



Gary Beach hams it up as "renown theatrical director Roger De Bris."

# Dancing on Hitler's Grave: *The Producers* (2005) comes to DVD

Special for Digital Filmmaker  
by Jan Lisa Huttner

**"It ain't no myst'ry  
If it's politics or hist'ry.  
The thing ya gotta know is  
Ev'rything is show biz!"**

Screening rooms are a lot like libraries: silence reigns supreme. Most critics don't need anyone to shush them; they're kept in check by peer pressure, and part of the game is to stifle your reactions so no one knows what you're thinking. But the night I saw *The Producers* (2005) early last December, the crowd was doubled over with laughter. So imagine my surprise when I started reading all the negative reviews...

*The Producers* holds a prestigious Broadway record: it won 12 Tony awards in 2001, taking the prize in every possible category in which it was a contender. Nevertheless domestic box office grosses for the film adaptation were dismal. So far, the film has recouped less than half of its \$45 million production budget. Four Golden Globe nominations failed to produce a single Oscar nomination. What went wrong?

The first version of *The Producers* (1968) was an 88-minute farce made for under \$1 million. The screenplay, the first of the eleven he's seen filmed, won Mel Brooks his only Oscar to date ("Best Screenplay Written Directly for the Screen") in 1969. By contrast, both the 2001 Broadway stage version of *The Producers* and the 2005 film version are elaborately staged musicals. Although most of the basic plot points remain constant, the storytelling formats are completely incommensurate.

For the sake of the uninitiated, here's an overview:

One fine day, Manhattan accounting firm Whitehall & Marks dispatches nebbishy “Leo Bloom” to audit the books of washed-up impresario “Max Bialystock.” While quizzing Max about a minor discrepancy, Leo makes a startling discovery: “You can make more money with a flop than with a hit.” Exhausted by his recent string of failures, Max seizes on this “cockamamie scheme,” convincing Leo they can bilk the IRS and escape to Rio de Janeiro. Working together, they diligently scrape the bottom of every talent barrel, but instead of failure the result is a smashing success. Their musical extravaganza ***Springtime for Hitler: A Gay Romp with Adolph and Eva in the Bergesgarten*** is so over-the-top, it’s irresistible. Convicted of fraud and sent to Sing Sing, Max and Leo immediately start selling shares in a new production to their fellow prisoners.

The success of the original was built on two critical factors: star power and deliberate bad taste. When Brooks cast Zero Mostel as Max, he was Broadway’s miracle man. The original production of ***Fiddler on the Roof***, which opened in 1964, was supposed to be a box office failure (“too ethnic”), but with Mostel playing the central part of “Tevye,” it became a box office giant. ***Fiddler*** made yiddishkeit respectable, enabling Jewish audiences to publicly mourn the shtetls destroyed in the Holocaust, while good-hearted people everywhere empathized.

The move from sentimentality to transgressive comedy was made possible by the “Six Day War” in 1967. Like their ancient king David facing off against Goliath, the people of Israel had scored an amazing victory against the combined Arab armies. Jews had proven themselves as warriors, so who better than “Tevye” to “dance on Hitler’s grave,” and thereby embody the aphorism “He who laughs last, laughs best!”

Of course, most people didn’t get it, and many Jews who had personal memories of World War II were deeply offended by Brooks’ determination to treat Hitler as a subject for comedy. But over the years, the cult status of ***The Producers (1968)*** grew, and thirty years later, a movie about the making of a Broadway musical was reclaimed as a Broadway musical. Laugh lines in the original were transformed into melodies. Aesthetic elements evolved from cheap kitsch into deliriously extravagant costumes and props. Supporting players like “Ulla” (the secretary) and “Fritz” (the playwright) became fully-drawn characters, and, best of all, Brooks jiggered the plot so that “Roger De Bris” (the director) could move from back stage to center stage in order to personally take on the role of Hitler on Opening Night.

If you just don’t like musicals, and many people don’t, then none of this matters, but if you do, then there’s no contest: the musical version of ***The Producers (2005)*** is much funnier than the original and, despite its length, it moves at a much brisker pace. When I saw the stage version, I laughed my head off. When I saw the screen version, I laughed even harder. All the tiny little details, the things no one sitting in front of the proscenium can really see, kept me in stitches: the poster of “King Lear” in Max’s office, the animatronic birds wearing swastikas, the Iron Cross medals adorning Ulla’s tits, all hilarious. How great to see Leo visualizing the dancers in his dream sequence as “beautiful girls wearing nothing but pearls.” And watching Roger play Hitler, so desperate for affirmation, you can understand why the audience is seduced.

But there's a worm in the apple that even I couldn't ignore: Matthew Broderick. Broderick is best-known for his starring role in the John Hughes 1986 comedy ***Ferris Bueller's Day Off***. That was twenty years ago, and the years have finally caught up with him. Film audiences don't really care about the acclaim his performance generated on Broadway; we simply reject him as Leo, the same way we now reject Omar Sharif in ***Funny Girl*** and Natalie Wood in ***West Side Story***.

The part of Leo Bloom was created by Gene Wilder in his first major movie role (preceded only by a small but memorable scene in ***Bonnie and Clyde***). The opening credits leave no doubt that the star of ***The Producers (1968)*** is Zero Mostel, but their onscreen chemistry is magic. Their faces are perfect complements: Mostel's is huge, decrepit, and vaguely deranged; Wilder's is tiny, soft, and childish. When their faces share the same frame, Leo's wide-eyed terror is perfectly understandable.

Alas, whatever chemistry Broderick's Leo had with Nathan Lane's Max on stage, the camera destroyed it. Their joint close-ups are a disaster, silently eating away at the visual reality of the Max/Leo relationship, and thereby undermining the whole film.

Luckily Broderick is a talented song-and-dance man with a warm comic persona, so once he and Lane leave Max's office and begin interacting with the other characters, Broderick is fine. He holds his own with Uma Thurman as Ulla, Jon Lovitz as Mr. Marks, and Will Ferrell as Fritz, and he's at his best when surrounded by his beautiful girls in pearls.

Nathan Lane, on the other hand, is a joy in every scene, including the ones rescued for the DVD. Adapting their film from stage to screen, Brooks and his co-writer Tom Meehan decided to follow the lead of ***Chicago***, eliminating some of Max's scenes and embellishing some of Leo's. (The film version of ***Chicago*** turned Velma from Roxie's co-star into a supporting player in her fantasy life.) Brooks assumed his theatre audiences would enjoy Broadway references – like the African-American accountant singing “Oh, I debits in the morning and I credits in the evening, until these ledgers be done” in homage to Paul Robson's timeless rendition of “Old Man River” from ***Show Boat*** – but uninitiated movie audiences could probably care less. The big number Lane loses comes right at the beginning of the stage version. “I Used to be the King” not only introduces Max's back story, it also exorcises the ghost of Zero Mostel, playing havoc by inverting Tevye's lyrics in “If I Were a Rich Man.” It's now the first and the best of the DVD's deleted scenes.

The DVD also contains a featurette unpacking “I Want to be a Producer,” Leo's biggest number. Like ***Chicago***, ***The Producers (2005)*** benefits greatly from the collaborative efforts of expert lighting designers Peggy Eisenhauer and Jules Fisher.

*The Producers* (2005) Review – Special for Digital Filmmaker



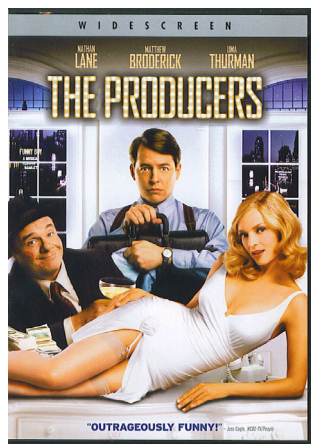
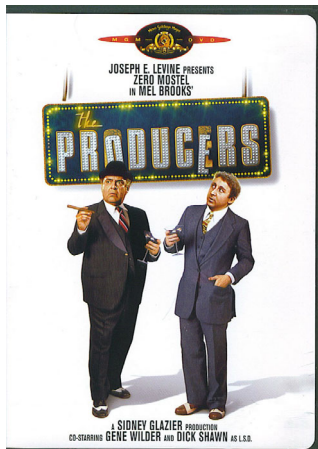
Leo Bloom's fantasy world: "beautiful girls wearing nothing but pearls."

In the end, though, it's all about Hitler, perfectly played here by Gary Beach (recreating the role which brought him Tony and Drama Desk awards in 2001). Mel Brooks clearly believes that Hitler was history's greatest buffoon. He promised his people a "thousand year Reich," but delivered barely a decade. However horrible his legacy (for Jews, for Russians, for Poles, etc, etc), he did his greatest damage to Germany. The people who believed in him, the people who voted for him, paid a very dear price for his brand of infotainment. Who is the real monster here? Is it the leader or the audience members egging him on? That's the bitter after-taste to this superior confection.



Shock & Awe: The grand finale to "Springtime for Hitler."

## The Producers (2005) Review – Special for Digital Filmmaker



Do your own compare & contrast: both versions of **The Producers** are now available to all on DVD!



Director Susan Stroman

Susan Stroman, one of only three women in Broadway history to win a Tony for Directing, has already received 5 Tony Awards, 2 Olivier Awards, 5 Drama Desk Awards, 8 Outer Critics Circle Awards, a record 4 Astaire Awards and the Lucille Lortel Award, but members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences (AMPAS) refused to be impressed with her cinematic debut.

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