ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

At event for king of comedy, refrain is clear: 'Hail Sid Caesar'

By PETER EPHROSS

NEW YORK (JTA) - When the dean of Jewish comedy took the stage December 11, he spoke French, German, Italian, Japanese and Yiddish. The problem is, Sid Caesar doesn't really speak any of these languages. He just imitates their sounds perfectly.

That comic genius December 11 earned Caesar the Third Annual Alan King Award in American Jewish Humor, sponsored by the National Foundation for Jewish Culture. Caesar earned the adoration of millions of television viewers in the early 1950s - the Golden Age of Television - when his "Your Show of Shows" aired on Saturday nights.

Caesar was known for an impeccable sense of timing, and for his intelligence and versatility. "You only had to tell him that you needed a Hindu with a bad back, sore feet and a twitch, and that was it," comedian Alan King said. "There was nothing he couldn't do - from an Italian actor to a gladiator to a baby."

MEL BROOKS, left, Jerry Stiller, second from left, and Sid Caesar listen to Alan King, right, on December 11, when Caesar earned the Alan King Award in American Jewish Humor. Caesar is best known for his 1950s television variety shows where such celebrities as Brooks and Woody Allen launched their careers. *Credit: Peter Ephross/JTA.*

A live variety show with no TelePrompTers, "Your Show of Shows" set a standard for excellence that some believe has never been equaled. "It makes 'Saturday Night Live' look like a kindergarten Christmas pageant," said Rabbi Andrew Bachman, who is helping to create a Jewish comedy Web site at yap.cat.nyu.edu.

Sid Caesar during his comic heyday. *Photo courtesy National Foundation for Jewish Culture.*

Caesar's story is similar to those of so many great Jewish entertainers of the 20th century. He was born in Yonkers, N.Y., to immigrant parents from Poland and Russia. In the summer of 1942, while performing as a saxophonist, he began performing comic routines. During World War II, he wrote and performed musical comedy revues for the U.S. Coast Guard in Brooklyn, and by 1947 he was headlining at New York's Copacabana.

Asked if being Jewish had something to do with his comedic talent, Caesar bristled. "You can be Jewish and be bad" at comedy, he said. Some of the more than 350 spectators at the December 11 event could be excused if they didn't agree. Famous Jewish performers, many of whose careers were launched by Caesar, honored their mentor.

Mel Brooks, who was one of Caesar's writers, presented Caesar with the award, as Jerry Stiller, who most recently played George Costanza's father on TV's "Seinfeld," looked on. Actor Carl Reiner paid tribute by video, as did writer Larry Gelbart, who helped to create the television series "M*A*S*H." Woody Allen and playwright Neil Simon also worked for Caesar. As Caesar's fellow stars took the microphone, the shtick came fast and furious. Actress Joy Behar, who is Italian, joked, "Everyone thinks I'm Jewish. My mother calls me up a few years ago and says, "Happy Chanukah. I said, 'Ma, I'm not Jewish.' "

But for all the Borscht Belt-style routines, there was a bittersweet edge to the celebration at New York's tony Pierre Hotel. Caesar himself was known to be an intense, difficult person to work with. He would sometimes punch through walls with his fist, and once reportedly punched a horse in Central Park that was giving his wife a rambunctious ride. Brooks said he once told Caesar he needed a breath of fresh air, and Caesar obliged by picking him up and hanging him outside the 11th-floor window.

The tension of producing a live show eventually got to Caesar, and he struggled for years with addictions to alcohol and pills. Caesar rarely performs anymore. He is little known to people under 50, though that may change with a three-part video and DVD of his work, "The Sid Caesar Collection," just released.

In more recent years he underwent heart bypass surgery, and his once-robust figure has shriveled. And when Caesar himself took the stage to receive his award, he needed assistance because of a broken hip. The audience responded in a way that the comedy maestro understood and appreciated - with a standing ovation.

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PBS, NPR shine light on Chanukah; commercial TV offers mostly static

By TOM TUGEND

LOS ANGELES (JTA) - Chanukah appears to be lost amid commercial television's blizzard of Christmas specials, so it's up to public TV and radio to air Jewish holiday content. PBS and American Public Television are offering a number of Chanukah-themed programs to some 347 affiliated stations. But it's up to each local station to decide whether and when to run them.

Here's what to look for, but for details check local listings and PBS's Web site, www.pbs.org. * "A Taste of Chanukah" - Theodore Bikel hosts this cultural and musical celebration of Chanukah, which includes the Klezmer Conservatory Band, as well as the recipe for the "perfect" latkes. * "A Chanukah Mitzvah" - Mitzvah Mouse and his puppet pals David and Rachel, of "Alef ... Bet ... Blast-Off" fame, travel back in time and meet Judah the Maccabee. * "Chanukah at Bubbe's" - In another time trip back, puppets visit everyone's favorite grandmother, who relates stories of the Festival of Lights. * "December Dilemma: The Creche, the Dreidel and the Star" - This documentary examines tensions of the season and the "blending" of the holidays, as viewed by Jewish and Christian pundits.

* "Lighting the Way: Young People Celebrate" - Four youngsters ages 11-16 play hosts as their families celebrate Chanukah, Christmas and Kwanzaa. * "New Jewish Cuisine" - Chef Jeffrey Nathan prepares the culinary delights of the holiday, including potato latkes, brisket and braided challah.

Additional JTN programs are: * "HomeStyles" - Host Teresa Strasser comes up with innovative ideas for holiday decorating, chocolate treats and a new dreidel game. * "92nd Street Y Presents" - Contemporary chamber and choral music on Jewish themes, and the premiere of "Chanukah Suite" by Nora Kroll-Rosenbaum. * "Spirit and Song" - A documentary on a national gathering of choral singers joining in a concert of Jewish music, with emphasis on Chanukah and other holidays.

Check local listings for dates and times.

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Controversial Israeli director finds atonement, reconciliation in 'Kippur'

By TOM TUGEND

LOS ANGELES (JTA) - "My country is full of contradictions and volcanic eruptions," Israeli film director Amos Gitai says. "We fluctuate between extremes. One morning you say peace is at hand and all problems will be resolved. The next day, it's the apocalypse."

No eruption in Israel's 52-year existence did more to change the self-image of its people than the Yom Kippur War, the focus of Gitai's latest film. The lightning triumph of the 1967 Six-Day War had convinced many Israelis of their invincibility. The surprise attack by Egypt and Syria on October 6, 1973, "shook the arrogance of our leadership," Gitai says. "As a people, we became much more aware of the fragility of our existence. We realized that military power is not enough, we must look for a political solution."

Such views, and the movies and documentaries which dramatize his convictions, have made Gitai perhaps Israel's most controversial filmmaker. In "Kippur," he continues the tradition of touching his countrymen's most sensitive nerves. The film has opened to excellent reviews in New York, Los Angeles, Minneapolis and Boston. It is slated to open in Chicago on January 6, and in most major U.S. cities thereafter. "Kippur" is a recounting of Gitai's own experiences.

As the film opens, Weinraub - the last name of Gitai's father before he emigrated from Berlin to Palestine in 1935 - walks through deserted Tel Aviv streets on Judaism's holiest day as muffled prayer chants echo from behind the walls of small synagogues. Suddenly, the wail of sirens breaks the silence. Weinraub jumps into his battered Fiat and, with a comrade, takes off for the Golan Heights to look for his combat unit. In the chaos of the Syrian surprise attack, the two young men can't find their own outfit. Instead, they link up with a helicopter rescue unit ferrying wounded men and downed pilots from the front and from behind Syrian lines.

In a scene from the film Kippur, which focuses on Israel's Yom Kippur War, Uri Ran Klauzner, left, Guy Amir, second from left, Liron Levo as the main character, Weinraub, third from left, and Tomer Ruso play the parts of Israeli soldiers. *Photo courtesy Kino International.*

With some of the relentlessness of the D-Day invasion scenes of Steven Spielberg's "Saving Private Ryan," the camera fixes on the seven-man medical team as it extracts soldiers from burning tanks and crashed planes, agonizing over whom to save and whom to leave behind. On the sixth day of the war - which fell on Gitai's 23rd birthday - Weinraub's helicopter is shot down by a missile, leaving two men dead and Weinraub/Gitai with a bullet lodged within a millimeter of his spine. His war is over.

But "Kippur" is more than a combat movie, and the title itself conveys different layers of meaning. Most commonly, "kippur" means "atonement," as in the Day of Atonement that gave the war its name. The root word also alludes to the casting of lots, as in the Jewish holiday of Purim, and stands for the unpredictable chances of life and death in war. The word also connotes reconciliation, says Gitai.

Despite headlines reporting daily violence between Israelis and Palestinians, Gitai still can trace a psychological thread from confrontation to peace. "The overwhelming feeling when you're in war is not hatred, bravery or even fear, but utter fatigue," he says. "In this film, it's not only physical fatigue, because you're running and carrying people, but also emotional fatigue because you see such terrible things. That's at the heart of my war experience."

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