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# A WEEK OF BLACK HUMOUR

SOME WEEKS ago I complained about the lack of comedies on Israel Television. I have just realized that the fault was mine; I had been looking for laughter in the wrong places. The jests are there all right, but they are not in situation comedies, they are items on Mabat, disguised as news. Whoever is writing the scripts has a taste for black comedy, of the "M.A.S.H." and "Catch 22" and "Candide" type, with a lot of slapstick thrown in.

The week got off to a really uproarious start with that business in Ankara. All those cops and tanks and troops cavorting around and imitating Terrible Turks, as they gathered outside the Egyptian Embassy to cheer for the Palestinians — I was reminded of the Keystone cops horsing around with Charlie Chaplin. Side-splitting stuff. Black comedy at its best.

All this was just a lead-up to the press conference of Turkish Premier, Bulent Ecevit, in which he thanked the PLO and Yasser Arafat for what the organization had done for the Turks. That droll fellow is a natural comedian of the highest class, with a deadpan style worthy of the great Buster Keaton himself.

Whoever wrote Ecevit's script did a very good job. That graceful tribute to the Palestinians for killing a couple of his surplus cops, and terrorizing the capital, and murdering some Egyptians — marvellous stuff! But, however good the script, you still need a great comic actor to deliver the lines in the right way, without giving the game away by bursting into laughter, or chuckling to indicate that it's all a joke. Ecevit pulled off this difficult feat in an inimitable performance.

IN MY unconsidered complaint about a lack of jokes, I pleaded for

some indigenous humour. Now I must admit that for black humour there is nothing to beat the present Israeli Government. This week it excelled itself in the series, "The Day of the Economy," with Finance Minister Simha Ehrlich playing the main role in his unique and characteristic style.

All great humour has an element of pathos in it: as Byron wrote, "If I laugh at any mortal thing, 'tis that I may not weep." Charlie Chaplin was famous for the tragic undertones to his humour, however much slapstick his scenes contained. Simha achieves the same effect. With his tubby face, his owl glasses — a take-off of Harold Lloyd? — and his very effective eyebrows, he looks like an embattled rabbit defying the hounds to do their worst to him. They do.

Of course, he was aided this week by a great team of script-writers, his so-called economic advisers. For instance, there was that stuff about his suddenly discovering that the price of bread was going up, not a mere 100 per cent, as he had planned, but 160 per cent, so that the housewife would find a loaf would cost IL2.50 instead of IL2.50.

The scene was beautifully produced. A less artistic director would have shown us Ehrlich's horde of economists doing sums on their slates, or whatever they use, and crossing out one lot of figures, and writing others, and getting frantic, and smashing their chalk, and jumping on their slates, and rushing in all directions, and breaking in on the

boss as he begins his outline for the Cabinet, and spreading chaos and confusion. Then we would have been shown shots of the grocers eagerly marking up prices on their loaves and then re-marking them, and re-marking them yet again, going faster and faster, like Chaplin's corn-feeding machine, with smiles of glee on their faces, while we saw housewives gulping, and dropping their parcels, and selling their children into white slavery, so that they could afford to buy a sandwich.

Here it was all done by a single twitch of Simha's eyebrow. Subtle. I was reminded of that scene in Charlie Chaplin's "Gold Rush," where he gets so hungry he starts to eat his boots. But even Charlie needed some props: Simha tells it all by pantomime. A great natural comic. All week he was in top form, doing his imitations of Tuvya Tsafir or Motti Giladi doing their imitations of the Minister of Finance. He makes them seem like amateurs.

One of the best lines given to him by his script-writers was his claim to have done research, and to have discovered that no minister of finance was ever loved — not Eliezer Kaplan, not Levi Eshkol, not Pinhas Sapir, not Yehoshua Rabinowitz. He is certainly winning the unpopularity stakes. According to his reasoning, this means that he is doing a wonderful job.

I think that it was in Levi Eshkol's day that Israelis invented the story of Eshkol's chauffeur, while driving for his boss in Nahariya, running over and killing a dog outside a

## TELEVIEW/Phillip Gillon

house in which a party was taking place. The chauffeur, like all good Israeli drivers, wanted to drive off at once, but Eshkol explained to him that this was the *yekke* town of Nahariya, where dogs were held in high esteem, so he should go inside and apologize. Reluctantly, the chauffeur complied. From inside the house, Eshkol heard screams, shouts, wild cries — eventually, the chauffeur staggered out, his face covered with lipstick marks. He said in a bewildered way, "I went in, as you told me, and said, 'I'm Levi Eshkol's chauffeur. I killed the dog.' And they all went mad hugging and kissing me like crazy."

I wonder what story will be told about Simha?

If I may venture a word of criticism, the comedy was a bit dragged out — all those hours from nine o'clock to midnight would have been enough, without going on for another 24 hours as well. Still, we can't have too much of a good thing.

While our main applause goes to the star, we must remember, as he himself said, that it was really a team effort, and all members of the government contributed their share of laughs. It was a great touch to show us the film for the "War Against Inflation" among the advertisements, shortly before Simha delivered that remarkable line, "Who suffers from inflation? The individual doesn't."

One very funny scene could only have been appreciated by somebody who has seen the stock exchanges of New York, or London, or Johannesburg, during a panic. The wild excitement at the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange consisted of a score of bored-looking bankers sitting around a table, while one of them muttered prices under his breath. No yelling, no screaming, no throwing of ticker tape. That's the way to go broke, Israeli style, like gentlemen with stiff upper lips.

AN IMPORTED funny news item was of Mafia boss Carmine (Lilo) Galante lying on his back, covered with spaghetti and red wine, still trying to smoke his cigar, although he was very dead. This was so amusing that I looked forward with great enthusiasm to "Honour Thy Father," Wednesday night's film about the Mafia wars.

I must confess that I was rather disappointed. One of the main scenes was a straight crib of Lilo's killing, with the dead lying around, covered with pasta and spaghetti. Why can't we have a shoot-up in a Chinese restaurant, with a kosher substitute for sweet and sour pork as the dish triggering the action.

In "Honour thy Father" the pasta was lethal even without shooting — one sensitive gangster died from an allergy to it, or something, we were never told exactly what happened to him. My impression of the film as a whole was that anybody who supported the Bananas family was bananas: neither Joe nor

his son, Salvadore Billy Boy, ever did anything except hide away. Somebody should have told them that they were supposed to be on the giving end of the shotguns, not just the receiving end.

MY ENEMY in Television House has been filling our evenings with masses of French films. Long, long ago, when the French first began to ill-treat us — that was in Charles de Gaulle's time — I swore a mighty oath that I would express my Israeli pride by boycotting French films. Admittedly my opponent in TV House can now argue that, if he rejects the products of all our critics, we'll never see any films at all, not even our own, Jewish self-hatred being what it is. Still, I maintain that we should snub the French until we get some kind of apology.

Don't tell anyone, but in my despair I even watched the worst film ever made, "Return to Peyton Place," on Jordan. Here I picked up a remarkable budget-saving device, which I pass on, in case Television House ever decides to do an Israeli series. Allison has a five-minute session with Benny Tate, then she goes to her room and thinks about it, so you see a full replay of the scene two minutes after you've seen it. Then Betty has a session with Steve Cord — damned! she doesn't go up to her room and cogitate about what happened, with a complete replay of what happened a couple of minutes earlier. Gefit? by this double-take system, you get twice the length of film for one lot of shooting. I pass on the idea for what it's worth.



Simha Ehrlich...a great natural comic.