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SPIEGEL Interview with Mel Brooks**"With Comedy, We Can Rob Hitler of his Posthumous Power"**

Jewish comic actor Mel Brooks talks about Hitler as a comical character, the limits of humor and his latest film "The Producers," which hits screens in Germany and other European countries this week.

SPIEGEL:

Mr. Brooks, almost all the rogues in your film have moustaches. Is that the long shadow of Hitler?

Brooks: You must be joking! Rogues on the screen were already wearing moustaches when Hitler was still running around in short trousers. A cinema villain essentially needs a moustache so he can twiddle with it gleefully as he cooks up his next nasty plan. So Hitler's incomplete moustache would never have been enough for that.

SPIEGEL: Your new comedy "The Producers" is set at the end of the 1950s on Broadway and concerns a Nazi musical that breaks box office records. It shows a dancing and singing Hitler. Isn't that a bit tasteless?

Brooks: Of course. But it's also funny, isn't it? The film revolves around a Broadway producer who, for financial and technical reasons, wants to produce a flop. After he turns down the chance to adapt Kafka's "The Metamorphosis," he comes up with the idea of creating a musical about Hitler, produced by the lousiest director in the city, cast with the worst actors by far -- in the middle of the Jewish metropolis of New York. He's sure it won't work. Yet because the audience considers the piece to be a brilliant parody, his worst fears are realized, it's a hit. "The Producers" therefore deals with the difficulty of having a flop.

SPIEGEL: Which you of course know well yourself. "The Producers" is based on a musical that you produced that ran successfully on Broadway for five years and also on the film "The Producers" that you shot in 1967. How did the audience react to the film back then?

Brooks: The Jews were horrified. I received resentful letters of protest, saying things like: "How can you make jokes about Hitler? The man murdered 6 million Jews." But "The Producers" doesn't concern a concentration camp or the Holocaust.

SPIEGEL: Can you really separate Hitler from the Holocaust?

Brooks: You have to separate it. For example, Roberto Benigni's comedy "Life Is Beautiful" really annoyed me. A crazy film that even attempted to find comedy in a concentration camp. It showed the barracks in which Jews were kept like cattle, and it made jokes about it. The philosophy of the film is: people can get over anything. No, they can't. They can't get over a concentration camp.

SPIEGEL: But the film has deeply moved a lot of people.

Brooks: I always asked myself: Tell me, Roberto, are you nuts? You didn't lose any relatives in the Holocaust, you're not even Jewish. You really don't understand what it's all about. The Americans were incredibly thrilled to discover from him that it wasn't all that bad in the concentration camps

after all. And that's why they immediately pressed an Oscar into his hand.

SPIEGEL: So there are limits to humor?

Brooks: Definitely. In 1974, I produced the western parody "Blazing Saddles," in which the word "nigger" was used constantly. But I would never have thought of the idea of showing how a black was lynched. It's only funny when he escapes getting sent to the gallows. You can laugh at Hitler because you can cut him down to normal size.

SPIEGEL: Can you also get your revenge on him by using comedy?

Brooks: Yes, absolutely. Of course it is impossible to take revenge for 6 million murdered Jews. But by using the medium of comedy, we can try to rob Hitler of his posthumous power and myths. In doing so, we should remember that Hitler did have some talents. He was able to fool an entire population into letting him be their leader. However, this role was basically a few numbers too great for him -- but he simply covered over this deficiency.

SPIEGEL: Was he a good actor?

Brooks: Yes, as he convinced many millions of Germans. It's not without good reason that comedies about Hitler often concern actors who should play him. Just think about Charlie Chaplin's "The Great Dictator" (1940) or Ernst Lubitsch's "To Be or not To Be" (1942). There's no doubt about it, Hitler worked in the same branch as we do: he created illusions.

SPIEGEL: In a documentary film about the downfall of the German battleship the Bismarck, US director James Cameron referred to Hitler as the "greatest pop star of his time."

Brooks: There's something in that. Hitler must have had a magnetic attractive force, like a rock star he used his voice to spellbind umpteen thousands of listeners. So it's only fitting when comic actors make him the limelight hog of world history. We take away from him the holy seriousness that always surrounded him and protected him like a cordon.

SPIEGEL: You yourself fought against the Nazis in Europe in 1945 and came to Berlin just after the end of the war and stayed there for eight months. Could you still feel much of a Hitler reverence?

Brooks: Everywhere you went you could sense a great relief that the war was finally over. I myself was shaken by the extent of the destruction. When we were transporting away a few prisoners of war in a train, I discovered an old man who looked like my grandfather. He suddenly leaped out of the carriage. I took my rifle and aimed at him. He called (Brooks says in German): "Don't shoot, I have to shit". Most of the Germans who survived the war were just poor simple people. Was National Socialism ever taught in German schools?

SPIEGEL: Yes, and in great detail.

Brooks: That is comforting to know. When you come to Germany as a Jew you have an uneasy feeling, but I've always felt okay in Berlin. It was there that I saw Brecht and Weill's "Three Penny Opera" and was totally crazy about this kind of musical theater.

SPIEGEL: Have you seen Oliver Hirschbiegels's film "Downfall"?

Brooks: Yes, and I thought it was excellent. It shows us Hitler's self destruction. While Goebbels was idolizing Hitler as the new Christ, like the salvation in the flesh, he was decaying before our very eyes -- and all that was needed to illustrate this was a shot of his trembling hand.

SPIEGEL: Don't you think the film humanizes Hitler too much?

Brooks: No, it doesn't arouse the slightest bit of sympathy for Hitler. It shows a man who went mad. Let's face it; he too started off as a small, innocent baby. His monstrous grimace comes across all the more startling when you can sense the paltry remains of his human nature.

SPIEGEL: Was Hitler funny? Would you have been able to make him laugh?

Brooks: I have no delusions of grandeur. Hitler would definitely not have smacked himself on the thigh and cried out (Brooks says in German): "What fantastic fun." If he had found something funny you'd probably see at the most a flinch in the corner of his mouth.

SPIEGEL: You yourself played Hitler in 1983 in your remake of the film "To Be or not To Be"...

Brooks: ... and I also gave him my voice in a song in "The Producers".

SPIEGEL: How does it feel for a Jew to slip into the skin of his greatest enemy?

Brooks: It is an inverted seizure of power. For many years Hitler was the most powerful man in the world and almost destroyed us. To possess this power and turn it against him -- it is simply alluring.

Interview conducted by Lars-Olav Beier.

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