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***The Last Laugh* Premieres on *Independent Lens*
Monday, April 24, 2017 on PBS**

Online Streaming Begins April 25

**Can We Make Jokes About the Holocaust?
Mel Brooks, Sarah Silverman, Gilbert Gottfried, Rob Reiner,
David Steinberg and Others Weigh In**



Mel Brooks
Credit: Ferne Pearlstein

(San Francisco, CA) — *The Last Laugh* is a documentary based on the premise that the Holocaust would seem to be an absolutely off-limits topic for comedy. But is it? History shows that even victims of Nazi concentration camps used humor as a means of survival and resistance. Still, any use of comedy in connection with this horror risks diminishing the suffering of millions. So where is the line? If the Holocaust is taboo, what are the implications for other controversial subjects — 9/11, AIDS, racism — in a society that prizes freedom of speech? Directed by Ferne Pearlstein, *The Last Laugh* premieres on *Independent Lens* Monday, April 24, 2017, 10:00-11:30 PM ET ([check local listings](#)) on PBS.

Offering fresh insights into the Holocaust, the film weaves an intimate cinema verité portrait of Auschwitz survivor Renee Firestone alongside interviews with influential comedians and thinkers ranging from Mel Brooks, Sarah Silverman, and Gilbert Gottfried to authors Etgar Keret, Shalom Auslander, and Abraham Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League. The film also includes rare archival footage of cabarets inside the concentration camps, as well as clips ranging from *The Producers* to *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, video of performances from comics Louis CK, George Carlin, and Chris Rock, and newly discovered footage of Jerry Lewis's never-released Holocaust comedy *The Day the Clown Cried*.

Mel Brooks has made a career out of making fun of Nazis, calling it “revenge through ridicule.” Yet the Holocaust itself is a subject he won’t touch. Not so for Sarah Silverman or Judy Gold or the late Joan Rivers. From *Hogan’s Heroes* to *Seinfeld*’s “Soup Nazi,” mainstream pop culture has pushed the envelope of what is considered acceptable. As Rob Reiner notes: “The Holocaust itself is not funny. There’s nothing funny about it. But survival, and what it takes to survive, there can be humor in that.”

Visit [The Last Laugh](#) page on *Independent Lens*, which features more information about the film. *The Last Laugh* will be available for online viewing on the site beginning April 25, 2017.

Participants (in order of appearance)

Renee Firestone is a 92-year-old Auschwitz survivor and anti-genocide activist whose remarkable verité story runs parallel to the Greek chorus of interviews. Renee serves as a living example of the positives — and pitfalls — of using humor to come to terms with the terrible events of the Shoah. She turns 93 in April 2017.

Klara Firestone is Renee Firestone's daughter and founder of '2nd Generation Los Angeles' (2GLA), a group for the children of survivors. A psychotherapist by trade (named after Renee's own younger sister who was murdered in medical experiments at Auschwitz), Klara helps navigate through the issues in the film from the perspective of a child of survivors.

Gilbert Gottfried is a comedian with a reputation for making jokes in bad taste. He was fired as the voice of the Aflac duck after making taboo tweets about the devastating tsunami that hit Japan in 2011.

Rob Reiner is an acclaimed actor, writer, director, and activist (and son of Carl Reiner) who began his career on the controversial *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* in the late 1960s, and became a household name on the even more controversial, taboo-breaking comedy *All in the Family*.

Mel Brooks is a comedy legend who has made a career of satirizing Hitler and the Nazis. His comedy would seem to be the quintessential example of so-called "Holocaust humor," but he makes a sharp distinction between satirizing the Nazis (whom he considers a time-honored target) and humor at the expense of the victims.

Judy Gold is a Jewish-American lesbian comedian who is a self-proclaimed obsessive on the subject of the Holocaust.

Sarah Silverman is a comedian and free speech activist known for pushing the boundaries of acceptability, perhaps more so than any other contemporary stand-up comic.

Carl Reiner is a revered comic actor, writer, and director whose career spans six decades. He is perhaps best known as part of a comedy duo with Mel Brooks, stretching back to their early years as staff writers on Sid Caesar's seminal 1950s variety series *Your Show of Shows*.

Robert Clary is a Franco-Polish actor, entertainer, and Auschwitz survivor who, as a teenaged boy, performed in the camps. He later starred in the controversial 1960s situation comedy *Hogan's Heroes* about a group of Allied POWs in a Nazi prison camp.

Etgar Keret is a satirical Israeli novelist and short story author whose work draws heavily on his parents and his experience growing up as a '2G' (child of Holocaust survivors). His most recent novel, *The Seven Good Years*, is about the seven years leading up to his son's birth and his father's death.

Aaron Breitbart is the head researcher at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles who describes to Renee and Klara Firestone the history of the cabarets in Nazi concentration camps.

Jake Ehrenreich is a monologist and performer whose one-man show *A Jew Grows in Brooklyn* explores his experiences growing up as a child of survivors.

Alan Zweibel is a producer, director, playwright, and veteran comedy writer who began his career on the original *Saturday Night Live* in the 1970s (writing in particular for Gilda Radner) and continues to be at the forefront of contemporary comedy, working with Larry David, Lisa Lampanelli, Billy Crystal, et al.

Susie Essman is a comedian best known for her television role as the outrageous Susie Greene on Larry David's *Curb Your Enthusiasm*.

Larry Charles is a writer/director at the forefront of present day taboo-breaking comedy, as a veteran of the *Seinfeld* writing staff, director of the infamous "Survivor" episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (among others), and director of three Sacha Baron Cohen features (*Borat*, *Bruno*, and *The Dictator*), as well as Bill Maher's documentary *Religulous*.

Deb Filler is a New Zealand-based comedian, monologist, and child of survivors whose one-woman show *Punch Me in the Stomach* features a cast of characters based on her survivor family members.

Elly Gross is an Auschwitz survivor who feels it is never acceptable to use humor in connection with the Holocaust. She and Renee debate this difficult topic while riding in a gondola down a fake canal through a shopping mall in the surreal surroundings of the Venetian casino and hotel in Las Vegas.

Jeffrey Ross is a comedian best known for his "too soon" jokes including numerous Holocaust references. He has been dubbed the "Roastmaster General" for his work on the Comedy Central Roasts.

Harry Shearer is an actor, writer, and satirist (as well as a child of survivors) and one of a handful of people who have seen Jerry Lewis's controversial unreleased 1972 Holocaust film *The Day the Clown Cried*.

David Steinberg is one the most well-regarded comedy directors and writers of his generation, whose controversial comedy "sermons" on *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* in the late 1960s contributed to the surprising cancellation of that top-rated CBS-TV program.

Lisa Lampanelli is a self-proclaimed "insult comic" and the "Queen of Mean," who thinks nothing is off-limits for comedy. She is infamous for a joke made at a Comedy Central Roast of actor David Hasselhoff (who is immensely popular as a pop singer in Germany) where she proclaimed

his music so bad that had it been played at Auschwitz “the Jews would have sprinted for those ovens.”

Roz Weinman is a child of survivors and former head of Standards and Practices for NBC during the *Seinfeld* years, who discusses her regrets over the term “Soup Nazi,” the sliding standards for different shows and audiences, and how limitations can be a boon rather than a hindrance to creativity.

Abraham Foxman is a Holocaust survivor and longtime president of the Anti-Defamation League, perhaps the best-known and most prominent watchdog on anti-Semitism in American culture.

David Cross is a comedian who participated in several satirical public readings of the screenplay of the Jerry Lewis unreleased Holocaust comedy *The Day the Clown Cried* until Lewis’s lawyers shut them down with a cease-and-desist order.

Shalom Auslander is an American novelist and writer whose works draws on his ultra-Orthodox Jewish upbringing in upstate New York, which he eventually fled. Author of the memoir *Foreskin’s Lament*, the short story collection *Beware of God*, and the biting satirical novel *Hope: A Tragedy*, which portrays Anne Frank as a bitter 95-year-old woman still stuck in an attic, trying to finish her second book.

Hanala Sagal is a 2G author of the memoir *My Parents Went Through the Holocaust and All I Got Was This Lousy T-Shirt*, about her experiences growing up as a child of survivors. Sagal is also a writer and co-executive producer of the feature *Elvis & Nixon*.

About the Filmmakers

Ferne Pearlstein (Director, Writer, Producer) is an American filmmaker based in New York City whose work has won numerous awards and been screened and broadcast worldwide. Pearlstein holds post-graduate degrees in documentary film and photography from Stanford University and the International Center of Photography. In 2003, Pearlstein’s feature documentary *Sumo East and West* — which she directed, produced, photographed, and edited — premiered at the Tribeca, Los Angeles, and Melbourne International Film Festivals, and was shown nationwide on *Independent Lens*. Other credits as director include *Dita and the Family Business* (PBS) with Josh Taylor, and three short films, including her debut *Raising Nicholas*, which premiered at the 2003 Sundance and San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Film Festivals.

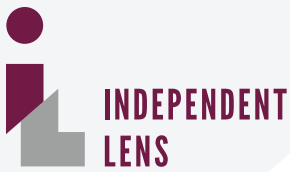
As a director of photography with dozens of films to her credit, Pearlstein is one of only a handful of female cinematographers featured in Kodak’s long-running “On Film” ad campaign in the pages of *American Cinematographer* magazine. In 2004 she won the Excellence in Cinematography Prize at the Sundance Film Festival for her work on *Imelda*, a feature documentary about Imelda Marcos, which followed the former First Lady of the Philippines during her campaign for the presidency. Committed to shooting on film, she has shot documentaries in

places as diverse as Haiti, Uganda, and Guyana, and snuck her 16mm camera from the Karen refugee camps of Thailand across the border to film in the rebel bases of the Karen Liberation Army in Burma. Among her other credits as cinematographer are: Academy Award® winner Alex Gibney's segment of *Freakonomics* (Tribeca 2010); DP on three-time Academy Award nominee Deborah Dickson's *Ruthie and Connie* (HBO); and DP on *The Voice of the Prophet* (Sundance, 2002) where she met her longtime collaborator and husband Robert Edwards.

The Last Laugh had its world premiere at the 2016 Tribeca Film Festival and its international premiere at HotDocs 2016 and has gone on to play at dozens of festivals including the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, BFI London Film Festival, Michael Moore's Traverse City Film Festival, Jerusalem Film Festival, Rome Film Festival, Aspen FilmFest and Chicago International Film Festival.

Robert Edwards (Writer/Producer) is a writer/director based in New York. His most recent film is *One More Time (aka When I Live My Life Over Again)*, starring Christopher Walken and Amber Heard, which premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival in 2015. A graduate of Stanford University's Master's Program in Documentary Film, Edwards won a 2001 Nicholl Fellowship in Screenwriting from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for his first script, *Land of the Blind*, which in 2006 became his directorial debut, starring Ralph Fiennes and Donald Sutherland. As a screenwriter, he has written scripts for directors including Bennett Miller, Mark Romanek, and Mike Newell, and for producers Plan B, John Davis, and HBO. He is currently at work on a seven-part miniseries about the Flying Tigers for executive producer John Woo and collaborating on a new script with director Ray Tintori. For his own next film, Edwards is developing *The Bomb in My Garden*, based on his adaptation of the memoir of the chief scientist in Saddam Hussein's uranium enrichment program, with Johnny Depp's production company Infinitum Nihil.

Amy Hobby (Producer) is an Academy Award®-nominated producer of both scripted and documentary films. Her most recent film, *What Happened, Miss Simone?*, was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Feature Documentary, a Grammy, and a Peabody Award and won the Emmy for Outstanding Documentary. In a career spanning more than 20 years, Hobby has had 13 films premiere at the Sundance Film Festival including *Nadja* (produced with David Lynch), *Sunday* (Sundance Grand Jury Prize), *Hamlet* starring Ethan Hawke, Sam Shepard and Bill Murray, and *Secretary* (another Sundance Grand Jury Prize winner) starring Maggie Gyllenhaal, who was nominated for a Golden Globe for her role. Hobby's documentary films include *And Everything Is Going Fine* (IFC) directed by Steven Soderbergh, *Shepard & Dark* (official selection Cannes Film Festival) and *Love, Marilyn* (HBO) directed by Liz Garbus, with whom she collaborated again on *What Happened, Miss Simone?* (Netflix). In 2013 she and partner Anne Hubbell co-founded Tangerine Entertainment which produces and builds community for films directed by women. *The Last Laugh* is the only non-scripted film Tangerine has chosen to produce. Hobby is the current Vice President of Artists Programs at the Tribeca Film Institute.



CREDITS

Directed, Photographed and Edited by Ferne Pearlstein
Written by Ferne Pearlstein and Robert Edwards
Produced by Ferne Pearlstein, Robert Edwards, Amy Hobby,
Anne Hubbell and Jan Warner
Cinematography Ferne Pearlstein
Anne Etheridge
Edited by Ferne Pearlstein

About *Independent Lens*

Independent Lens is an Emmy® Award-winning weekly series airing on PBS Monday nights at 10:00 PM. The acclaimed series, with Lois Vossen as executive producer, features documentaries united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement, and unflinching visions of independent filmmakers. Presented by ITVS, the series is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding from PBS, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Wyncote Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. For more visit pbs.org/independentlens. Join the conversation: facebook.com/independentlens and on Twitter [@IndependentLens](https://twitter.com/IndependentLens).

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