

Purging the Jews of “Babylon”

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Margot Robbie in "Babylon"

The Academy Awards is soon upon us. One film that will not be walking away with a large Oscar haul is Damien Chazelle's "Babylon." (It is nominated for three awards, none in major categories.) That came as a surprise, given the box office and critical success of his last film, "La La Land," the size of "Babylon's" budget, and the attractiveness and appeal of its cast, which included Brad Pitt and Margot Robbie.

The film is a valentine to the early days of Hollywood, circa 1928, right before the Golden Age of movies, when silent films won over the general public and talking pictures would become America's most dominant cultural export. Movies, in fact, projected what America represented to most people around the world.

Shouldn't a movie about the wonder of moving pictures, and the pioneers who built Hollywood, be a box office draw? It is a sweeping film, lush in its cinematic landscape—deserts, hills, movie sets and mansions—daring if not wholly debauched in its sexuality, and frenzied given that nearly all the characters are inebriated, or drug and gambling

addicted.

It also has a bloated running time. Chazelle's green light from the studio was more like a *yahrzeit*.

Perhaps its ambitions in scope were undermined by its misadventures in woke. Actually, there's an object lesson in "Babylon" worth pondering.

Not unlike the recent opening of the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures in Los Angeles, which somehow neglected to mention that five of the original seven studio heads were Jewish immigrants, "Babylon" went out of its way to foster inclusion for every category of identity except for the one responsible for moving the nascent industry to Los Angeles, erecting studios, sound stages and an entire city to support it—in what had been a barren wasteland.

The Jews of Israel and those from Hollywood both made deserts bloom.

"Babylon" is set during this time period, and yet there is no mention of the Jewish Hollywood moguls

—except for Irving Thalberg, who was not a studio chief, and is not identified as being Jewish. Al Jolson, who starred in the first talkie, “The Jazz Singer,” is shown on screen, but we never learn that the character he plays in the movie only becomes a crooner after abandoning his earlier calling as a cantor.

A female Jewish director occupies a minor role. And, bitinglly, Margot Robbie delivers a line about *latkes*.

And then there’s this bit of circumcising dialogue, a scene depicting the inaugural day in shooting a talkie. “All quiet on the set” was a challenge for the silent film community. There are many takes for various technical reasons, but then an unfortunate Jewish crewmember sneezes, followed by this tirade:

“Who sneezed? Who the f–k sneezed? Kike-nosed, Hymie-hole piece of mongoloid shit! I see you. Oh, I see you right there, you little Shylock’d-face. Wipe your nose again! Wipe your little hook nose, you menorah motherf—er!”

So much for sensitivity reads. I guess this is preferable to ending up on the cutting room floor.

And yet the movie gives star billing to a junior studio executive from Mexico and a lesbian Asian-American scriptwriter. Seriously? In 1928? Maybe on Mars, but not in Hollywood, which was overrun with Jews who decamped from the Garment District and Yiddish newspapers back east and invented an entirely new artform with its own visual and literary language.

At least “Mank” (2020) more accurately depicted a writer’s room consisting mainly of Jews.

Perhaps such casting decisions are overdue, however. After all, until very recently, white actors portrayed Mexicans and Native Americans, and disgracefully performed in blackface.

When it comes to the creation of culture these days, white privilege is becoming a disqualifying character trait. And the storylines of white America are being whitewashed, too. The politics of identity has given way to the culture of identity—where representing

cultural diversity has become the defining vision for the entire industry.

And be careful where you tread.

At the 2017 Golden Globes, actor Michael Keaton presented an award and flubbed the cue card, conflating “Hidden Figures” with “Fences”—both films with an African-American cast. He announced, “Hidden Fences.” Nowadays there is such racial sensitivity in Hollywood, his apology was delivered with the same mortification of a man trying to explain his presence at a Klan rally.

Invariably, the consequence of purging whiteness from filmmaking meant that Jews would have the most to lose. They simply were overrepresented in American culture. To achieve equity on both the screen—in front and behind the camera—and in the executive suite, Jews may soon end up with lavish payouts wrapped in pink slips.

Kanye West may get his wish, after all.

There were already premonitions of this distortion of

history when it came to Jews. In depicting the civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King Jr., “Selma” (2014), appallingly, removed the Jewish activists who marched alongside Blacks and got their heads bashed in, too.

Nevertheless, there’s more at stake here than the disappearance of the Jewish-American story. The prestige of being included in the closing credits is one thing; the deterioration of American cultural excellence is something else altogether. Art created mainly to represent marginalized groups is a nice aspiration, but don’t be surprised if we end up with art that is tedious, derivative and mediocre—in which case, it’s not really art at all.

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We’re seeing this throughout American society: the

impulse to achieve equity at the expense of meritocracy; revisionist history that does not compensate for historical wrongs; and the celebration of identity over authenticity. Making some groups feel better in seeing a vision of themselves on screen has very little to do with great filmmaking.

At the Golden Globes, Brad Pitt and Margot Robbie sat at the table closest to the stage, positioned nicely to collect their trophies. They never left their chairs. They smiled good-naturedly, but “Babylon” was nearly shut out with only a single win—Best Score. A new wave of woke-minded films with fresh faces dominated the night.

Ironically, in a movie that featured an extended scene of a snake bite, the whole production was snake-bitten. Perhaps the movie god intervened, cautioning Hollywood not to entirely re-write the script and forget how it got here.

Perhaps it's the same God of the Chosen People.

Thane Rosenbaum is a novelist, essayist, law

professor and Distinguished University Professor at Touro University, where he directs the Forum on Life, Culture & Society. He is the legal analyst for CBS News Radio. His most recent book is titled "Saving Free Speech ... From Itself."

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