

THE LAST LAUGH



A Tangerine Entertainment Production

A film by Ferne Pearlstein

Featuring: **Mel Brooks, Carl Reiner, Sarah Silverman, Robert Clary, Rob Reiner, Susie Essman, Harry Shearer, Jeffrey Ross, Alan Zweibel, Gilbert Gottfried, Judy Gold, Larry Charles, David Steinberg, Abraham Foxman, Lisa Lampanelli, David Cross, Roz Weinman, Klara Firestone, Elly Gross, Deb Filler, Etgar Keret, Shalom Auslander, Jake Ehrenreich, Hanala Sagal and Renee Firestone**

Directed, Photographed and Edited by: **Ferne Pearlstein**

Written by: **Ferne Pearlstein and Robert Edwards**

Produced by: **Ferne Pearlstein and Robert Edwards, Amy Hobby and Anne Hubbell, Jan Warner**

2016 / USA / Color / Documentary / 85 minutes / English

For clips, images, and press materials, please visit our DropBox: <http://bit.ly/1V7DYcq>

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THE LAST LAUGH

“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.”

-Rob Reiner, Director

“I am...privy to many of the films that are released on a yearly basis about the Holocaust. I cannot think of one project that has taken the approach of THE LAST LAUGH. THE LAST LAUGH dispels the notion that there is nothing new to say or to reveal on the subject because this aspect of survival is one that very few have explored in print and no one that I know of has examined in a feature documentary.”

-Richard Tank, Executive Director at the Simon Wiesenthal Center

SHORT SYNOPSIS

THE LAST LAUGH is a feature documentary about what is taboo for humor, seen through the lens of the Holocaust and other seemingly off-limits topics, in a society that prizes free speech.

LONG SYNOPSIS

THE LAST LAUGH is a feature documentary that proceeds from the premise that the Holocaust would seem to be an absolutely off-limits topic for comedy. But is it? History shows that even the victims of the Nazi concentration camps themselves 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 we make the Holocaust off limits, what are the implications for other controversial subjects—9/11, AIDS, racism—in a society that prizes freedom of speech?

Shot on Super 16mm, THE LAST LAUGH thoughtfully weaves together 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, as well as archival material ranging from "The Producers" and "Curb Your Enthusiasm," to clips of comics such as Louis CK, Joan Rivers, and Chris Rock, to newly discovered footage of Jerry Lewis' never-released film Holocaust comedy "The Day the Clown Cried," to rare footage of cabarets inside the concentration camps themselves. In doing so, THE LAST LAUGH offers fresh insights into the Holocaust in a way we haven't seen before.

Created by the award-winning team of Ferne Pearlstein ("Sumo East and West" and "Imelda"), Amy Hobby (Academy Award nominee for "What Happened, Miss Simone?"), Anne Hubbell ("Gayby"), Robert Edwards ("One More Time" aka "When I Live My Life Over Again") and Jan Warner ("Poetry of Resilience").

ABOUT THE CAST

RENEE FIRESTONE – 91-year-old Auschwitz survivor and anti-genocide activist whose remarkable *verité* story runs parallel to our Greek chorus of interviews. Renee serves as a living example of the uses—and pitfalls—of using humor to come to terms with the terrible events of the Shoah.

KLARA FIRESTONE – Renee’s 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 us navigate these issues from the perspective of a child of survivors.

MEL BROOKS – Comedy legend who has made a career of satirizing Hitler and the Nazis. Brooks’ comedy would seem to be the quintessential example of so-called “Holocaust humor.” Yet in our lengthy interview with him—which serves as a central part of our narrative—he shows a surprising unease with the subject, and makes a sharp distinction between satirizing the Nazis (whom he considers a time-honored target) and humor at the expense of the victims.

CARL REINER – Revered comic actor, writer, and director whose career spans six decades. 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*.

SARAH SILVERMAN – Comedian and free speech activist known for pushing the boundaries of acceptability, perhaps more so than any other contemporary stand-up comic.

ROBERT CLARY – Franco-Polish actor, entertainer, and Auschwitz survivor who as a teenaged boy performed in the camps. Later starred in the controversial 1960s situation comedy *Hogan’s Heroes* about a Nazi Allied POWs in a Nazi prison camp.

ROB REINER – 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*.

SUSIE ESSMAN – Comedian best known for her television role as the outrageous Susie Greene on Larry David’s *Curb Your Enthusiasm*.

HARRY SHEARER – Actor, writer, and satirist (as well as a child of survivors) who is one of a handful of people who have seen Jerry Lewis’ controversial unreleased 1972 Holocaust film *The Day the Clown Cried*.

JEFFREY ROSS – Comedian best known for his “too soon” jokes including numerous Holocaust references. Dubbed the “Roastmaster General” for his work on the Comedy Central Roasts.

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

GILBERT GOTTFRIED – Divisive comedian known for making jokes in very bad taste; fired as the voice of the Aflac duck after making taboo tweets about the devastating tsunami that hit Japan in 2011.

JUDY GOLD – Jewish-American lesbian comedian who is a self-proclaimed obsessive on the subject of the Holocaust.

LARRY CHARLES – 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*.

DAVID STEINBERG – 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.

ABRAHAM FOXMAN – Holocaust survivor and longtime president of the Anti-Defamation League, perhaps the best-known and most prominent watchdog on anti-Semitism in American culture.

LISA LAMPANELLI – Self-proclaimed “insult comic” and the “Queen of Mean,” who thinks nothing is off-limits for comedy. Infamous for a joke made at a Comedy Central Roast of actor David Haselhoff (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.”

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

ROZ WEINMAN – 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.

ELLY GROSS – Auschwitz survivor who feels it is never acceptable to use humor in connection to 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.

DEB FILLER – 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.

ETGAR KERET – Satirical Israeli novelist and short story author whose work draws heavily on his survivor parents and his experience growing as a ‘2G.’ 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.

SHALOM AUSLANDER – 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.

JAKE EHRENREICH – 2G monologist and performer whose one-man show *A Jew Grows in Brooklyn* explores his experiences growing up as a child of survivors.

HANALA SAGAL – 2G author of the memoir *My Parents Went Through the Holocaust and All I Got Was this Lousy T-Shirt*, concerning her experiences growing up as a child of survivors. (Hanala is also a writer and co-executive producer on the upcoming feature *Elvis & Nixon*.)

AARON BREITBART – 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.

FILMMAKER Q&A FOR INDIEWIRE:

TRIBECA 2016 WOMEN DIRECTORS: MEET FERNE PEARLSTEIN – ‘THE LAST LAUGH’

QUESTION: Describe the film for us in your own words.

FP: "The Last Laugh" is about taboos in humor, starting from the premise that the Holocaust would seem to be an absolutely off-limits topic for comedy...but is that actually true? History shows that even the victims of the concentration camps used humor for survival and resistance. But where's the line? If we make the Holocaust off limits, what are the implications for other controversial subjects — AIDS, racism, 9/11 — in a society that prizes freedom of speech?

QUESTION: What drew you to this story?

FP: An old friend of mine and I were in Miami in 1991 with a group of journalists who were being given a tour of Miami's then-new Holocaust Memorial, led by an elderly survivor. My friend had just finished reading Art Spiegelman's "Maus" and asked the guide what she thought of the book. She reacted very strongly against it and said to him, "You cannot tell this story through the funny pages! There was nothing funny about the Holocaust!"

That moment stuck with him, especially because she hadn't read "Maus." When he went back to school for his PhD he wrote a 40-page paper called "The Last Laugh: Humor and the Holocaust." A few years later, when I was getting my Masters in Documentary Film from Stanford, he handed me the paper and said, "Make this into a film." That was 1993.

QUESTION: What do you want people to think about when they are leaving the theater?

FP: We want to provoke debate and discussion — to introduce these issues and stimulate a serious conversation about freedom of speech, our collective memory and how to remember the past while keeping it vibrant.

QUESTION: What was the biggest challenge in making the film?

FP: There were several! It was nearly impossible to get grants for this project because of the nature of the subject. We were finalists for more than four large grants, but in each case we were ultimately rejected.

We had a strong academic team behind us explaining why the subject was important, and how it offered a new approach to something that felt like it had been looked at from every possible angle. But it was still risky. Understandably, no one wanted to offer what might look like an endorsement of the idea that "it's okay to laugh at the Holocaust." Even though that was not at all what we were saying.

The next big challenge was finding the first comedian who was willing to be in the film. Fortunately, Rob Reiner agreed. Once we had Rob onboard a whole world opened up to us because of the universal love and respect for him. I think the attitude was, if he believed in and trusted us, we must be okay.

QUESTION: How did you get your film funded? Share some insights into how you got the film made.

FP: We received one modest grant from the New York State Council of the Arts. The bulk of our funding was from one anonymous donor who believed in the project from the beginning. Once we got to picture lock, an investor came in with the finishing funds we needed.

QUESTION: What's the biggest misconception about you and your work?

FP: Well I think if you care too much about how your "documentary imagery" looks — you are perceived as making documentaries that are not "important" enough.

As a documentary filmmaker who originally trained at the International Center of Photography in Documentary Photography, I was taught the opposite to be true. The success of your image was as much about the strength of the image's content as it was about the aesthetic appeal.

QUESTION: What's the best and worst advice you've received?

FP: The worst advice for "me" personally: "If you've directed and/or shot your own film, you won't have the perspective to edit it." I do understand that premise, but that's why I work so hard to have consultants and trusted friends around me to make sure I have that outside perspective that's desperately needed.

The best advice: When I was graduating from Stanford, one of my professors — Jon Else, who is a brilliant documentary director and DP— told me, "If you want to be hired to shoot documentaries in film, you need to buy yourself a film camera so you can be a package deal."

So I bought a used Aaton LTR that was so old the serial number was in the double digits. And I made a career shooting documentaries in film. The first feature I shot with that camera was "Imelda" by Ramona Diaz, which I won the Sundance Cinematography Prize in Documentary for. The most recent feature I shot with it was "The Last Laugh."

QUESTION: Name your favorite woman-directed film.

FP: "Lost in Translation" by Sofia Coppola has such a special place in my heart. I started my career as a still photographer working for two Japanese newspapers, and spent some time in Japan—which I fell in love with—and then made my first feature documentary there, "Sumo East and West" about Westerners in the ancient Japanese art of sumo wrestling.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

FERNE PEARLSTEIN, Writer and Director:

Ferne Pearlstein is an American filmmaker based in New York City. A rare triple threat, she is a prize-winning cinematographer, a feature film editor, and a writer/director whose work has won numerous awards and been screened and broadcast around the world. 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 PBS's Independent Lens series and broadcast around the world. Its two-year festival run culminated in a special outdoor screening on Oahu's Waikiki Beach for 7000 people at the Hawaii International Film Festival. Her other director credits 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.

An acclaimed documentary 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 for which she lived and traveled with the former First Lady of the Philippines during her campaign for the presidency. Committed to shooting in 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 are: cinematographer on 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 long time collaborator and husband Robert Edwards, who had hired her to shoot the film. They have been producing partners ever since.

Pearlstein went on to co-produce and edit, as well as direct and shoot 2nd unit, Edwards' first feature LAND OF THE BLIND, starring Ralph Fiennes and Donald Sutherland, which premiered at the 2006 Tribeca Film Festival. Most recently, she was a producer on Edwards' latest feature ONE MORE TIME (aka WHEN I LIVE MY LIFE OVER AGAIN) starring Christopher Walken and Amber Heard, which premiered at the 2015 Tribeca Film Festival and came out in theaters and on VOD on April 8, 2016.

Pearlstein's first scriptwriting effort, "Evie's Garden" was a semi-finalist in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' prestigious Nicholl Fellowship.

THE LAST LAUGH had its World Premiere at the 2016 Tribeca Film Festival and its International Premiere at HotDocs 2016.

ROBERT EDWARDS, Producer and Writer:

Robert Edwards 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 such as Plan B, John Davis, and HBO. He is currently at work on a 7-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 (Tangerine Entertainment):

Amy Hobby is an Academy-Award nominated producer of both scripted and documentary films. In a career spanning more than 20 years she 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 an Emmy for her role.

Ms. 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 her most recent film WHAT HAPPENED, MISS SIMONE? (Netflix), which was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Feature Documentary, a Grammy, and a Peabody Award.

In 2013 Ms. Hobby co-founded Tangerine Entertainment which produces and builds community for films directed by women. In her various capacities Ms. Hobby speaks on panels and runs workshops around the world including the Women's Economic Forum (Goa, India 2015), Screen Australia Workshops for Narrative Films (Brisbane, Australia), Cannes American Pavilion, creating IFP's "How to Take a Meeting" workshop, Stowe Story Labs Mentor, and Impact Partners Documentary Producing Mentor. She has also been on numerous film festival juries and panels over the past 10 years. Ms. Hobby is the current Vice President of Artists Programs at the Tribeca Film Institute where she oversees all filmmaker grants, labs and programs.

ANNE HUBBELL, Producer (Tangerine Entertainment):

Anne Hubbell is the co-founder of Tangerine Entertainment, a groundbreaking production company and community builder focusing exclusively on films by women directors. She is also Vice President of Motion Picture & Consumer Films at Eastman Kodak where she works with studio and independent movies of all budgets, episodic content and commercials, and is a liaison to the international film community at large. She is a 20-year industry veteran and currently serves on the boards of New York Women in Film & Television, the New York Production Alliance and Rooftop Films, and is a member of

the Producers Guild of America. As a freelance producer and consultant, she has worked on numerous film and TV productions and not-for-profit media and arts events. Her credits include award-winning features GAYBY (2012) and LIPSTICK & DYNAMITE (2005) and two seasons of IFC's "Independent Focus" and "iFilm@IFC" (2001-03). Via Tangerine, Hubbell produced Amber Tamblyn's directorial debut, PAINT IT BLACK, which had its world premiere at the 2016 Los Angeles Film Festival and will be screening on the international festival circuit starting summer 2016.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Directed, Photographed and Edited by

Ferne Pearlstein

Written by

Robert Edwards and Ferne Pearlstein

Produced by

Ferne Pearlstein, Robert Edwards, Amy Hobby, Anne Hubbell and Jan Warner

Cinematography

Ferne Pearlstein

Anne Etheridge

Edited by

Ferne Pearlstein

Inspired by

The Last Laugh: Humor and the Holocaust

by Kent Kirshenbaum

Featuring

(In order of appearance)

Renee Firestone

Klara Firestone

Gilbert Gottfried

Rob Reiner

Mel Brooks

Judy Gold

Sarah Silverman

Carl Reiner

Robert Clary

Etgar Keret

Aaron Breitbart

Jake Ehrenreich

Alan Zweibel

Susie Essman

Larry Charles

Eugene Lebovitz

Deb Filler

Gerhard Maschkowski

Elly Gross

Dave Lux

Jeffrey Ross

Harry Shearer

David Steinberg

Lisa Lampanelli

Roz Weinman

Abraham Foxman

David Cross

Shalom Auslander

Hanala Sagal

Herman Feuerstein

Supervising Producer

Steven Bennett

Co-Producers

Anne Etheridge

Dori Stegman

Associate Producers

Adrienne Collatos
Yelena Rachitsky
Jamie Lauren Davis
Catherine DeCioccio

Production Sound Mixers

Richard Fleming
Nico Ruderman

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Richard Trank
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