
The Guardian

‘Why don’t Jews play Jews?’ – David Baddiel on the row over Helen Mirren as Golda Meir

Maureen Lipman sparked fury by suggesting the ex Israeli PM should not be played by Mirren. But, says David Baddiel, why shouldn’t ‘authentic casting’ apply to all minorities? And where is the outcry over Bojack Horseman?



📷 'The deep truth of any marginalised identity is only available to those who live that identity' ... Mirren as Meir in the forthcoming film *Golda*. Photograph: Jasper Wolf/Assemble Publicity/PA

Soon after the brilliant *It's A Sin* came out, Russell T Davies justified his decision to cast only gay actors in gay parts by saying: “They are not there to ‘act gay’ because ‘acting gay’ is a bunch of codes for a performance. You wouldn’t cast someone able-bodied and put them in a wheelchair ... authenticity is leading us to joyous places.”

It would be wrong to suggest that no one questioned this statement, but it became part of an ongoing conversation about casting and minorities. Davies was not, thankfully, mightily abused on social media for saying it – which is what happened last week to Maureen Lipman, after she suggested, on being asked about the casting of Helen Mirren in a biopic of Israel’s former prime minister Golda Meir, that Jewish parts should perhaps be played by Jewish actors.

I'm going to claim some credit – or, for those (and it seems there are many) who hate this suggestion, responsibility – for this, because I'm aware that Lipman (like Sarah Silverman, who said something very similar as regards the castings of Kathryn Hahn as Joan Rivers and Felicity Jones as Ruth Bader Ginsburg) has read my book *Jews Don't Count*. It's a polemic expressing my opinion that, over a period of extreme intensification of the progressive conversation about representation and inclusion and microaggression and what is and isn't offensive to minorities, one minority – Jews – has been routinely neglected.

In the book, some time is devoted to the issue of casting. In terms of this conversation, casting is most directly an employment issue, a correction against previous traditions that have meant less work for minority actors. But it is also – and I would say, at its core more so – about respect. There is something disrespectful, this argument runs, about casting an able-bodied actor in a disabled part, or a cis actor in a trans part, and so on. The deaf actor Marlee Matlin expressed this well when she said: “Deaf is not a costume.”



📷 Gay actors in gay roles ... Ash and Richie in *It's a Sin*. Photograph: Ben Blackall/Channel 4

The deep truth of any marginalised identity is only available to those who live that identity. Casting a non-minority actor to mimic that identity feels, to the progressive eye, like impersonation, and impersonation may carry with it an element of mockery – or at least seem reductive, reducing the complexity of that experience by channelling it through an actor who hasn't lived it.

You may not agree with this – you may be one of those people who say actors should be allowed to act – but in the offices of casting directors, the progressive argument has been won. Even in animation, voice actors now need to correspond to the ethnicity or sexuality or gender preference or able-bodied status of their avatars. The risks of outrage if this stricture isn't followed are too great. The Netflix animation *BoJack Horseman* is a stone-cold

masterpiece, but the show's creator, Raphael Bob-Waksberg, has apologised profusely because an Vietnamese American character in it, Diane Nguyen, is voiced by the not-Vietnamese at all Alison Brie.

In BoJack Horseman, there is another character called Lenny Turteltaub. He's a turtle, but a very Jewish one, a very Jewish Hollywood producer stereotype, and he's played by JK Simmons, who is not Jewish. There has been no outcry about that, and Waksberg has seen no need to get anguished about it. This is true across the board: Jewish is the minority that you can cast with actors not of that minority, and hardly, until very recently, hear a whisper of concern. What you can hear, still, if you do raise the issue, is an extremely vehement reaction.



📷 Double standard? ... Bojack Horseman's Lenny Turteltaub, right, is voiced by JK Simmons, who is not Jewish. Photograph: Everett Collection Inc/Alamy

This vehemence is about a number of confusions – many see Jews

as whites, when it would be truer to say that, as far as racism goes, Jews are Schrödinger's whites: white or non-white depending on the politics of the observer. Many instinctively see Jewishness as a religion, rather than an ethnicity, and therefore antisemitism as religious intolerance rather than racism, despite, as I've pointed out many times, my great-uncle being an atheist not getting him any free passes out of the Warsaw ghetto. But primarily, it's about Jews being assumed, antisemitically, to be successful and privileged and powerful, and therefore not in need of the protections that identity politics affords other minorities. In the case of casting, that falls down as: "Well, Jews are everywhere in showbiz, so Jewish actors don't need that leg-up."

It's odd, then, that so many Jewish parts are *not* cast with Jewish actors, even when the characters and storylines are very Jewish indeed. Why, if there are so many Jews in showbiz, is Gary Oldman cast as Herman Mankiewicz, or Rachel Brosnahan as Mrs Maisel? Why did the makers of recent BBC drama Ridley Road, about antisemitism in London after the war, have to scrabble around, after I pointed out the lack of Jews in the cast, saying that the female actor playing the main character had just discovered that she had one Jewish grandfather? Why are the four main characters of the only recognisably Jewish sitcom on British TV, Friday Night Dinner, all played by non-Jews, apart from Tom Rosenthal who has said publicly that he doesn't consider himself Jewish? If there are so many Jewish actors, they must all be quite shit, as they really aren't getting the Jewish jobs.

And more importantly, as I say, this issue is not really about who gets the work. It's about the idea that minority experience should be expressed by those who truly know it, rather than caricatured by those who don't. It would be an interesting conclusion, given 2,000 years of persecution, that the representation of Jewish identity doesn't deserve this complexity.



📷 Non-Jewish cast ... Friday Night Dinner. Photograph: Channel 4

Despite the use in this argument of the term Jewface, when I watch non-Jews play Jews, it isn't just about the face. The phrase I use, to cover the whole range of tics and shrugs and stooping and whining and kvetching like I saw in a recent production of *Little Shop of Horrors* for the playing of the character of Mr Mushnik by a non-Jewish actor – is *Nebbish Being*. Having a non-Jew do *Nebbish Being* – if you follow the same logic that would apply if this was a black, gay, trans, disabled or any other minority character, playing-up stereotypical aspects of that minority – is disrespectful, or at least not true, to Jews.

It's complex, all this. I note that many Jews themselves feel uncomfortable with the demand that Jews should play Jews, both for reasons to do with acting but also, more deeply, because many Jews are uncomfortable in general with asking for parity with other minorities within all the microaggressions and callings-out of identity-politics-land. My position on this lack of parity is: whether you want parity or not, it's worth pointing out. It's worth

saying. I – and Maureen Lipman and Sarah Silverman – have stressed that, yes, actors should be allowed to act. But that isn't the world we or casting directors live in now, and the question then has to be asked: why should things be different for Jews?

In all the aggressive tweeting about Lipman, I saw many photos posted triumphantly of when she once played a vicar in a TV show. Social media loves of course an Aha! meme, and those who hated Lipman for saying her Golda Meir thing posted it luxuriously, as if it proved her bang-to-rights wrong. But minority casting is not a two-way street. Dev Patel can play, obviously, all the south Asian parts he gets offered, and he can also now play David Copperfield. Michael Fassbender, however, is not going to be up any time soon for Gandhi. The new casting is an industry-wide attempt to right a previous structural wrong, which means that minorities are now both given a fenced-off right to play themselves, and *also* allowed to play parts from the mainstream culture.

If Jews are part of this, the same ring-fencing should apply to them as regards Jewish parts, but also shouldn't stop them from being cast as non-Jewish characters from the majority Christian culture too. Which means Lipman can say this about Meir and Mirren – and play all the vicars and priests she wants. But this of course is to imagine that Jews are seen as a real minority. This is to imagine that Jews are understood as much in need of wrongs righting as any other minority.

The dial is shifting a little. Tamsin Greig said recently that she "probably shouldn't" have played a Jewish mother in Friday Night Dinner. This is not the kind of exhaustive apology that some performers, including myself, have given for the historic transgression of playing minorities when they are not a member of that minority.

And here's the thing. I don't need or want Greig to apologise (she's a unique case anyway, being a practising Christian with some Jewish ancestry). I think, in fact, that Greig was brilliant in Friday Night Dinner, that she got as close as possible, without caricature, to the reality of writer Robert Popper's suburban Jewish mum. I believe two things at once – that in an ideal world, non-Jews *should* be allowed to play Jews, but the fact this allowance already exists, and has up to this point received very little pushback is, in the modern casting context, a discrepancy, and one that needs to be deconstructed, because it says a lot about how people see Jews.

It is, as I say, complex. At the end of the day, I don't know the answer. But I think that I – and Maureen Lipman and any other Jew – should not be abused for asking the question.