

Television Comedy as a Source: *So Haunt Me*

***So Haunt Me* is the greatest Jewish TV comedy that you've (probably) never heard of.** I watched it first as a child but returned to it as part of my doctoral research into Jewish responses to race relations in postwar Britain. It appeared on BBC 1 between 1992 and 1994, before Jews became cool or controversial, and starred a Jewish ghost. If that doesn't make you want to watch it, there's nothing I can say to you. It appeared around the same time as a wave of television shows with Jewish leads that are even less remembered, such as *You Think You've Got Troubles* (1991), *Sam Saturday* (1992) and *Every Silver Lining* (1993), and thus forms part of a Jewish cultural renaissance in the early 1990s, as British Jewish writers and performers cautiously began to 'out themselves' as Jews and seek to enter multicultural spaces. Such pieces of 'low culture' as sitcoms are every bit as revealing of such cultural shifts as more prestigious forms like novels and visual art. *So Haunt Me* is set during the British recession of the early 1990s, featuring a family who have been forced to relocate to a run-down house in a cheaper area, in this case Willesden in North-West London. Willesden had, in the 1950s and 1960s a large Jewish population, and is to this day home to two Jewish cemeteries: one Orthodox and one Liberal. In *So Haunt Me* it represents a location where the protagonists would rather not be, a place that is haunted by its past rather than looking to its future. The eponymous family are the Rokebys, a traditional situation comedy '2.4 children' family, comprised of a husband, wife, son and daughter. They are a non-Jewish 'every family', and the audience is expected to identify with them.



Source commentary provided by Dr Joseph Finlay

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In contrast to the gentile Rokebys, there is a Jewish inhabitant of the house, a character who is depicted as distinctly other, both to the family and to the audience. The premise of the show is that one of the former residents, a certain Yetta Feldman, never left, and continues to reside there, now as a ghost. This is demonstrated with retro outfits and pale make-up. True to Jewish maternal stereotype, Yetta supposedly choked to death on a chicken bone whilst making soup in 1972. Jewish ghosts or spirits have a long literary pedigree, think of Ansky's *The Dybbuk*, or the Golem, created by

and of Karlin makes the show richer for the minority of the audience who would have known about them. And there are some wonderful surprises – such as when Yetta sings a Yiddish lullaby to the Rokeby's younger child – which it is tempting to suggest that Karlin improvised from her own reservoir of Jewish cultural knowledge. Despite the goyishness of the Rokebys, there is a running gag about Sally Rokeby growing increasingly fond of Yetta and becoming more Jewish in sympathy with her, to the consternation of her husband Pete, to the extent that Sally begins to refer to theirs as a 'mixed marriage'. At a

moment, in the early 1990s, when the UK Jewish community was engaged in a moral panic over intermarriage, with new Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks pointedly asking 'Will We Have Jewish Grandchildren?', this is bold, provocative stuff. But mostly the joy of *So Haunt Me* is that it is so profoundly British and Jewish,

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the Maharal of Prague, or Frume Sarah in *Fiddler on the Roof* (played in the film by Ruth Madoc who would go on to find sitcom fame as Gladys in *Hi-De-Hi*). But here the ghost is played not for horror, but for laughs. Yetta is at first annoying, interrupting family life, but soon becomes more interesting and vivacious than any of the living characters and gets most of the best lines.

Key to *So Haunt Me*, written by the British-Jewish writer Paul Mendelson, is that Yetta Feldman is played by the veteran British-Jewish actress Miriam Karlin. Karlin was something of a sitcom ghost herself, having famously the role of Paddy in *The Rag Trade*, a 1960s BBC sitcom set in a clothing factory. She played several other Jewish roles in her career, including Golde in the original West End production of *Fiddler on the Roof*, and was a prominent activist in the Anti-Nazi League in the 1970s. She thus carries something of the memory of these roles into Yetta, bringing an element of intertextuality into sitcom-land. Appreciating the historic Jewishness of Willesden

containing a rich vein of sarcasm and passive aggression rooted in fondness that is common to both cultures. It seems unlikely that a mainstream British, non-Jewish audience appreciated it as much as I did. As *The Times* television page commented when the first episode was released 'why so much should be made of the phantom's Jewishness is not yet clear'.

Despite precedents in Maureen Lipman's Jewish grandmother character in the 1980s BT adverts and Leslie Joseph's vampish Dorian in *Birds of a Feather* (first broadcast in 1989), *So Haunt Me* appeared almost twenty years before the new wave of Jewish cultural products that occurred in the 2010s, such as *Friday Night Dinner* and *Grandma's House*. *So Haunt Me* has never been released on DVD but it is, thankfully, possible to find the entirety of it online. It offers cultural and historical insights to scholars and non-scholars alike. Nu, watch it already.