Makin' Whoopee: Creating Eddie Cantor on Screen

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by

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To Nan—how I wish we could
have shared our love of
musicals.

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Introduction | We Want Can-tor!

In the mid 1930s, Eddie Cantor—radio and film star, former stage actor, philanthropist, songwriter, and author of numerous best-selling comedy books—was one of the most popular celebrities of his time. Ninety years later, his name does not spark recognition in even some of the most fervent fans of Old Hollywood. Those who enjoy and celebrate the accomplishments of Eddie Cantor live in a small, private Facebook group with roughly 800 members. There are many reasons why Cantor is mostly forgotten today. Most notable, perhaps, is his frequent use of a blackface persona, often compared to the likes of Al Jolson. Cantor's humor lacks the longevity of that of the Marx Brothers and his songs are naughty and risqué, with innuendos that do not always resonate with modern audiences. With mediocre films outdated in more ways than one, why even glance at Eddie Cantor and his precode filmography when the Marx Brothers and Maurice Chevalier exist, which paved the way for the film musical and musical comedy in a way that Cantor's films do not?

Watching Eddie Cantor's early films, one might be taken aback by how forward they were in their messaging about themes such as Jewish identity, play with gender, and the Great Depression during a time when musicals were oversaturating the industry and were often marketed as escapism from a gloomy era of American history. *Whoopee!* (1930), *Palmy Days* (1931), and *Roman Scandals* (1933) are far from perfect films. The humor can be outdated, the blackface is abundant and difficult to watch, sexism sometimes runs rampant, and songs often drag. This does not take away from the merits these films have, however, with their interesting views on gender and sexuality, Jewish influence, and complicated racial dynamics, amongst other things. Cantor, through his early films, developed a film persona that combined elements of

his Jewish identity, femininity, and Great Depression politics that would come to define his character in film during the 1930s and led to his burgeoning popularity which reached its height in this decade.

Why write about this often forgotten comedian and entertainer whose material has not aged as well as other comedians of his time? Cantor's popularity is unique. Biographer Herbert Goldman subtitles his Cantor biography *The Birth of Modern Stardom*, explaining that Cantor was one of the first artists to expand his stardom beyond a single medium and use the platform he had created for political and social endeavors. By close reading Cantor's earliest sound features he made with producer Samuel Goldwyn, I aim to break down and identify the persona that Cantor created through his screen personality. In doing this, I hope to shed some light on the different subversive elements that make up this popular star persona that dominated box offices and make an effort to help answer the question as to why Cantor was as popular as he was.

The Eddie Cantor Story

Eddie Cantor was born Isidore Itzkowitz on January 31st, 1892 in the Lower East Side of New York City to Russian Jewish immigrant parents.[1] By the time he was two years old, Itzkowitz was an orphan, living with his Grandma Esther. Izzy Itzkowitz, whose last name soon became Kanter, a shortened version of his Bubba's name, Kantrowitz, often found himself getting in trouble around the neighborhood, worrying his aging grandmother. He first found relief from the impoverished life he was used to when he attended Surprise Lake Camp (Alliance Camp) as part of the Educational Alliance initiative to help lower class children get fresh air

[1] All information regarding Cantor's personal history is taken from his autobiographies, *My Life is in Your Hands* and *Take My Life*, biographer Herbert Goldman's *Banjo Eyes: Eddie Cantor and the Birth of Modern Stardom*, and David Weinstein's *The Eddie Cantor Story: A Jewish Life in Performance and Politics*.

outside of the city. It was here that young Izzy got his start in entertainment, performing at campfires which helped him extend his stay from two to eight weeks. While still in school, Izzy found himself performing on the playground to impress the beautiful, athletic girl in school, Ida Tobias. Ida, whom Cantor would later marry, became friends with Izzy and gave him the name Eddie, borrowed from a friend who was dating a boy named Eddie and she thought the name suited the budding performer.

Cantor's first time performing on a stage was at an amateur night in 1907 where he won first prize after doing impressions (of impressions) of famous vaudeville actors and politicians. After getting experience at amateur nights, he became a singing waiter; his pianist was none other than Jimmy Durante, also from the Lower East Side. Cantor soon got an agent and created a new character for his repertoire using blackface makeup which would later become his signature (discussed further in Chapter 1). One of Cantor's first professional acting jobs that helped him make a name for himself was with the duo Bedini and Arthur, with Cantor acting as their stooge. Cantor later joined Gus Edwards' *Kid Kabaret* in an "adult" role alongside a young, and eventually lifelong friend, George Jessel. In October 1916, Cantor was given the opportunity to perform in the *Midnight Frolic*, impresario Florenz Ziegfeld's revue aftershow on the roof of the New Amsterdam Theatre. The next year he would make his way downstairs and into the *Ziegfeld Follies of 1917*. Cantor would be a performer in the *Follies* through 1920, returning in 1927 as the first starring performer to ever be billed in the *Ziegfeld Follies*.

Cantor's first foray into human rights and philanthropy would be in 1919 and his association with the Actors' Equity Association strike. Throughout the rest of his career, Cantor would remain fully committed to tackling social issues such as advocating for Black performers

on his radio and television shows to serving as the president of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) from 1933 to 1935 and the first president of the American Federation of Radio Artists (later AFTRA) from 1937 to 1940, as well as helping to fund many different Jewish organizations and causes throughout his career. Perhaps most notably, Cantor came up with the name "March of Dimes" and proposed that radio listeners send in a dime rather than ask wealthy patrons to make donations to the nonprofit. This is only a snippet of Cantor's extensive charity work that earned him an honorary Oscar in 1957 and continued up until his death in 1964. I bring this up as Cantor's lifelong dedication to humanitarian efforts became a notable part of his persona offscreen.

Cantor would perform not just for Ziegfeld but also for the Shuberts in musical revues such as *The Midnight Rounders* in 1920 and *Make it Snappy* in 1922, which marked his first appearance as a star on Broadway, with his name above the title of the show. His songs, such as "My Yiddisha Mammy," and sketches, such as his taxi sketch that ends with criticism of Henry Ford, in these shows would highlight his identity as a Jewish comedian. His popularity as the "Apostle of Pep" aligned with "the emerging youth culture of the 1920s, which celebrated raw energy and rebellion against social constraints" (Weinstein 62). He would return to Ziegfeld for his two immensely successful book musicals, *Kid Boots* in 1923 and *Whoopee* in 1928. Both musicals would eventually be adapted into film. *Kid Boots* was referred to by Cantor at the time of his first autobiography, while *Whoopee* was still in the works, as "one of the most successful musical comedies of the American stage" (Cantor and Freedman 228). While *Kid Boots* would feature Cantor as a witty bootlegger, the character of Henry Williams in *Whoopee* "stressed the weak side of the Cantor stage persona that would be exploited in the Goldwyn movies of the

1930s" (Goldman 126). *Whoopee* was also a critical success, its closure speaking to the stock market crash and economic turmoil in the country rather than quality.

When the stock market crashed on October 29th, 1929, Cantor was just one of millions of people who lost just about everything they had. He would end up writing three comedy books about the Great Depression: *Caught Short!: A Saga of Wailing Wall Street* (1929), *Yoo-Hoo, Prosperity!: The Eddie Cantor Five-Year Plan* (1931), and *Your Next President!* (1932). In 1931, he would also venture into the world of radio, making him a household name with his radio show, *The Chase and Sanborn Hour*, being one of the most popular shows on the radio in the 1930s, a career he would continue into the 1940s.

A Few Moments with Eddie Cantor

Cantor's career in film began in 1923 on Phonofilm developed by Lee de Forest around 1922. Phonofilm was an early sound-on-film process that was marketed as being "primarily for the reproduction of musical, vaudeville numbers and solos" ("'Phono-Films' Weekly"). Cantor's film debut was in the six-minute short *A Few Moments with Eddie Cantor, Star of "Kid Boots"* which was first screened around the time that Cantor had his debut in Ziegfeld's *Kid Boots.*[2] The short film, which like many of the Cantor shorts can be found on YouTube, has him perform a short standup routine for the new sound process. The short is a great look at traditional vaudeville and Cantor's performance style. He also sings two songs, "The Dumber They Come, the Better I Like 'Em" and "Oh, Gee, Georgie!" accompanied by George Olsen. These songs are typical for Cantor, full of innuendo and eye-rolling at the "naughty" parts. The eye-rolling and hand-clapping and skipping around are what I will refer to as *Cantorisms.* These distinctive

[2] Citations for all films discussed can be seen under the "Selected Filmography" section.

choreographic styles appear in many of the musical numbers in Cantor's films and came to define his specific brand of musical performance that could be seen into the 1950s on episodes of *The Colgate Comedy Hour*, of which Cantor was one of the hosts.

When Cantor first appeared in film, he was entering the world of silent slapstick comedy. Stars such as Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Harold Lloyd were some of the most well-known and beloved actors of the time.[3] Cantor's character, referred to by David Soren as "The Kid" was "innocent, kindhearted and considerate of others, but also a perpetual wise guy, who was always outsmarted by others until eventually his honesty and integrity somehow helped him to triumph" (Soren 9). *Kid Boots* (1926) was a silent adaptation of Cantor's hit musical (yes, I am aware of the irony), starring Cantor as Samuel "Kid" Boots, a tailor who falls in love with Clara (Clara Bow) and finds himself as a divorce witness all while fooling around in a country club. The film is a far cry from the stage show, with similarities practically beginning and ending with Cantor. However, the film gives an early glimpse at his persona as a physical comic actor. Routines such as the "Osteopath Scene" from the *Follies* and the stage version of *Kid Boots* are brought to the silver screen, and one of the most memorable moments, in which Cantor powders his arm and positions a door to look like his arm is another woman and starts to make love to it, was improvised by Cantor and remains a quintessential slapstick routine for any enthusiast of the genre. Although not a wide showcase of his talents as a comedian due to the silent nature of the film, *Kid Boots* cements itself in Cantor's repertoire as hinting at a promising career in film, even though his following silent film, *Special Delivery* (1927), was a flop.

[3] Harold Lloyd shares the most similarities to Cantor's work as a silent comedian, particularly with his "Glasses" character who was "an ordinary young man facing the problems that most young men encounter" (Slide 221). Although released a year after *Kid Boots*, Lloyd's *The Kid Brother* (1927) is a solid example of the world in which Cantor was entering, the character's persona closely aligned with what Cantor would perform.

After turning down the role of Jakie Rabinowitz in *The Jazz Singer* (1927), Cantor's first appearance in a full length sound film would be the Florenz Ziegfeld-supervised *Glorifying the American Girl* (1929). The final act of the fictional story about a young woman who wants to star in the *Follies* is a collection of performances from the *Ziegfeld Follies* with star performers of the time such as Rudy Vallee, Helen Morgan, and Eddie Cantor. Cantor's appearance in the film solidifies his Jewish identity in the eyes of the filmgoing public. He appears briefly before his sketch, encouraging the young lead played by Mary Eaton, his co-star from the stage production of *Kid Boots*. He tells her, "I've got all my relatives out there—and a few gentiles too." Nods to the actor's Jewish identity do not end there, as the sketch, a reworking of the Schubert-produced *Midnight Rounders* sketch "Joe's Blue Front," is performed with a Yiddish accent at a tailor shop that is coded as Jewish, one of which Cantor worked in as a young teen.[4] Martin Scorsese, in a *New York Times* article discussing the comedy of Sacha Baron Cohen, refers to this sketch as the "essence of Jewish comedy" (Lim).

Between 1929 and 1930, Cantor would film four short films, though only three survive in full (*A Ziegfeld Midnight Frolic* [1929], *Getting a Ticket* [1930], and *Insurance* [1930]).[5] These films, like the sketch in *Glorifying the American Girl*, are glimpses of Cantor's vaudeville routines while working for Ziegfeld. *A Ziegfeld Midnight Frolic* (1929) is a short look at Cantor's solo performance, similar to *A Few Moments with Eddie Cantor*. After having just

[4] Goldman states that Cantor's scene in *Glorifying the American Girl* is from the sketch "Belt in the Back" (130). Weinstein states that this is actually a reworking of "Joe's Blue Front," however, it is possible that this is the same sketch (see the advertisement on the slide show for the section "Jewish Codes" in *The Eddie Cantor Story: A Jewish life in Performance and Politics* YouTube video). The video also goes in depth regarding the Jewish aspect of the sketch that appears in *Glorifying the American Girl* (*The Eddie Cantor Story*).

[5] *That Party in Person* (1929) is, as far as I can tell, either a lost film, or at the very least, inaccessible. The audio of the film can be found online but no image exists. It features Cantor as himself talking to Paramount and making a deal to create a talking picture. He sings a couple of songs and talks about working alongside Clara Bow in *Kid Boots*. The film, from the audio recording, appears to be similar in style to *A Few Moments with Eddie Cantor*.

performed in *Whoopee*, Cantor has hopped up to the roof of the New Amsterdam Theatre to perform in the *Midnight Frolic* for wealthy patrons, several of whom he points out in the audience, with the *Midnight Frolic* being where Cantor made his Broadway debut in 1916. The entire routine is performed in blackface, but there are no references to the minstrel makeup Cantor wears, nor any references to the South. Instead, Cantor performs as himself: a Jewish comedian who sings risqué, sometimes naughty, songs, which had come to define his persona. In the film, Cantor references his Jewish identity, claiming that he is "tickled to death that Henry Ford," a known antisemite, "apologized to a race of people with whom I'm very familiar," referring to a published statement from July 1927 (Weinstein 79). He jokes that the reason Ford was upset with the Jewish people, "leave it to Cantor to find out," was because "they were getting more money for second hand Fords than he was getting for new ones," a joke in which "Cantor's pride at Jewish acumen tweaks the insecurities at the heart of the antisemitic accusation that Jews controlled American business and finance" (Weinstein 80). The short film gives a contemporary audience an authentic view at Cantor's comfortability performing in front of an audience as well as his inclusion of Jewish identity into his comedy. Throughout time, this deep connection to Jewish identity would become diminished in film, although remaining a significant part of his radio identity.

A Look Ahead

Chapter 1 will cover Cantor's first full-length feature talkie, *Whoopee!* from 1930. This would be the second and final full adaptation of one of his stage shows and the only film in

which Ziegfeld would go to Hollywood and help produce along with Goldwyn.[6] The film is the closest one would ever get to seeing a Ziegfeld stage production aside from some of the color sequences in *Glorifying the American Girl*. Filmed using two-strip Technicolor, *Whoopee!* is full of the Ziegfeld glamor as well as the comedy acts that often structured the shows. The film tackles numerous topics from Cantor's Jewish identity—it is the only film he starred in where his Jewishness was written directly into the script—to interracial relationships between a Native American and a white woman. Identity plays a large part in the film as Cantor plays a neurotic Jewish hypochondriac, a Greek cook, a Black "singin' cook," and a Jewish Native American chief. I will explore how Cantor portrays these different identities and how they interact with his Jewish identity, which remains pervasive throughout the story as well as explain how these elements came to define the persona while also being unique to this film. The chapter will also touch on femininity and queerness, tied once again to Jewishness and a perceived "lack" that will continue to characterize Cantor's characters throughout the 1930s.

Chapter 2 will tackle Cantor's second film of the 1930s, *Palmy Days* (1931), an irreverent comedy where Cantor's small and boyish character is a foil to the tall and oppressive female lead, played by Charlotte Greenwood. This chapter will primarily cover the increased feminization of Cantor's characters where he is submissive to a masculine female figure and appears in drag in the film, portraying a waitress he names "Daisy Crumb." I will discuss the musical aspect of the film and how it creates a tension between Cantor's own masculinity and performed femininity. These elements, as I will explain, emphasize the subversiveness of Cantor's film persona and its uniqueness, particularly in the world of the movie musical.

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[6] Moments of stage shows such as the "Osteopath Scene" would appear in other films such as *Palmy Days*. As for Ziegfeld, he hated his work in Hollywood, often clashing with Goldwyn, and planned to return to creating stage shows but died in 1932.

Chapter 3 will take a look at Cantor's final film before the enforcement of the Hays Code in 1934, *Roman Scandals* (1933). *Roman Scandals* is the first of these musicals starring Cantor to truly tackle the Great Depression. Elements from the previous chapters, such as Jewishness and its interaction with femininity will be explored as Cantor's character appears non-assertive and humiliated compared to the strong musclemen that make up Ancient Rome. In a look towards his future films, Cantor's role as a Great Depression figure and optimist will be explored as Cantor is placed in situations where he must uncover the corruption that plagues his town as the everyman who is beloved by the regular citizens and hated by the elites. Through musical numbers in particular, which point to an increased sophistication of these musicals, we will see how Cantor becomes a spokesperson for perseverance through difficult times, a trait that began in 1929 when he started publishing comedy books after losing almost everything in the stock market crash. Finally, we will closely examine the musical number "Keep Young and Beautiful," which combines the glorifying aesthetics of Busby Berkeley choreography (who choreographed Cantor's first four films) with a multitude of Cantor's different identities such as his blackface persona, a perceived queerness, and heightened femininity amongst a racially diverse and complicated backdrop in an ultimate "tribute" to the persona Cantor had created over his first four films.

By looking at these three Eddie Cantor vehicles, *Whoopee!*, *Palmy Days*, and *Roman Scandals*, I attempt to uncover what made Cantor so popular as I explore the different identities that crafted his film persona from a Jewish man who often appears very feminine and is outspoken on political issues situated during the Great Depression. In choosing to write about pre-code films, subversiveness in Cantor's persona takes center stage and shows the development

of the persona beginning with his first feature film that is eventually solidified with his final pre-code film. The time has come to meet and learn about the man who has captured my attention for the past several months and will hopefully capture yours as well.

Figure 1.1. Editorial stock photo from *Whoopee!* Courtesy of Shutterstock.

Chapter 1 | Such a Chutzpah: Jewish Identity in *Whoopee!*

After a successful Broadway run in 1928, it only made sense for the Ziegfeld stage show and book musical *Whoopee* to make its way to Hollywood, with an added exclamation mark, of course, and filmed in captivating two-strip Technicolor.[7] *Whoopee!* (1930) was Eddie Cantor's first full length talkie, Florenz Ziegfeld's first and only producing role in Hollywood, and Busby Berkeley's first choreographer role in Hollywood. *Whoopee!* is a unique film that engages with questions of ethnicity, race, and gender and sexuality, while still maintaining an essence of cinematic spectacle for the viewer encompassed in Cantor's musical numbers and narrative choices (included for him to perform vaudeville-style comedy). The film, featuring numerous performers from the original Broadway show, combines sophisticated broad comedy with a sturdy but thin plot that does not shy away from difficult topics, even when handled with a shaky hand. *Whoopee!* includes themes such as Jewish identity and its interaction with race, gender and sexuality, and identity as a performer through Cantor's humor and musical numbers.

Whoopee! contains two plots, connected by Cantor's Henry Williams, an anxiety-laden hypochondriac who has been sent to California to better his health as he is domineered by his nurse Ms. Custer (Ethel Shutta). In the (main) romantic plot, Sally Morgan (Eleanor Hunt) is in love with Wanenis (Paul Gregory), a Native American, whom she is forbidden to marry, so her father (Walter Law) sets her up with the local sheriff Bob Wells (Jack Rutherford). Before she is set to marry Bob, Sally tricks Henry into running off with her, allowing for Cantor-centric

[7] The use of two-strip Technicolor is interesting as it was not commonly used, often deemed expensive and only used for certain films, including those that included Ziegfeld-related scenes such as *Glorifying the American Girl*, which has Technicolor scenes, and *Sally* (1929), which was filmed entirely in Technicolor, though most of that print is lost. *Whoopee!* being in two-strip Technicolor not only highlights Ziegfeld extravagance (the production did spend more than its budget), but also shows that Cantor was a star who was worth the Technicolor treatment.

comedy routines to ensue as Bob looks for them, including Cantor as a Greek chef and in blackface and redface routines in moments of disguise. At the end of the film, Wanenis is found to be white but raised by Native Americans so he and Sally can be together, and Ms. Custer and Henry find themselves in love.[8]

Critically popular, *Whoopee!* was described by *Screenland* as "the best of Broadway and the best of Hollywood"; *Motion Picture News* called it "a standout comedy with laughs toppling over each other continually and brief respites given the audiences to recover for the next spasm via brief effective songs or dance ensembles" during a time when "filmusical comedies … seemed to be on the downgrade with audiences generally" (Evans, "Reviews of the Best Pictures" 86; Greene 84). Cantor was front and center of it all, taking over 75% of screen time and being the main source of the opening night audience's twenty applauses with a thirty-minute ovation when he came out on stage ("Cantor Scores Tremendous Hit in 'Whoopee'" 21). Cantor's witty humor which became "the essence of the star comic style popular on Broadway until the 1950s" helped the film become a success amongst critics and audiences (Barrios 234). While a major success in cities around the country, *Whoopee!* did not fare as well in other parts of the United States for different reasons, including the heavy reliance on Cantor's Jewish ethnicity for the comedy. Despite the eventual "de-semitization" of Cantor in later films as his popularity on screen grew, Cantor's Jewish identity, and the critical conversations that result from that, is part of what makes *Whoopee!* and its comedy so intriguing to both the modern and 1930s viewer (Jenkins, "Shall We Make It for New York or for Distribution?" 41).

[8] From here on out, I will be referring to the Native Americans as Indians since that is what they are referred to in the film and in criticism.

Big Chief Izzy Horowitz

Cantor as Henry Williams makes numerous references to his Jewish identity throughout the film, despite his goyish name. When the "half-breed Indian" Wanenis mentions his assimilation into white American culture, claiming that he has gone to white American schools, Henry perks up and exclaims, "An Indian in a Hebrew school!" Henry aligns himself with his Jewish identity over his whiteness, an identity that kept Cantor away from assimilation with the general public. It is even debatable whether Henry considers himself white, as he claims his grandfather also "married a white girl" like Wanenis', which constitutes his (Wanenis') "small part Indian." He also claims that he could never be an aviator like Lindbergh because he "can't eat sandwiches," a reference to Charles Lindbergh's love of ham sandwiches and Cantor's own kosher diet (Weinstein 76). Later, when among the Indians after Black Eagle (Chief Caupolican), Wanenis' adopted father, has decided to accept Henry into his tribe, Henry refers to himself as "Me, Big Chief, Izzy Horowitz" with a "hook," his nose, and a ladder as he peddles Indian goods (Figure 1.2). Every reference Henry makes to his Jewish identity or knowledge of Jewish culture occurs in the presence of Indians, thereby conflating two "very different cultural systems" (Jenkins, "Shall We Make It for New York or for Distribution?" 45). Henry assumes a Native language is Yiddish and that Indians are "Jewish traffic cops" who say "hoy," like "oy," and seamlessly transitions from an Indian-inspired song and dance into what is meant to sound like a Jewish folk song. He also adopts a Yiddish accent, similar to his performance in *Glorifying the American Girl* as a Jewish tailor, and uses Yiddish words such as "chutzpah" when pretending to be Indian while peddling a blanket and a doll.

Figure 1.2. “Me, chief.” “Fire chief?” “Yes, here is my hook and ladder,” Henry quips to Ms. Custer.

Jewish culture and the Western genre were not strangers by any means in this period. On the vaudeville stage, Ziegfeld performers like Fanny Brice combined Yiddish with Native American stereotypes in her “I’m An Indian” routine (Antelyes 23). Unlike typical blackface by Jewish performers, where the actor essentially erases his Jewish identity in favor of being perceived as “Black,” the “Jewish Cowboy” trope creates a unique concept of layering, as its name suggests. It combines the two ethnicities, rather than hiding one—an example of assimilation that keeps and even honors Jewish identity. It has even been argued that the combination of Jewish and Native identity appropriated by Jewish actors “transformed racial difference into ethnic difference and used the latter position to stake a claim upon American

identity," as opposed to blackface (Antelyes 16). Blackface, on the other hand, created a white American that, "in the service of Americanizing immigrants, pretended to the absence of conflict between black and white" (Rogin 5). Redface, as Antelyes puts it, allows the actor to be both Jewish and American "through the retention and refinement of certain visual, verbal, and cultural Jewish markers" (Antelyes 16).

Although pretending to be Indian and adopting that identity as a disguise, Henry is still, first and foremost, Jewish, as well as white. When Wanenis claims he spent time in "your schools," Henry does not take that to mean a white school but a Hebrew school. Henry is still the white man when he arrives at the reservation, but is viewed as a Jewish Indian by Mr. Underwood (Spencer Charters), a man whom Henry had several run-ins with before. The layering of Henry's Jewish and white identities with an appropriation of Native identity creates a new identity, the American Jew, to be synthesized by audiences past and present as something relatively unique that forces the viewer to accept a Jewish man as both an American and as a Jew. This can perhaps be seen most clearly after Henry is taken to the reservation and sees that he is with Black Eagle. To the tune of "Ol' Man River" from *Show Boat*, Henry sings, "Ol' Black Eagle and Ol' Man Siegal," riffing on both of their identities as a unit while singing a song about the plight of African Americans often sung by a Black actor. This is not an appropriation with the intention of being offensive, but rather is multidirectional. It combines the most "American" of identities, the Native and the African American, and puts them on the same level as the Jew, the ethnic outsider who does not fit in the West. The Jew thus appears to fit in with the Western theme and appears less threatening in that world where the Native and the African American fit in with the scenery and enhance it.

Henry Jenkins has suggested this amalgamation of different ethnic identities "works to undercut the rigid racial categories and strict boundaries of the romance plot" and "make[s] the very notion of a fixed racial identity problematic, and the idea that such an identity might block romantic fulfillment, absurd" (Jenkins, "Shall We Make It for New York or for Distribution?" 42). This even comes up when Henry asks Black Eagle the story of Pocahontas, a Native American, and John Smith, a white man, who tells him that Pocahontas saved John Smith, a small moment in the film that suggests that interracial love is a possibility. Wanenis, however, is discovered to have pure white blood at the end of the film, complicating this reading. While I believe Jenkins to be correct in noting that racial and ethnic identity in the film are clearly fluid (Henry easily and effectively adopts multiple racial and ethnic identities), and the white man can be accepted by another race, I also think we need to ask why Wanenis' and Sally's love must be bound by something the film claims is superficial. If Henry can be both white and Jewish, and pretend to be both Black and Indian, why must Wanenis be white to marry Sally? The film struggles with this question and allows the viewer to question the world of the film in a way that musicals up until this point often did not.[9] Musicals were typically viewed as pure entertainment during this time period. While *Whoopee!* is surely entertaining, it also opens up questions about identity, both in the singular (Sally), and the layered (Wanenis, the white man believed to be part Indian, and Henry, the white Jewish American who performs in both blackface and redface).

[9] In the ending to the stage production, many of the characters are apprehensive about Wanenis being white, allowing Henry to make a speech against prejudice: "What's so terrible about being a little bit Indian? Look at Senator [Charles] Curtis, our newly elected vice-president. He's part Indian. And what's wrong with my friend Bill Rogers, you got to love him, and who in the world is going to walk up to Jack Dempsey and say 'to Hell with the Indians'" (qtd. in Weinstein 77-78). This does not appear in the film adaptation, but does suggest that one of the lessons of the original script was more liberal to an extent.

Henry's Jewish identity is not commented on by any of the characters in the stage show (or the film) and thus becomes a "'private' joke for the audience" (Most 45). What does this mean, however, in the context of a film? The joke is still for the audience as none of the characters in the film ever react to Henry's quips about his Jewish heritage. Is it important that none of the characters in the film recognize Henry's Jewish identity? More than likely, this lack of recognition of Henry's Jewish identity is a sign of what is to come, a "de-semitization" of Cantor not only with the intent of boosting his popularity but also because those involved did not understand or know how to work with this kind of humor that was designed for a New York audience. Although his Jewishness does not directly affect the plot of *Whoopee!*, it does add the layering of identity for the audience in a quasi-lesson about love knowing no racial or ethnic bounds.

A Weak, Delicate Man

Jewishness, however, is not only present in Henry's remarks on his ethnicity. Much of the feminization and queerness of Henry's character is related to how Cantor would have been viewed as a Jew during the time period. According to Daniel Boyarin, the Jewish male was read through "a set of performances that are culturally read as nonmale within a given historical culture," that culture being one in which "being a man was predicated on possessing the phallus, the symbolic marker of coherence, power, and sublimation from the body, in short, of human completion" (Boyarin, "Masada or Yavneh?" 306–07). The phallus, or the complete phallus, is something the Jewish man lacks, due to circumcision. So, whenever Henry mentions his operation in his pants, this is a reference to his circumcision (Most 49).

Throughout the film, Henry makes consistent references to this "operation" which is seemingly located below the belt. The first time he brings it up is the first time Ms. Custer is seen taking care of him. Henry is a textbook hypochondriac, always fearing that there is something wrong with him, which is why he has moved out West in order to get healthy. Henry's fear of illness is read culturally as "more feminizing than poor health itself," with the Jewish man in particular assumed as being "particularly susceptible to neurosis," according to Freud (Most 48). This is a hysteria that is often "about femaleness but not … exclusively about 'women,'" with the lack of full phallic figure that Henry possesses also turning him into a feminine figure (Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct* 192). When Ms. Custer calls Henry a hypochondriac, he looks at her incredulously, exclaiming, "Yeah? Am I? How would you like to see my operation?", proceeding to lift up his shirt and stretch out his pants, while Ms. Custer shouts and reaches toward him to stop. Although Ms. Custer likes "weak men," she does not want to see his operation and acts almost afraid of it. Henry owns up to his "operation," however feminizing it may be, as it confirms to him that he is in fact "sick" and thus not a real man. When Ms. Custer cuddles up to Henry and asks if her gestures suggest anything to Henry, he says, "Yes, it does, but with my health I better not think about it." The "health" Henry refers to here is his circumcised penis, unable to fulfill manly duties due to his operation, which is why he refrains from sexual thinking even when Ms. Custer brings it up to him.

Henry's "operation" comes up three more (significant) times in the film. When Henry first meets Mr. Underwood and learns he is a "very nervous man," Henry gets excited, both his and Mr. Underwood's nervousness a code for their more queer characteristics. "Homoerotic desire" was often associated with "'feminized' men included in the category of hysterics" at the

end of the 19th century (Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct* 196–97). Although Henry's image of violence constitutes a feminine walk and spitting on Mr. Underwood's car, he manages to compose himself as Sally hands him a gun. While threatening Mr. Underwood with the phallic-shaped object, Henry tells him, "Crank my flivver," with a sly grin as Mr. Underwood looks on incredulously. He claims he is sick to which Henry proceeds to tell Mr. Underwood how he would "love to show [him] [his] operation." Although the flivver is the car, the pairing of the action of cranking to the operation, or circumcised penis, is an example of Henry's homosexual characteristics.

Perhaps one of the most memorable and odd scenes in the film takes place between Mr. Underwood and Henry once again when Henry is disguised as a cook and according to Cantor, was improvised by Spencer Charters in a rehearsal one day and praised by Ziegfeld (Cantor and Ardmore 135). The two men bond over their illnesses, both real and imaginary, as they both call themselves "nervous" men. When Mr. Underwood begins to take off his shirt to show a scar from an appendicitis operation, Henry follows suit, saying he will show Mr. Underwood something that will amaze him. He fully lifts up his shirt and asks Mr. Underwood to look down his pants, down to his leg. Henry then pulls out a measuring tape and starts to compare the scars from their operations. What length comparison could be made in a man's pants? Henry's operation is, once again, an elaborate "dick joke" that, when paired with another male figure, becomes layered with homosexuality included. The joke is taken even further as the two men roll around on the ground and continue to look down each other's pants, with Henry not even believing that Mr. Underwood had an operation (Figure 1.3). What might seem wildly out of place at first, an overt homosexual act (implied sex) between two men, follows how Henry has

been characterized throughout the film: nervous and sickly, with homosexuality, and his circumcision, being his sickness. Mr. Underwood concludes: “Yessir, my boy, that is *some* operation” as he looks exhausted after their “sex,” while Henry sits effeminately, his legs crossed and head in hand (Figure 1.4).

Figure 1.3. Mr. Underwood gets a look inside Henry’s pants to see his operation as Henry lifts his shirt up while laying down on the floor.

Figure 1.4. Mr. Underwood looks exhausted and Henry sits effeminately after the two get up from rolling around on the floor.

The final time the operation comes up is in the finale as Henry sings a reprise of "My Baby Just Cares for Me." Henry has decided not to view Ms. Custer as his nurse anymore but as a companion instead. While there is still implied dominance of Ms. Custer over Henry as she will "understand him, love him, comfort him," his illness, or hypochondriasis, is gone. He kisses her softly on the cheek (perhaps without passion) and begins to sing: "And how she enjoys my operation!" Although still circumcised, he is finally viewed as enough of a man to be part of a heterosexual relationship where a woman, not a man, actually appreciates his phallic lack as opposed to shunning it away as Ms. Custer does in the beginning of the film. Even though the

film ends with Henry in a heterosexual relationship that references his "operation," this does not discredit any of the previous jokes regarding Henry's circumcision and how it makes him less of a man as well as an object of homosexual desire.

Cantor's performance is described by Linda Mizejewski as "unabashedly queer—that is, performative, improvisational, resistant to any stable identity, sexual or racial" (Mizejewski 152). Henry's homosexuality, often referenced through his sickness, is pervasive throughout the film aside from the operation, such as the repeated joke of taking quick naps in men's arms. After being dressed up by a group of men whom Henry had dressed in suits earlier, making them stand out in the Western setting just as Henry stands out, Henry is seen wearing Ms. Custer's pink bloomers. Not only is he wearing female clothing, which he does later in the film when he wears a mink coat while with Sally in the desert, he also is subjected to jokes relating to anal penetration. When Henry tries to sit down, the cactus pricks him in the butt, a recurring joke in the Cantor films where "their ultimate weapons" are saved for "attacks on Eddie's butt" (Mast 119). This implied homosexuality is even connected to his Jewish identity within the scene as after Henry exclaims "An Indian in a Hebrew school!", he jumps and gets pricked in the rear once again. The Jewish man was "more likely to be homosexual," just as he was more likely to be feminized due to his lack of a full male form (Most 50). When Sally proposes that she marry Henry, she claims that they "wouldn't really have to be man and wife" and can secretly be "just good friends." Although this does not necessarily mean that Henry is queer, since in the film Sally and Henry *are* "just good friends," it undoubtedly sounds like Sally is proposing to be Henry's beard, someone he marries for appearances while actually dating a man.

One of the most blatant references to Henry's supposed homosexuality, aside from the comparison of operations with Mr. Underwood, is after Henry has been brought to the reservation by the Indians. After laying his head on "chiefy chiefy"'s shoulder, Henry stands up to see that Wanenis has arrived. Wanenis' shirtless chest is clearly a distraction for Henry who says, "I'd never know you without your shirt on" and qualifies that with, "He's cute, isn't he?" If these innuendos were not clear enough in displaying Henry's homosexual tendencies, nothing could be clearer than Henry outwardly flirting with Wanenis, another example of not only homosexuality but also of interracial attraction, or at least the fetishization of both the male and the "Native" figure.[10] Henry goes further with his fetishization, his eyebrows raising as he looks at the "summer shutters" covering Wanenis' penis. He repeatedly pats Wanenis on the back and then asks Wanenis to give him a "rubdown now," bending over in a precarious position (Figure 1.5). Although the Indian is seen as an old wise man stereotype with Black Eagle, and although Wanenis has an actual love story where he is seen as a human being rather than an object of infatuation, the film still presents the Indian body, as opposed to the person, as something that is erotic and inherently sexual when in traditional clothing.

[10] At this point in the film, Wanenis is still believed to be Native American. It is only within the last few minutes of the film that Wanenis' true racial identity is learned.

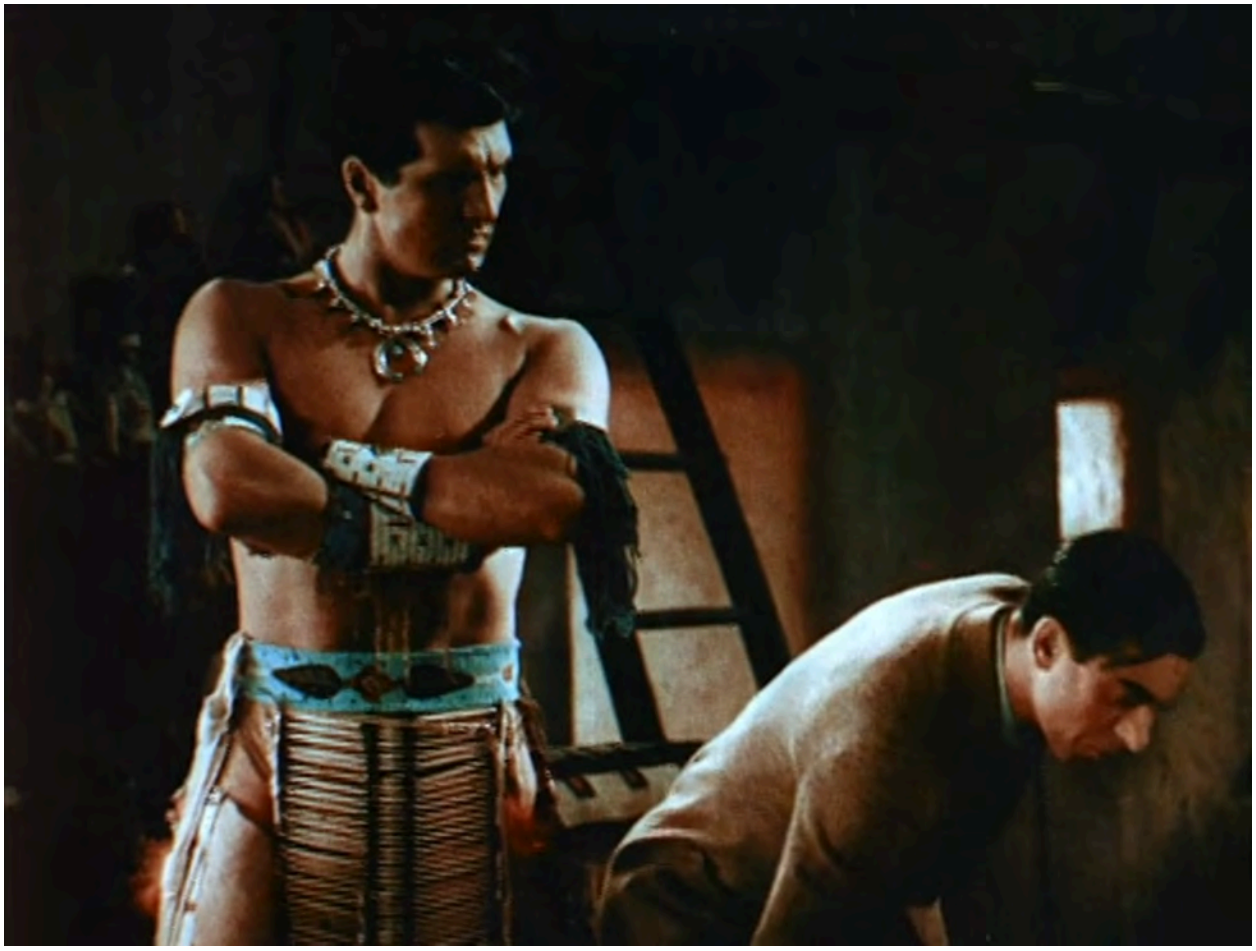

Figure 1.5. After patting Wanenis' bare back for an unnecessarily long time, he bends over and asks to be patted down himself.

Rather than being the large, strong man that fits in the West, like Wanenis, Henry constantly reminds those around him how he is unable to provide for a woman. After helping Sally escape, she claims that she thought he would be the one to help and save her, be brave, to which Henry replies, "I'm not brave. I can't even help myself." This relates back to his hypochondriasis as he states that he came out west to die from his sicknesses, not to be healed with the help of Ms. Custer who claims he is as healthy as she is. Henry's illnesses, despite being stuffed with pills, are incurable. Henry's femininity and lack of male prowess is incurable. He wants to die in bed with "doctors and nurses and flowers and a little fruit," hardly dying like a

real man who would confront Bob Wells and take the risk of being shot. In fact, Henry "can't stand the sight of a gun" and "when somebody says 'son of a gun,' [he] almost faint[s]." The gun, in the Western genre, is a symbol of masculinity in its phallic shape, with the genre itself often characterized as masculine in appeal. In the Western, if a woman is to play a dominant role, she must pick up a gun and situate herself in the "phallic trappings of the men surrounding her" (Minz 109). So when Henry must take the gun and defend both himself and Sally, and later to protect himself from being caught by Bob Wells, he takes on a female position of someone who takes a gun, who does not already have one themselves, and fights back, often with a shaky, delicate hand.

Henry consistently does not act the way a man should, which perhaps leads him to find solace in the fact that he has had an operation in his pants. When Henry claims he is lonesome and Ms. Custer suggests he get a "nice girl," referring to herself, Henry says, "That's a good idea, but I don't know, I feel so safe with a calf." This line suggests that Henry feels safe when with something delicate and young, the opposite of Ms. Custer, or even safer with an animal as opposed to a human woman. When she says that she will take care of him if they were married, he refutes her by saying it would be cheaper to get a hot water bottle, showing more affection for medicine, the cure to his "ailments," than a woman. Does that make Henry more of a man for feeling safe around something so weak and not wanting to marry a strong woman, or does it make him less manly as he cannot handle anything more than weakness that resembles himself or his illnesses?

As a nurse, Ms. Custer, however, does not mind at all that Henry is weak. She claims that she became a nurse because she is romantic and "most girls like big, strong, healthy men," but

not her: “I like weak men,” she says assertively, leaning in to kiss Henry with “a positive passion for a weak man.” When she tries to be passionate again, he squirms and jumps up on the bench, arms crossed on his shoulders. Ms. Custer lifts him up, much to Henry’s chagrin, and he tells her to “get away with [her] passion” as it gives him “goose pimples.” Romantic love from a woman, a strong woman at that, makes Henry physically ill, and visually makes him appear more feminine in his gesture under the romantic advances of Ms. Custer, something that becomes a constant in the Cantor films (Figure 1.6). Women, who are more “manly” than Cantor, see his weakness as endearing and unthreatening.

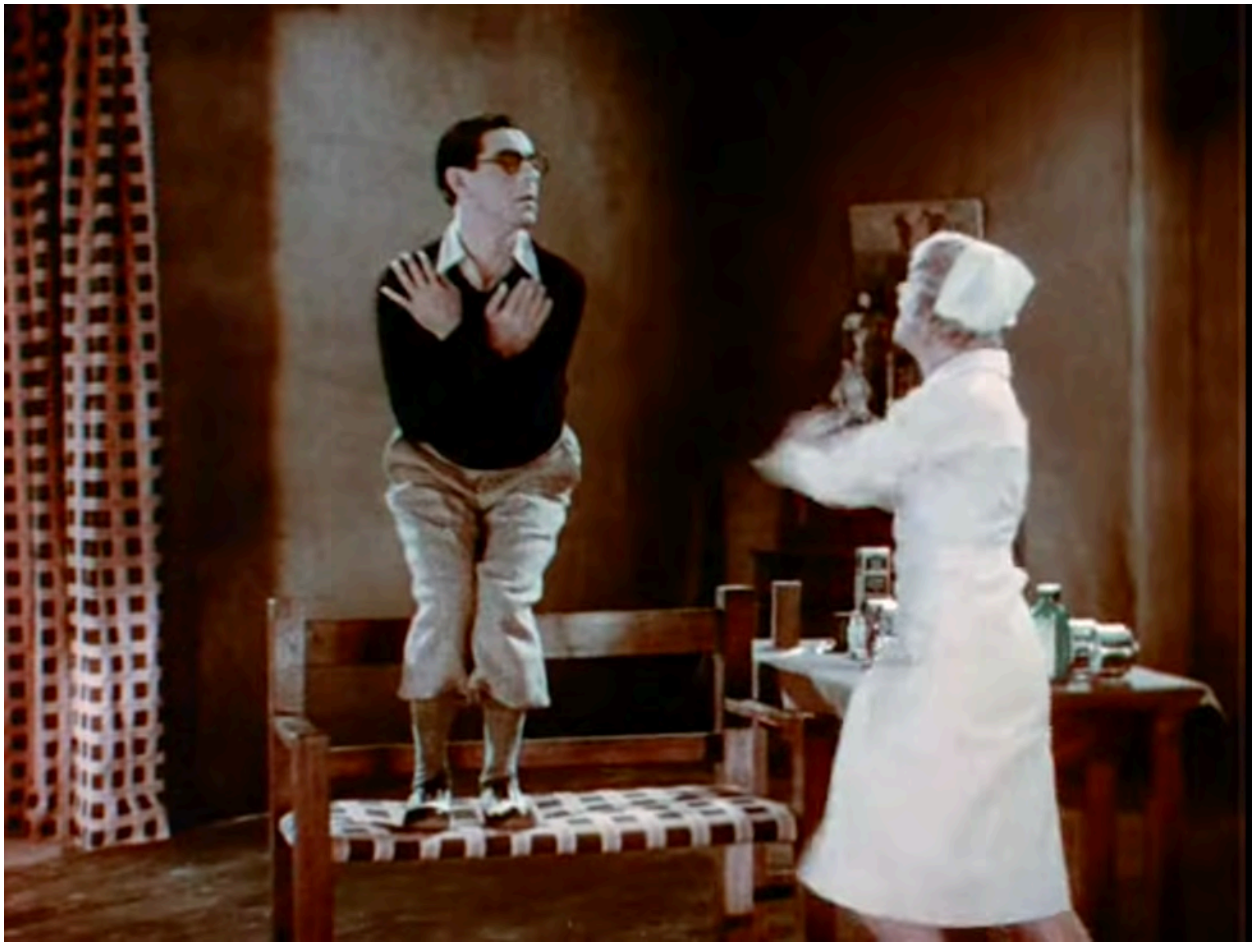

Figure 1.6. Henry stands up on the bench in fear as Ms. Custer aggressively tries to make love with him.

Henry even refers to himself as weak throughout the film, with Cantor constantly "defining himself as a woman among men" in his films (Mast 119). Once Henry sings in front of Sally, he tucks her into bed in the car like a mother would and tells her a bedtime story, solidifying the lack of any romantic interest if they were to ever be married, as Sally previously suggests, with Henry taking on the feminine role. He does the same when cooking and pretending to be a chef, which a male character claims to be a "female" duty minutes before. After mentioning his operation to Ms. Custer, she offers to hold his hand, to which he replies "It's not heavy, I can manage." Not only does Henry consider himself delicate, but this line depicts a role reversal, with Henry's hand soft and feminine rather than rough and manly and Ms. Custer taking his hand rather than him taking hers. He refuses marriage because he is "too delicate" despite Ms. Custer loving him that way. Ms. Custer, the female figure, takes a male position by proposing, with Henry taking a female position by referring to himself as delicate, acknowledged by the female characters in the film, and being the one proposed to. Despite being delicate his entire life, Henry says he "wouldn't let any woman boss [him] around," leading, of course, to Ms. Custer bossing him around and Henry responding in fear. Henry lacks Wanenis' strength in controlling a female relationship and instead lets himself be controlled by a woman who continues to appear masculine with her aggression, sexual and otherwise.

Ms. Custer reinforces her masculinity by dressing as a man when going to look for Henry. A poster is seen being put up before it is revealed to the audience that the person putting up the poster is Ms. Custer in a Stetson, a handlebar mustache, and chaps, making her the only woman in the film to wear pants. The audience is fully aware that this is Ms. Custer now in her own disguise, but Henry is seemingly fooled, although he claims otherwise, saying "he" reminds

him of his nurse, implying that his nurse acts more manly than she does womanly. When she interrogates Henry and asks if he loves Sally and he replies that he does not, she leans in, exclaiming, "Oh, I could kiss you for that!" Henry, naturally, recoils, asking, "What kind of a cowboy are you?" to which Ms. Custer takes off her mustache and hat and reveals herself. If Henry has been coded as homosexual throughout the film, why would he react so negatively to what he perceives to be a man wanting to kiss him? Ms. Custer's aggression frightens the nebbish Henry, regardless of whether she is dressed as a man or a woman, with Henry being weak and delicate to the point where "one blow might kill him!" Ms. Custer is clearly not a woman in the same way that Henry is not a man, thus their romantic subplot can be played for laughs, including visual gags of two "men" dancing in the kitchen. Both are in disguises that better represent who they truly are—Henry as a chef, a woman's job, and Ms. Custer as a cowboy, who fits in better out West than Henry as he adopts different looks to better assimilate. As a Jewish man, Henry is a fish out of water, the situational comedy stemming from his current location, the West, and situation, strong-willed women.

Cantor's Songs

The musical numbers in *Whoopee!* help to establish Cantor's performance abilities as part of his identity. The film itself is very theatrical in nature, allowing Cantor's comfortability with the audience to shine through. In fact, Cantor biographer Herbert G. Goldman calls *Whoopee!* "not so much a movie as a filmed stage show" (Goldman 137). As Cantor makes his venture into sound film, elements from his days in the *Follies* are retained, such as the performance of himself, Eddie Cantor, as opposed to the character he plays. In "Makin' Whoopee," "A Girlfriend of a Boy Friend of Mine," and "My Baby Just Cares for Me," Cantor is almost entirely

singing to the audience, not necessarily as Henry Williams but as himself, Eddie Cantor, the vaudeville entertainer. These musical numbers, whether or not they involve a background of beautiful women and intriguing cinematography, align themselves with the concept of spectacle as Cantor performs for the camera, helping to establish the entertainer aspect of his persona.

"Makin' Whoopee" depicts Cantor in front of a group of women (the Goldwyn Girls) singing directly to the camera or audience. The song is not integrated, other than the fact that it relates to a wedding (the Goldwyn Girls standing behind Cantor are dressed as bridesmaids for Sally and Bob's wedding later that day). Cantor sings the song directly to the camera, a technique not only related to the theatre but early filmmaking as well (Figure 1.7). In Tom Gunning's definition of the "cinema of attractions," he explains that acts of exhibitionism are "undertaken with brio, establishing contact with the audience" and are "willing to rupture a self-enclosed fictional world for a chance to solicit the attention of the spectator" (Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction[s]" 382). This technique, used by Cantor both on stage and in film, establishes a connection with the audience, as Gunning's theory points out, but also creates an idea of performance, possibly out of character, by the actor. Although this is not the seamless integration of music that has come to characterize the true movie musical pioneered by *Oklahoma!* roughly fifteen years later, where songs effectively move the plot forward, the number is still an effective method of storytelling by the character who creates this relationship with the viewer that is intimate, as if he is talking to you standing behind the camera. The storytelling that appears, alongside the narrative of the song, is the introduction of Cantor the performer to the audience. Although Cantor was a famous star at this point as his shows did tour and he had been in silent films before, his fame would only grow with his collaborations with Goldwyn.

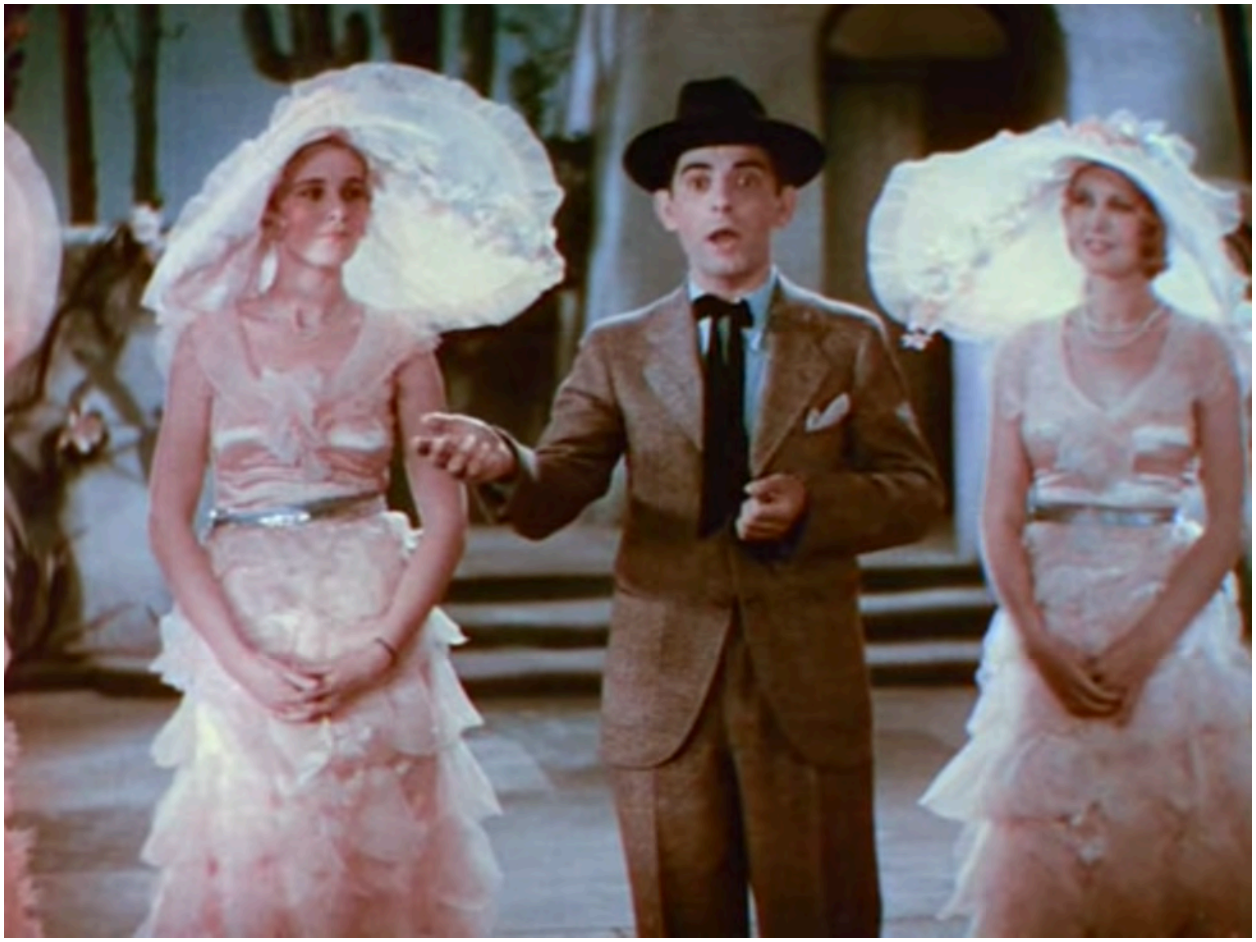

Figure 1.7. Eddie Cantor, without Henry's glasses, sings "Makin' Whoopee" with glorified women by his side.

Cantor begins the number by taking off his glasses, something that establishes to the viewer that Cantor, and not Henry, is performing for us. This relates to the few other moments in the film when Cantor takes off his glasses, most notably when Henry Williams is not Henry Williams, but rather a different identity. Taking off glasses is also a gesture that often suggests telling the truth and intimacy that is not hidden behind a pane of glass. In "Makin' Whoopee," the identity Henry Williams assumes is Eddie Cantor. The nervousness and emasculation that define the nebbish Henry Williams are absent when the confident Eddie Cantor saunters onto the created stage. The focus is on Cantor, even despite the beautiful women behind him, who walk

offscreen in the middle of the song. This "theatrical display dominates over narrative absorption, emphasizing the direct stimulation of shock or surprise at the expense of unfolding a story or creating a diegetic universe" (Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction[s]" 383). While there is a lack of diegesis in this act of singing directly to the camera, the number is not solely in a realm of its own, as it follows the trope of the glasses removal indicating Henry is a different person in the scenario he is in. Any indication that this song may be diegetic is Henry's parody of it when he is "Makin' Waffles." Similar to the jokes about Henry's Jewish identity, however, this gag is meant only for the audience as Henry is alone on screen singing to himself, performing the exact same routine he did on stage just a few years before (Goldman 126).

Despite all of this, there are elements of the song that play into feminization. He begins the song by singing, "Everytime I hear that dear old wedding march / I feel rather glad I have a broken arch." While this could be read through a literal translation, the song is full of innuendo, and this is no exception. What could a broken arch symbolize that keeps Henry from getting married? It is reminiscent of Henry's "operation" or circumcision which Ms. Custer initially fears, which makes him less of a man, "broken" and sick.[11] The man in the song falls "victim" to the bride who dotes on him, but he does not return the favor and is "suspected / Of making whoopee" with someone else. The woman is, naturally, Ms. Custer who, when she learns that Sally is with Henry, slaps him, thinking the two are actually romantically involved as Sally suggested in her letter. The song is consistent with typical Cantor musical numbers, with him rolling his eyes after every time he mentions "makin' whoopee." He ends the song by looking at

[11] Interestingly, this opening line is different from the line in the 1928 recording from when the Broadway show opened: "Every time I hear that march from Lohengrin / I am always on the outside looking in" (Donaldson and Kahn). Other beginning verses are different as well as speak to feminization such as the line "He's washing dishes / And baby clothes. / He's so ambitious, / He even sews," taking on traditionally female tasks (Donaldson and Kahn).

the camera, or the audience, and giving them a knowing look, as if he is in on the joke about it being Cantor performing, and not Henry (Figure 1.8).

Figure 1.8. “You better keep her, / You’ll find it’s cheaper / Than making whoopee,” Cantor ends the song and gives the audience a knowing look.

The second Cantor song that uses theatrical techniques and is, as far as the audience is aware, non-diegetic is “A Girlfriend of a Boy Friend of Mine” sung by Henry to Sally after she claims he has never been in love. Henry removes his glasses before this number as well, the removal of the glasses indicating the need to put on a disguise before the Underwoods arrive with their car and Henry proceeds to rob them. The absence of the glasses helps inform the viewer how they should interpret the number. By removing his glasses, Henry is once again

visually Eddie Cantor, but, unlike the last number, this song is meant to be through the voice of Henry. When Sally states, not asks, that "You've never really been in love," Henry replies that he has not. However, he then begins to sing "Love came to me in the springtime / Just like the blossoms I fell / I thought that June would be ring time / Which proves that you never can tell." Despite claiming that he has never been in love, Henry contradicts that in song and verse. How much of what is sung, then, are we meant to believe? Although the song fits within the scene as a response to Sally's claim, it is never commented upon by either character.

Henry chronicles his love story with a girl he loved, "But she turned out to be / The girlfriend of a boy friend" of his. Between the slow tempo of the song, the lack of acknowledgement of any of the lyrics by either character after the song is sung, and the still camera, the song is reminiscent of some of the music from the earliest musicals just a year earlier, such as "Look For the Silver Lining" in *Sally* (1929). "A Girlfriend of a Boy Friend of Mine" is not significant within either the plot or any of the aesthetic choices of the movie, and leaves much to be desired from the viewer. The romantic ballad, as depicted here, is not seen again in Cantor's films. The closest one gets to a number of this tempo is in *Kid Millions* (1934) with "When My Ship Comes In" which holds plot significance that is brought full circle at the end of the film. The only other time he sings a romantic number is "Calabash Pipe" in *Strike Me Pink* (1936) alongside Ethel Merman which is an upbeat and silly tune. Needless to say, this musical number is quite unique as it does not fit the image that Cantor later leans into, with the rest of his musical numbers in his films being quick-witted and bouncy, allowing the performer to show off his most well-known and appreciated skills as a comedic singer. Any attempt to make Cantor into a romantic leading man is quickly abandoned after *Whoopee!*

"My Baby Just Cares for Me" is Cantor's final musical number in *Whoopee!* While in blackface, Henry is seen sneaking around after having assaulted Mr. Underwood's son, Chester (Albert Hackett). After making a joke that he shares his name with the famous crooner Rudy Vallée, Henry claims to be a "singin' cook," prompting Bob Wells to put a gun against his stomach and threaten him to sing. The music quickly begins and Henry jaunts around, singing this tune. Henry walks across the stage, the camera following him as he sings the opening verse. His dancing mimics that of old minstrelsy and vaudeville entertainment. The non-static camera combined with the vaudevillian antics creates a layering of both theatrical and filmic techniques, mirroring the layering of Native and Jewish identities discussed earlier in the chapter.

While not sung directly to the camera like "Makin' Whoopee," the scene effectively stops the film, allowing Cantor the actor to perform for the audience, both in the movie theatre and within the scene in the film, as the Goldwyn Girls and even Bob himself grin watching him do his routine, full of typical Cantorisms. The song makes numerous references to famous names of the time, such as Gilbert, presumably silent film actor John Gilbert, famous actor Ronald Colman, opera singer Lawrence Tibbett, and actor-singers "Bud" (Buddy) Rogers and Maurice Chevalier. By including these names, and Rudy Vallée's just before the song, the film situates itself in the current time period, no matter how realistic that setting may be. All of these men were considered heartthrobs, but Cantor's baby just cares for him. Does this pairing make Cantor, a Jewish man with an effeminate persona, a heartthrob as well? Not necessarily, as later films confirm, despite Cantor consistently ending up with a woman in nearly all of his films. His romance is often the butt of the joke, even in *Whoopee!*, as Ms. Custer is viewed as aggressive and silly for wanting someone as "sick" as Henry.

The blackface number is meant to be comedic: Cantor, or Henry, is clearly not someone worthy of that love; him being in blackface further proves that point. This is very different from other leading men in Berkeley-choreographed films such as *Footlight Parade* (1933) and *Dames* (1934). James Cagney and Dick Powell, respectively, are masculine figures who are talented singers and dancers. They are marketed as handsome leads, seen most clearly in the promotional short film *And She Learned About Dames* (1934) in which Dick Powell is lusted after by girls at a finishing school. One girl who wonders what it would be like to kiss Dick Powell and gets the chance to visit the set of *Dames*. Powell, who is seen singing to Joan Blondell, skips over to the young girl who asks for a kiss on behalf of her principal. She then says that all 5,000 girls in the school would like her to get a kiss from him each and he happily obliges. Powell, like Cantor, is the lead of the musical, however is treated very differently. Even if Cantor within the song tries to sell himself as a romantic leading man, he is in blackface and therefore undesirable. Although Powell may appear goofy, he is positioned as handsome and worthy of desire. The effeminate qualities of Cantor are heightened to be silly through this makeup, whereas the more feminine qualities of a man like Dick Powell are considered romantic. This highlights the uniqueness of Cantor as a leading man in a musical whose abilities are used for humorous purposes rather than romantic in the style of Dick Powell or James Cagney.

The Singin' Cook

It is important to note that "My Baby Just Cares for Me" and the following sequence are performed with Cantor in blackface. The only time his character is acknowledged or believed to be a Black person is when Sally says to Henry, "How dare you speak to me?" when he begins to talk to her, only for her to quickly realize that Henry is in disguise to hide from Sheriff Bob

Wells. Henry also briefly employs an accent when he says to Bob, "I'se a singin' cook." Aside from these two brief moments, Henry, as played by Cantor, continues to be Henry, but a far more assertive, quick-witted Henry associated with him whenever he is in disguise without his glasses. The blackface, besides being a disguise, is, in the realm of the "cinema of attractions," as it is first and foremost a vehicle for more Cantor comedy (Figure 1.9). As Richard Barrios quips, "Routines, gags, and specialty numbers all drop in from nowhere to allow for the Cantor bag of tricks. He wants to do one of his blackface numbers? *Voilà*–get him corked up for 'My Baby Just Cares for Me'" (Barrios 234). This, in a roundabout way, resembles Cantor's own career, performing the same jokes he did when without makeup in blackface, helping him grow in popularity; the blackface was a means towards getting famous, rather than anything meant to shame or humiliate Black people for Cantor (however, blackface was never okay, even back during Cantor's rise to stardom, and is, regardless of Cantor's philanthropy towards people of color and uplifting of Black entertainers, a racist act) (Brideson and Brideson 175). As Cantor himself said in his first biography:

> It would be hopeless to change my act […] I had already helped myself to the best […] If I changed my make-up. A mere facial disguise might disguise everything. With a different make-up and a different delivery even the same lines would sound different. Great idea! (Cantor and Freedman 113–14)

Cantor's Jewish identity also complicates the concept of a white man performing blackface as "whiteness can determine who is to be included and excluded from the category and also discriminate among those deemed to be within it," including Jews (Dyer, *White* 51). This correlates with Cantor's engagement with his Jewish identity in the beginning of this chapter in relation to the Jewish cowboy figure, but interacts with his use of blackface as well.

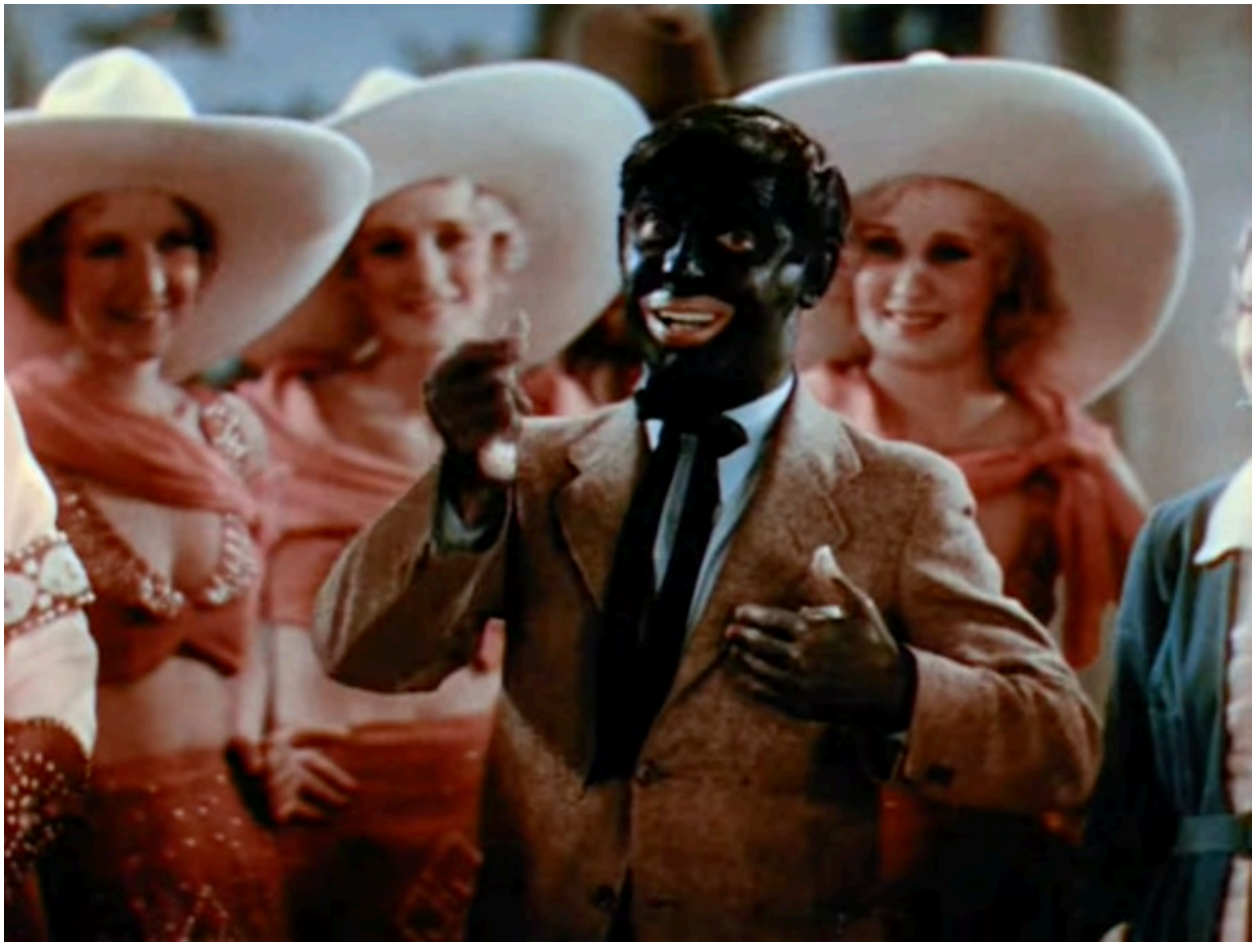

Figure 1.9. Henry, in a blackface disguise, performs “My Baby Just Cares for Me” for Bob Wells.

While redface may have “call[ed] attention” to Henry’s Jewish identity, blackface hides it, Henry still “Henry,” but less identifiable as he is when he is hiding among Black Eagle’s tribe, his Jewishness more subdued (Rogin 151). Within the film, blackface is slightly more than just pure entertainment, as is the case with following films where blackface is loosely written into the plot and is instead used as a way for Cantor to show off his versatility as was common for vehicles starring vaudeville entertainers. When Bob Wells comes to town, after pretending to be a Greek cook, Henry crawls into the stove that is then lit on fire just as Bob tells his men to not “let a white man get by ya.” A puff of black smoke and Henry in burnt cork emerge, thus leading

to his hidden identity of a "singin' cook." Even though Henry is not white, he is not exactly Black either, and thus he is also brought into questioning alongside two white men to figure out who was the "bandit" that attacked Chester after singing "My Baby Just Cares for Me." He is not treated any differently for the color of his skin, searched by Bob just like the two white men and subjected to Chester's psychological experiment. Henry in blackface, rather, is much more brash, as opposed to the nebbish man with glasses, fast on his feet as always but defying the men around him, something he is unable to do when around the domineering Nurse Custer. This, perhaps, is a reference to his feminization; he is so far removed from traditional masculinity that it is easier to fight back against regular society as opposed to fighting back against Ms. Custer who lives outside traditional femininity in a role similar to the weak Henry.

Henry even references his operation directly in front of Mr. Underwood, but, due to his disguise, he is unrecognizable to the man he had been discussing his operation with mere moments earlier. While the nebbish characteristics of Henry fade into oblivion, other than his cowering when about to be hit, much of his feminized masculinity remains, as he sings "the sheriff is a thie-ief" like a schoolgirl, flips his coattails, and even kisses the sheriff on his cheek. Although this character is meant to be Henry, much of it, despite being worked into the plot, is simply more of Cantor showing off his comedic talents, turning into, what Cantor called, "the cultured, pansy-like negro" (Cantor and Freedman 122).

Andrea Most writes that this use of blackface could be read as "a triumph of Jewish escapism or American self-invention" as Henry "is unquestionably using and manipulating the dynamics of American race relations in his performance. But he is also a Jew hiding in the stove in order to avoid detection by a posse of cowboys," a land and scenario in which he, as a Jew,

does not fit (Most 6). Although Most acknowledges the racism of the act, what she writes directly connects the need to hide as part of Henry's Jewish identity, when, in fact, Henry's need to hide is entirely plot driven. He does not hide because he is a Jew; he hides because he appears as white, an identity he resists (as Henry considers himself a "half-breed" whose great-grandfather married a white girl). Any sense of "Jewish escapism or American self-invention" is derived from what Henry becomes when he wears his blackface disguise, going from "frightened melancholic" to "violent trickster," the former of which is connected to his Jewish identity (Most 6; Rogin 153). Rogin's reading, while more accurate, in my opinion, claims that both identities are resultant of his Jewish identity, when that is not the case. When Henry is in redface, he is still visibly Jewish, and that is conveyed to the audience. None of his Jewish identity is brought up when Henry is in blackface, and thus, this "violent trickster" is not visibly or verbally Jewish, simply another one of Henry's disguises just like taking off his glasses (Rogin 153). Therefore, is blackface, in this context, really something that is "a triumph of Jewish escapism" or is it a triumph of Henry's wits that "add[s] an intellectual touch to the old-fashioned darky of the minstrel shows" (Cantor and Freedman 114)?

Maybe his weakness is conflated with his Jewish identity, but his Jewish identity does not make his blackface "empowering" or let "the wearer to perform the ragtime or jazz songs that are the central idiom of the musical stage of the period, and thus give the comedian the opportunity to dominate center stage" as Cantor does that without blackface makeup on (Most 54). Most, in this reading, ignores the plot of the story which, I think, is a detriment to understanding this musical's ability to tell a sophisticated story for its time both with theory-based criticism and with the actual text of the play. This is not the last time in the Cantor pre-code musicals where

his character will use blackface as a disguise in order to hide from people following him, but it is important to understand the context of the situations in each of these films to understand what blackface is doing in relation to both the plot and critical theory.

Whoopee! is a strange film in an era when strange films were popping up all over Hollywood. What makes *Whoopee!* unique is its commentary on relevant social issues through the use of musical comedy, particularly that of Cantor's performance. In subsequent chapters, we will see how some of these issues, such as gender and sexuality, will reappear in Cantor's following films. Some issues, however, such as Native American and overt references to Jewish identities, are unique to Cantor's first Goldwyn film, whether that be because of plot construction or an attempt by Hollywood to tone down Cantor's Jewish identity and create a recognizable and digestible "Eddie" persona on screen. After tackling a stage adaptation of a New York show, it was time for Cantor to become more Hollywood, to become someone other than Cantor, to become Eddie, the star and main character, of his next feature films.

Figure 2.1. Editorial stock photo of Eddie Cantor in *Palmy Days*. Courtesy of Shutterstock.

Chapter 2 | Make it a Pansy: Gender Fluidity in *Palmy Days*

In the original copy of the full script of *Palmy Days*, dated May 16th, 1931 and housed in the New York Public Library, there is a scene where Eddie Cantor's character, Eddie Simpson, is flirted with by one of the villain's henchmen, after appearing in drag for the first time (Figure 2.1). The man calls Eddie a "cutie" multiple times and asks him for "a little kiss." "Oh, you men! You're all alike!" Eddie coos as he flirts with the man and begins his attempt to poison him. As the henchman begins to feel the effects of the alum, he "finds himself talking like a sissy" (Ryskind et al.). This small moment, which was ultimately cut from the film, speaks to the characterization of Cantor in *Palmy Days* (1931). The persona Cantor crafts in this film follows the subversiveness that began with Henry Williams in *Whoopee!* and heightens it dramatically. In this chapter, I analyze how this film plays with Eddie's identity as an effeminate, and sometimes queer, man who acts subservient to dominating, masculine women, establishing an identity that goes against traditional depictions of masculinity, as a heteronormative concept during a time when that was considered normal.[12] I argue that by doing this, Cantor complicates the way in which his masculinity (and femininity) is perceived by audiences by making both gender and sexuality fluid.

Palmy Days follows Eddie Simpson (Cantor), who works for the fraudulent mystic Professor Yolando (Charles Middleton). In an act of retaliation as Eddie messes up his seance, Yolando forces Eddie to be the "sent from the heavens" boyfriend to Helen Martin (Charlotte

[12] For what I regard to be femininity, in both this chapter and others, I look towards Daniel Boyarin who states that "gender is a set of cultural expectations and performances" that acts like classes which "are mystified through mapping them onto more or less arbitrary physical differences" (Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct* 193). For queerness, I think in terms defined by Richard Dyer as not just homosexuality (men who have sex with men) but also "being in some way or other 'like' a woman, fey, effeminate, sensitive, camp" (Dyer, *The Culture of Queers* 5).

Greenwood), the fitness instructor at a bakery cafe. In a mix-up, Eddie also ends up as the efficiency expert to the head of the bakery, Mr. Clark (Spencer Charters). Through various gags and goofs, Eddie finds himself in peculiar scenarios where he must pose as a famous French mystic and as a female bakery employee while trying to break free from his contract with Yolando and save the bakery from being robbed by Yolando and his goons. Eddie saves the bakery, returns the money to Mr. Clark, and realizes that he truly has feelings for Helen.

In *Palmy Days*, Cantor takes what was established in *Whoopee!* and creates a dynamic look at gender roles and norms through humor and music. Before addressing the specific moments in this film that demonstrate an attentive look at femininity, I will place it within the timeline of Cantor's career and establish connections between the previous chapter's focus on Jewish identity and the following chapter's focus on Cantor as a Depression-era figure. I then will tackle what I perceive to be moments of "queerness" depicted by Eddie, the intense feminization of Eddie that is tied to his relationship with Helen, and finally one of the musical numbers and its involvement in establishing Cantor's persona as being tied to femininity.

Past, Present, and Future

When *Palmy Days* was released in theatres in October 1931, Eddie Cantor had just begun hosting his radio program *The Chase and Sanborn Hour*, taking over from another musical film star Maurice Chevalier. By the time *The Kid from Spain* premiered in 1932, Cantor had been established as a member of the family from his Sunday night radio programs which ended with "I love to spend each Sunday with you" ("Spending Sundays with the Late, Great Eddie Cantor"). Cantor's references on the radio to his wife and five daughters, the Cantor girls

becoming nearly as famous as the Dionne Quintuplets, made him appear as the relatable family man with a fine sense of humor and a heart dedicated to humanitarian causes.

Much of Cantor's comedy such as heightened femininity remained the same in both film and radio. Cantor's Jewish comedy, however, did not see the same fate. "Ambiguous and polysemic performances of gender and sexual identity" are part of what makes "Eddie," Cantor's character in his radio show and in his subsequent films following *Whoopee!* as he continuously places himself in situations that force him to shed traditional assumptions of masculinity (McFadden 265). Also well known to radio audiences was Cantor's Jewish identity. Even if he did not explicitly state that his comedy was Jewish, his "playful routines punctuated by colorful Yiddish expressions invited listeners to appreciate Jewish culture" while "proudly present[ing] a quick, aggressive, irreverent style associated with Jewish comedy" (Weinstein 108). Cantor's comedy in his films could still be considered "Jewish," with fast-paced witticisms and his working-class Lower East Side accent. Advertising for *The Kid from Spain* from the following year even mentions that "Eddie doesn't mind this bull-fighting business, but insists on killing only kosher bulls," a reference to both Cantor's Jewish identity and his own dietary habits ("Here's Hollywood!" 73).

However, Cantor's unabashed Jewishness was erased from his film persona from this moment on. Where Henry Williams in *Whoopee!* would have "Yiddish outbursts" when nervous, Eddie Simpson in *Palmy Days* merely starts singing when he gets excited and Eddie Williams in *The Kid from Spain* screams and jumps and hits whenever he hears a whistle (Jenkins, "Shall We Make It for New York or for Distribution?" 44). When Henry donned blackface in an escape from the cowboys after his head or wore an Indian headdress, he infused these personas with his

Jewish identity, revealing the real man under the makeup. But when Eddie Simpson and Eddie Williams cover themselves in burnt cork or pretend to be a French mystic or Spanish bullfighter, the men fully inhabit those identities, effacing any trace of Cantor's Jewishness, which was by this point reserved for radio.

Jewishness, however, may still play a role in these performances. Scott Balcerzak argues that by appearing as the nebbish character in all of his films, Cantor was "tracing a link between queered Hollywood comedians and a complicated history of male Jewish self-identity" (Balcerzak 81).[13] For Balcerzak, this "de-semitization" within the films, while keeping the nebbish qualities established in Jewish films such as *Whoopee!*, works as an act of "'whiteface' performance meant to assimilate to the apparatus of Hollywood cinema" (Balcerzak 83). I believe this to be true, and the overtly Jewish depiction of Cantor that appears in *Whoopee!* is heavily subdued in *Palmy Days* and following films. Jewishness is an important part of the identity crafted by Cantor outside of his film work. As explored in Chapter 1, the idea of a weak, nebbish man is inherently connected to Cantor's real life identity as a Jewish man. Rather than focus on this connection to Jewish identity, however, I will highlight the fluidity of gender and sexuality in the film.

The phrase "palmy days" is often used to describe a flourishing period, a time of prosperity, though also serving a double meaning as Eddie works for a mystic who reads palms (*OED*, "palmy (adj.), def. 2"). Thus, the Great Depression lingers in the background of the film at certain comedic moments, but overall the film is escapist fantasy. Both *Palmy Days* and

[13] According to Leo Rosten in his Yiddish lexicon *The Joys of Yiddish*, the nebbish or "nebech" is a distinctly Yiddish word. Rosten explains: "A *nebech* is sometimes defined as the kind of person who always picks up—what a *schlemiel* knocks over. A *nebech* is more to be pitied than a *schlemiel*. You feel sorry for a *nebech*; you *can* dislike a *schlemiel*" (Rosten 265). Eddie, often down on his luck, is pitied by others in the films for his lack of masculine qualities.

Cantor's following film *The Kid from Spain* proved to be immensely popular. As Miles Kreuger notes, "only a handful of musicals were made in 1931, and of these only Eddie Cantor's *Palmy Days* found an enthusiastic general public" while the next film "proved the only traditional musical to find audience favor in 1932" (Kreuger and Rouben Mamoulian Collection (Library of Congress) 257, 291). While "Al Jolson ushered in the talkies," a review at the time of *Palmy Day*'s release predicted that "Eddie Cantor will bring back movie musicals" (Evans, "Reviews of the Best Pictures" 59). This was a common sentiment, as others stated: "ten-to-one, this will bring back film musicals in a veritable inundation"; *Palmy Days* is "a true musical comedy with elaborate settings" that "is one of the few that leaves one enthused, amused, and eager for more of the same kind" (The Women's University Club 7; "The Shadow Stage" 48). Although *The Kid from Spain* was a more popular film, many of the thematic elements introduced in *Palmy Days* are only furthered in Cantor's subsequent film. For this reason, amongst others, I will not be discussing *The Kid from Spain* in this chapter, but its popularity and contribution to the Cantor persona do not go unnoticed.

Meeting Daisy Crumb

The first scene in *Palmy Days* shows a thin, well-manicured man ordering a cake from Clark's Bakery. He orders an all-chocolate cake and, when asked if he would like a little rose on top, grins and slyly says "Make it a pansy," raising his eyebrows in a knowing wink to the audience. During the 1920s and 1930s, "pansy" was a term often used to describe queer men. In the 1920s there was a "pansy craze," where gay men began to have a "prominent role in the culture and reputation" of New York City, where Cantor was working at the time (Chauncey 308). This would be the first and only time a clearly defined homosexual character would appear

in Cantor's films with Samuel Goldwyn. Although he would often play a "pansy-like" character both on stage and in film, Cantor almost always ends up with a girl at the end of the film, which is certainly the case with *Palmy Days*. However, this random man seen at the beginning of the film goes to show that the question of homosexuality within Cantor's films was not something entirely ignored by writers, producers, or Cantor himself. In *Palmy Days*, Cantor portrays a character that challenges heterosexual gender norms and binaries through the use of the nebbish character type that is consistently feminized and queered in his interactions.[14]

Eddie Simpson in the beginning of *Palmy Days* is consistently seen donning feminine clothing and taking on traditionally feminine tasks, setting the character up as effeminate. When the audience is first introduced to Eddie, he is seen wearing a skirt apron while washing a small dog. As Yolando's lackey, he is forced to do unpleasant and degrading tasks to help the professor swindle innocent men and women who think they are getting their fortune told. He talks in a feminine voice, pretending to be a deceased woman in heaven, barks and "talks" like a dog, and dons jingle bells around his waist, forced to shake his hips and dance a little jig.

Most egregious in Eddie's mind, however, is when Yolando forces him to be a gigolo for Helen Martin, the head of the gym at Clark's Bakery. He says to Yolando, "I've carried out your predictions and I've never complained. But when you start bringing women into it… That's sex!" his tone getting higher and eyes rolling. Neither Eddie nor Helen would be considered conventionally attractive, but his fear is more concerned with the fact that a woman is involved

[14] It is worth noting that Thomas Doherty's book *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930-1934*, Cantor is only mentioned once, as one of the few "radio 'headliners whose screen efforts enjoyed any appreciable success'" who "had already achieved fame in vaudeville" (Doherty 37). In ignoring this aspect of Cantor's identity in film, the book neglects the fact that one of these headliners achieved success by being subversive, playing with ideas of "sex" and "immorality." This further speaks to Cantor's forgotten legacy in film history.

rather than Helen herself. Yolando is physically dominating, gripping onto Eddie's chin and slapping him across the face as Eddie makes quips, his masculinity enforced by his strength while Eddie's is weakened through physical violence. Eddie starts to sing that he will not go to Helen's place as the audience learns that "every time that fool gets excited, he must sing." He compares himself to Washington, Lincoln, and Lindbergh, who would never go to Helen's apartment because "it's not honest." When a gun is put against his gut, a threatening phallic object, Eddie rolls his eyes and says "But after all, I'm not Lindbergh," and runs off. The comedy here works in multiple ways, the most obvious being the sight gag of an anemic-looking Eddie comparing himself to pioneering commanders in American history. As Yolando's puppet, Eddie is, of course, a far cry from the assertive gentlemen he conjures up in his speech. Any association of Eddie with "traditional masculinity" is a joke to the audience, enforced by the threatening phallic object of the gun.

Eddie's queerness and femininity are most overt during this first interaction with Helen Martin, after Yolando sends him to her gym located above the bakery to keep the working girls in shape. She welcomes him as her gigolo with open arms, while Eddie tries to escape the "physical torturess." Similar to Cantor's first scene with Ms. Custer in *Whoopee!*, Eddie is depicted as physically uncomfortable in the arms of a woman, particularly that of an outgoing woman who contrasts with the meekness Cantor's characters typically possess. In ribbing about Helen's height, Eddie claims "you're far above me." She refers to him as "no Ronald Colman," to which he retorts, "say, you're no Marlene Dietrich yourself." "Oh, Dietrich's got nothing I haven't got," Helen replies, and begins to sing "Falling in Love Again" from her film *The Blue Angel* (1930) while exposing her calf and knee (Figure 2.2). This topical back and forth situates

the film in the present day, like “My Baby Just Cares for Me” in *Whoopee!* But while that song set up Cantor as someone at the level of a Ronald Colman to at least someone (his baby), even if that is pushed against by the blackface, *Palmy Days* emphasizes that Eddie is nothing compared to the dashingly handsome film star: he lacks the sex appeal of Colman and appears as inferior. Similarly, Helen cannot be favorably compared to the ever gorgeous Marlene Dietrich. Although both comparisons set up the two leads as presenting outside of typical beauty standards, Helen’s comparison becomes more complicated through the reference of someone like Dietrich as opposed to someone like Clara Bow. Dietrich was well known for her masculine style. As theatre critic Kenneth Tynan wrote in 1957, “her masculinity appeals to women and her sexuality to men” (qtd. in LeMay 3). When Eddie initially compares Helen to Dietrich, he refers to her lack of conventional beauty and sexuality. But when she responds to Eddie’s comment by invoking Dietrich, she relates to both her masculine appeal and her overbearing sexuality, which she demonstrates in the subsequent gymnasium scene.

Figure 2.2. Helen compares herself to Marlene Dietrich and serenades a frightened Eddie.

In a pained voice, Eddie compliments Helen's singing, using his signature effeminate clapping often used in musical numbers. By bringing the effeminate, musical element of Cantor the performer to Eddie the character, he is further cemented as a character who goes against the grain of traditional gender interpretations. Suggestively, Helen says to him, "Oh, baby, you're the key to my ignition," Eddie being the pointed object that fits in the slat of the ignition, an overt sexual innuendo. A cut shows a close up of Eddie, as opposed to the wide shot of the couple seen beforehand, his eyes looking up and down, scanning the exposed Helen. Once again he deflects her advances through a witty comment, telling her that she "better start [her] engine and keep moving." As has become commonplace by this point, the Cantor films use sexual innuendos that

contradict the displayed gender norms inherent to Eddie's effeminate, lithe characters. This joke regarding Eddie as the "key" to Helen's "ignition" enforces a type of humor "based in a suggested male lack, yet one of a decidedly complicated ethnic nature" as seen through the references to Colman, who is British, and Dietrich, who is German (Balcerzak 89).

While the "phallic lack" is aligned with Cantor's Jewish identity in other films, as described in the previous chapter, in *Palmy Days* it also turns him into a "more ambiguous queered buffoon, something seen in Helen's satiric comparison of the nebbish to Ronald Colman, an Anglo figure of unconventional witty masculinity" (Balcerzak 90). The woman in a patriarchal narrative is meant to symbolize "the castration threat by her real lack of a penis" (Mulvey 59). So, what is meant by this conflict of Eddie's "lack" that lives alongside innuendos marked by the assumption that he is truly a male figure? Eddie lacks the power of the phallus as he acts "queer." Helen threatens his masculinity in multiple ways: she is a woman who offers a castration threat to his male figure; she also is more masculine and domineering, forcing him into a position of submission and femininity.

A seemingly insignificant moment in the film that asserts Eddie's effemination is when Mr. Clark takes him down to the cafe in Clark's Bakery. He goes to a female employee and says, "You know, it's nice to see a girl without too much makeup on. I bet you don't drink." She does not. "Do you smoke?" She does not. "Do you stay out late nights?" She never does, to which Eddie replies, "My, you're a nice girl" and pinches her cheek. The woman pulls Eddie aside before he goes off and asks him the same questions to which he gives the same answers as she does. "You're a nice girl, too," the lady says, pinching Eddie's cheek. He blushes and revels in the compliment for a moment before realizing what she said and walking away in offense. Eddie

is feminized here not only because he is outright compared to a girl, but also as he is unable to be commanding and stereotypically misogynistic like other men, cementing Eddie as softer, more feminine, and someone with whom the audience can feel sorry for, the nebbish.

Continuing the motif of donning feminine clothing and doing feminine tasks discussed at the beginning of this section, Eddie appears in full drag towards the end of *Palmy Days*, a moment that speaks to a larger commentary on the part of Cantor as to how he may view his characters as appearing feminine as well as pathetically masculine. He is on the run from Yolando's goons, who want the combination to Mr. Clark's safe, where a large stack of money is hidden. As he runs away, he hops into a wagon with a mannequin dressed as one of the bakery waitresses. After Eddie hides under a blanket in the wagon, two women come in and push the wagon towards the elevator. A cut takes the viewer away from the wagon and focuses on the men hunting for Eddie. When the women are seen pushing the cart again, Eddie has taken the place of the mannequin. A cut then positions the viewer as peeking into the wagon from the far end, seeing Eddie, who now dons a full face of feminine makeup, bobbed wig, and bonnet (Figure 2.3). As he steps out of the wagon, the audience gets a full reveal of Eddie in drag, wearing a dress and heels. The sheerness of the dress accentuates his legs and further emphasizes the silly spectacle of a man dressed as a woman.

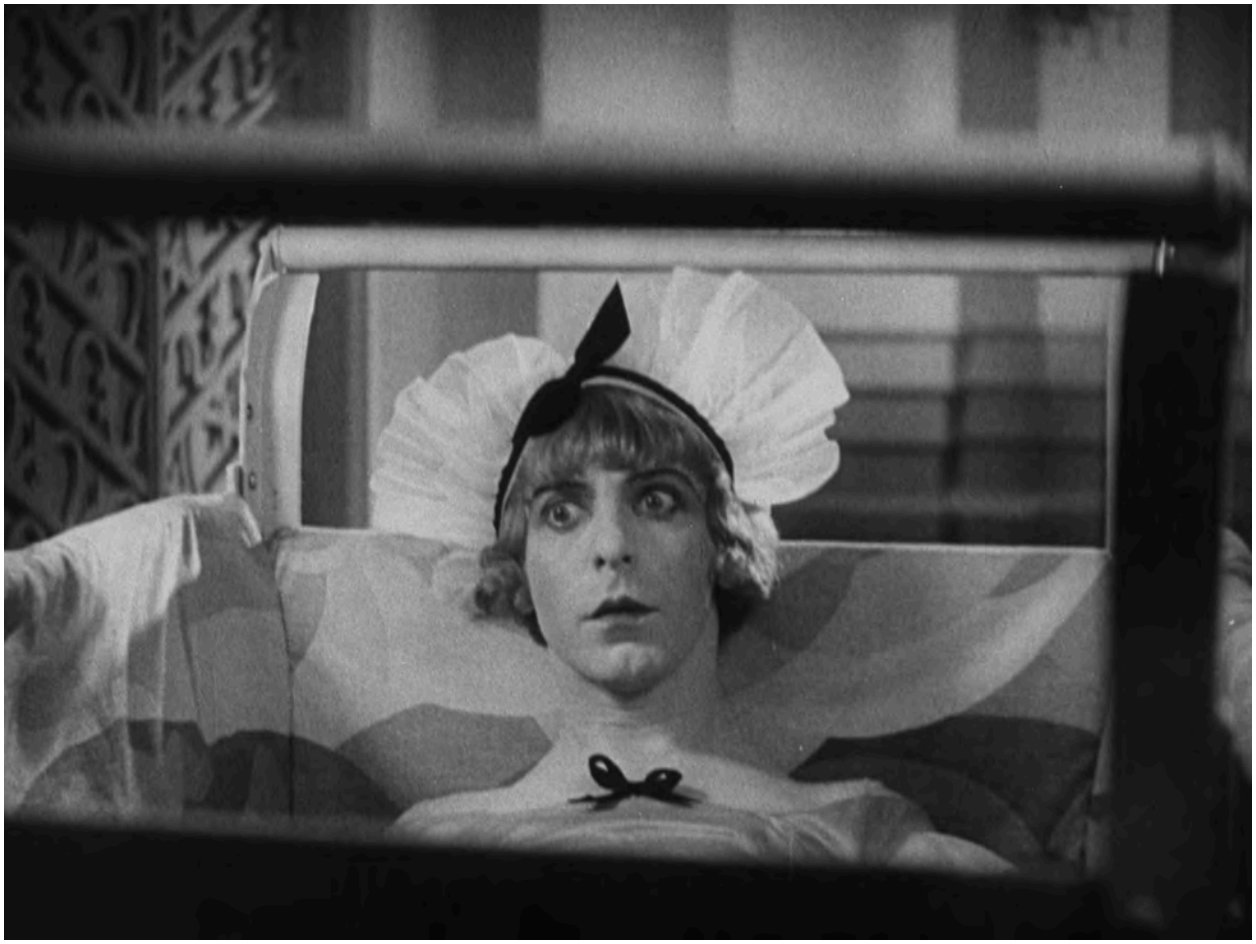

Figure 2.3. The first glimpse of Eddie as one of "the most beautiful girls in the world" at Clark's Bakery.

This is not the first time in the film, and most certainly not the first time in Cantor's film career, that he takes on the identity of another person to keep himself out of trouble. Earlier in *Palmy Days*, Eddie disguised himself as a French mystic from the newspaper in order to break off his contract with Yolando. Here, however, rather than breaking weak ethnic boundaries, Eddie breaks from the constraints of gender binaries as he depicts himself as a woman. While the audience is fully aware this is Eddie, he positions himself as an actual woman within the narrative. He awkwardly walks into the cafe and goes behind the counter with the other female employees, punctuated by a tuba rendition of "There's Nothing Too Good for My Baby," which,

through tone, implicates Eddie as a fool. To disguise his voice, he initially does not talk. When he does speak, he speaks in his normal voice, only moving to a higher pitch when he notices the men on his tail. When he falls into line with the other women leaving the restaurant, the music changes to "Bend Down, Sister," the opening number in the film that sexualizes the Goldwyn Girls, establishing Eddie as one of the girls to be fetishized and looked at, becoming a subject of the male gaze. The only thing distinguishing him from the other women is that he has his hands on his hips to appear more feminine. Is he, thus, a woman who looks like Eddie Cantor, or Eddie Cantor dressed as a woman?

Cantor creates an identity that fluidly shifts with his performance: he appears alongside gorgeous women to be leered at and gets the same treatment from the camera, but also acts as a feminine foil to the masculine Helen. This is most clearly seen once Eddie has escaped the men but has landed himself in the girl's locker room. It is here where he identifies himself as Daisy Crumb after being caught by Helen who notices Daisy as a new girl. The idea that this is a man in drag or even her true love is completely unnoticed by her. When her eyes widen and she leers at Eddie, it is "merely" on account of the last name which she recognizes. Helen admires Daisy's form as "she" poses, her gaze directed towards Eddie's rear as has been seen in the film already (Figure 2.4). Not only is Eddie's sexuality fluid, but so is Helen's as she appears to have lesbian characteristics. As Helen is given the time to look admiringly at Eddie, the audience is as well, Eddie pausing in his pose for several seconds as we see how convincing and "good" he looks as a woman. Helen compliments Eddie's form to which he replies, "I think it's just my girdle."

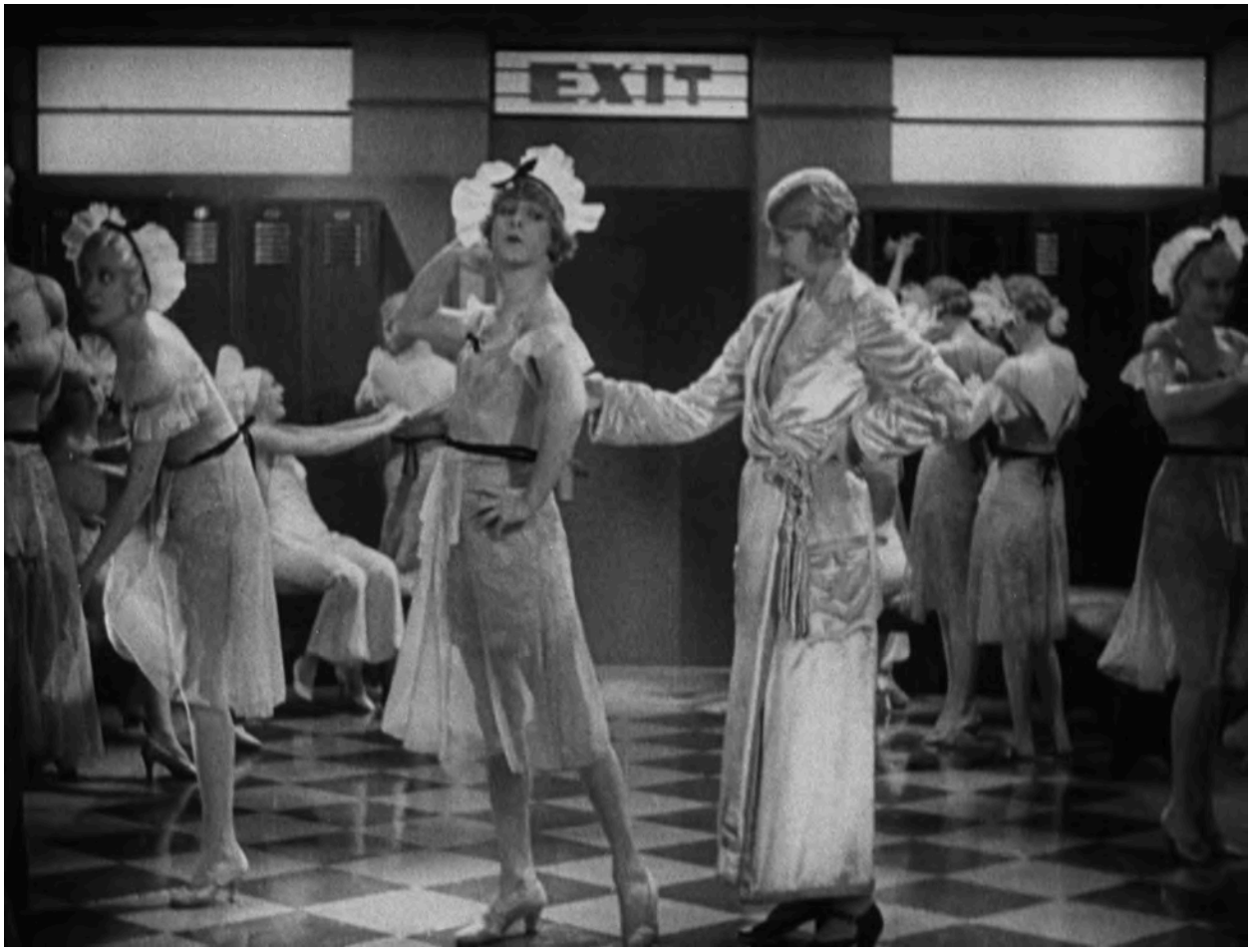

Figure 2.4. “Well, turn around, let’s have a look at you. Nice form!” Helen exclaims as she assesses Daisy Crumb.

The space is treated as a women-only space by Yolando’s men who are following Eddie. When he closes the door on the two men, Eddie is “officially” a woman in a space for women, different from when in *Roman Scandals* he is clearly a man in a space for women. Helen instructs Eddie as if he is one of the girls, not realizing a difference between Eddie in drag and one of the stunning, hand-picked Goldwyn Girls. Discussing *Palmy Days*, Cantor explained that this was “the first time that beautiful girls have been properly photographed… The critics all over the country have raved about these gals. They were selected with the same care that leading ladies are picked” (Cantor 27). But in this scene, Eddie is one of “these gals,” at least in the eyes

of Helen Martin, whose own queerness shines through in this moment where Eddie is unrecognizable yet someone she is fascinated by. She forces him to get ready to swim with the other girls, going as far as to start unzipping Eddie's dress and slapping him on the back, while he stammers, uncomfortable with her proximity. Why is Eddie so nervous around women? Is it the fact that he is turned on by them and struggles to control his masculine urges, or is it that he simply is not attracted to them? If he *is* attracted to them, by having Eddie dressed as a woman, the narrative inherently becomes queer. But the narrative also becomes queer if he is *not* attracted to them. The film also shows Eddie pull the safe combination out from where it is tucked in his stocking and has him slip it down his chest, as if putting the combination between his breasts, something Rosalie (Lyda Roberti), Eddie's love interest in *The Kid from Spain* is seen doing as well, a decidedly feminine and sexual gesture.

The camera pans to show the women of the factory in the shower, first from afar so the audience can see their heads and their legs, then a close up of the faces, in imagery that rivals the Berkeley glorification of women from "Bend Down, Sister." When Eddie is seen, he has a towel wrapped around his entire body with the bonnet still on his head. Helen finds "Daisy Crumb" to be bizarre, constantly questioning her antics. The female identity Eddie possesses is subversive in the eyes of the other women. He may be a man dressed as a woman, but as a woman he acts as both glorified and not. This once again connects his own oddities with Helen's, the two of them playing roles outside of the female gender norms, when Eddie is supposed to be a woman. The inclusion of a Cantorism, like the hand clapping, is seen again as Eddie starts to skip and bop up and down, claiming "There are no more showers!" in a singsong voice. By incorporating the queerness of a Cantor performance number to the character of Eddie, he is read as decidedly

queer. It is also worth noting that he is never depicted as gawking at the women in the locker room. His fear is of being a man in a woman's space, not that he cannot control himself around so many beautiful and half-naked women.

After Helen takes away Eddie's towel, he is seen with his head popping out of the shower asking for a towel, claiming the women will "never know" why he needs it, a reference to his penis. He cries, "If I don't get a towel I'll be the funniest guy in a predicament." In this sequence in drag, Eddie is both decidedly a woman and decidedly male, which contradicts what is previously implied in the film. As discussed, the "lack of phallus" from *Whoopee!* is not present in *Palmy Days*. Eddie is a man who is feminine and a femme. Of course, the moments where Eddie is leered at by Helen complicate this, but what is notable here is a unique play with identity and subversion of gender roles and norms by a character who is laughed at yet sympathized with. The shower scene ends with him saying, "Oh mama, look at your bo–uh, girl," Eddie himself confusing the gender he depicts.

In the waiting room outside the pool, whilst wrapped in a shower curtain, Eddie makes himself out to be one of the girls, sitting down to gossip about the bridal shower that was thrown for him. Eddie references the sequence in the gymnasium with Helen, who acts as a dominatrix to his submissive nature, when telling a woman he is "black and blue from the last rubdown," further insinuating that Eddie's position in that scene, which will be discussed in detail in the next section, is inherently that of a woman (the women in Clark's Bakery get rubdowns as well). Eddie enters the pool room for diving and gets in line with the other girls. As each woman gets ready for their plunge, they step out of the frame, take off the towel, reach back into the frame to drop to the discarded towel, and their feet are seen as they jump, eliciting the sound of a splash.

By placing Eddie in this line of girls, he becomes an object of the male gaze alongside them. However, since he is dressed as a woman, is he to be considered an object of heterosexual or homosexual desire for the male viewer? Women are seen swimming up to the camera in a Berkeley-esque style, as in the opening number, further highlighting the sexualized nature of the camera that follows. Dispersed between glamor shots of the women is Eddie singing in fear, dismayed that it is a pool day and troubled that he will be in a pickle when it becomes his turn. While on the one hand, the cinematography equates Eddie with the women, the dialogue masculinizes him, making it abundantly clear that he is in the wrong space.

Helen pushes Eddie into the pool by kicking his butt. As he jumps, he lets go of the towel, just like the other women, and is, in the split second the audience gets to view him, seemingly nude. Helen laughs amusedly while Eddie remains underwater, prompting her to goose step into the pool to rescue him. The final shots of the drag sequence feature Eddie emerging from the pool, now in Helen's dress, walking off as if nothing happened. The next time we see him, he is dressed in a suit, in contrast to the dress he was last seen wearing. What are we, especially as modern viewers, meant to make of this outrageous sequence in the latter half of this popular film from 1931? The scene offers a unique perspective on identity, particularly how Cantor might have viewed his characters, as blending in seamlessly with the feminine oeuvre while also breaking gender binaries through humor and play, with the help of cinematic techniques to certify a point.

The Physical Torturess

Helen Martin follows the trope of Cantor having to "dodge the sexual advances of assertive women" which, although present in *Whoopee!*, is exaggerated in *Palmy Days*

(McFadden 266). She situates herself in the romantic life of Eddie through her own interference. She is physically dominating and strong, often made to appear masculine, all while asserting herself over the "homely, unattractive little worm" that is "pursued and harrassed [*sic*] by all kinds of strange human menaces," according to the pressbook for the film, Helen included ("Ziegfeld Tutelage a Boon to Cantor in Goldwyn's Comedy 'Palmy Days'"). Through Helen's physicality, she plays a dominatrix-esque role over Eddie who appears submissive in different ways—tossed around inside an unconventional gym and lulled into a daze by dazzling sex appeal.[15]

Helen in *Palmy Days*, played by Charlotte Greenwood, is overbearing compared to both the Goldwyn Girls and Eddie as she coaches them in her gym (she is taller than Cantor when not in heels). Helen says she would pay for someone to love her to the fraudulent mystic Yolando and has quick retorts for Yolando's description of Eddie. He calls him "pale and somewhat anemic" to which Helen replies, "That's alright. I'll build him up." Yolando describes Eddie's eyes as "pop[ping] right out of his head," igniting the response from Helen, "If you think they're popping out now, wait until I get hold of him. And this one won't get away!", eliciting a popeyed look from Eddie who is listening in on the conversation. Helen's assertiveness and hypersexual femininity is threatening and domineering to the everyman represented by the meek Eddie. His fear of Helen could be related to both her overt sexuality and lack of femininity as well as his overt queerness. What makes Helen Martin an interesting character is her unabashed sexual

[15] While the main focus of this section is Eddie's relationship with Helen, I do want to briefly mention Eddie being "lulled into a daze by dazzling sex appeal" in *Palmy Days*. This is primarily seen in his relationship with Joan (Barbara Weeks), Mr. Clark's daughter. When he first meets her, he giggles and smiles like a schoolgirl, popping the buttons off of his jacket. After, he squeals "whoopee!" and kicks a tray of donuts into the air. Eddie falls prey to the dazzling woman, believing he is going to marry her and acts feminine; this all happens as Helen, decidedly masculine, makes overtures to Eddie.

advances and masculine characteristics, taken to an extreme far beyond what was depicted with Ms. Custer in drag in *Whoopee!*

The most blatant example of Helen's masculine femininity and sexual power is when she physically asserts dominance over Eddie, displaying her skills as a "physical torturess," as he calls her when they first meet. She has already used her dominance against him, bringing in a judge to marry the two of them after first meeting, taking on the traditionally masculine role of proposing. She considers the two of them "fine physical specimens" and asks Eddie to compare their muscles. He feels Helen's arm muscles and then reaches down with his other hand to feel his own leg muscles, claiming with a wavering voice, "it's about even" (Figure 2.5). Helen's physical prowess displayed through her arm muscles is even compared to Eddie's leg muscles, emasculating Eddie while Helen appears more masculine. She can easily pick up Eddie like it is nothing while he stumbles around, and falls into the couch looking exhausted and dazed after complaining that she "get a fella [her] size." Helen refers to Eddie's weak ability to lift her up as "brute strength," something Eddie clearly lacks as visible to the audience. By having Helen comment on Eddie's strength in this way, she positions herself as the weak female needing to be saved, a stark contrast to her abrasive and strong character, exemplified by her physical appearance.

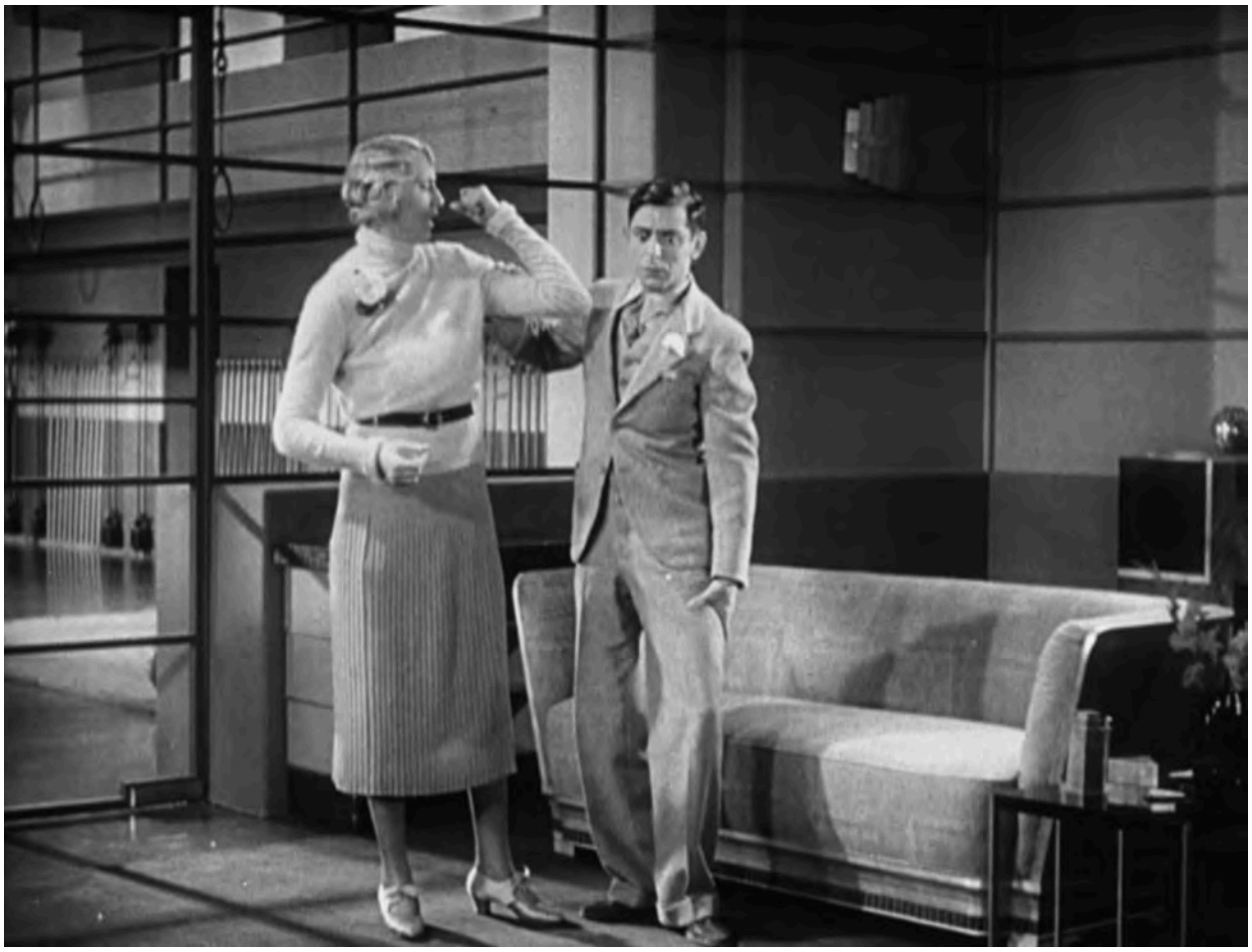

Figure 2.5. “It’s about even,” Eddie’s voice quivers as he compares his thigh to Helen’s bicep.

Helen’s domineering position is only furthered when Helen takes Eddie into her gym to build him up. A series of physical gags prove her dominance over the much smaller, nebbish man. This scene is reminiscent of Cantor’s performance in “The Aviator’s Test” and the “Osteopath Scene” in the *Follies of 1918* and *1919*, which reoccurred in *Kid Boots*, where Cantor is subject to harsh physical examination, tossed around and battered through a series of slapstick moves (Cantor and Freedman 187–88). Unlike “The Aviator’s Test” where Frank Carter delivered the physical examination, a woman delivers this physical examination.[16] This was

[16] In *Kid Boots*, the role of Doctor Fitch, described as “an eccentric doctor who, in spite of her robust physique, was learning golf to build up,” was played by a woman, Jobyna Howland in a role similar to Helen’s where she puts Kid Boots through a rigorous training where, amongst other things, she “slammed [Cantor] about unmercifully and

pointed out by reviewers at the time, who claim that "even if [the viewer] know[s] the act by heart, they have never seen it performed with such a foil as the lanky Greenwood" ("The Picture Parade" 61).

The examination begins with Helen throwing a medicine ball at Eddie, swiftly knocking him down, and escalates from there. While this scene distinctly feminizes and weakens Eddie, it can also be read as a nod to the actor's Jewish identity. Sport and athleticism are historically "a point of contradiction between Jewish tradition on the one hand and gentile, and in particular American, ways on the other" and were often the target of Jewish self-deprecating humor (even if the scene inadvertently displays Cantor's athleticism and flexibility) (Davies 137). Helen then sits Eddie down on a mechanical horse to strengthen "[his] back, [his] shoulders, and [his]... back!" as she looks at his behind. He is thrown around violently on the horse while Helen envisions their romance: "Oh, isn't that romantic? I can see us together in the moonlight riding way off into the desert, your horse going faster and faster and faster. Oh, that's what I call love." As Eddie pleads for Helen to take him off the horse machine, his body is vigorously thrusted back and forth as he rides, the visual itself appearing sexual in nature. Helen's fantasy aligns itself with the Western genre, explored by Cantor in *Whoopee!* In *Palmy Days*, Eddie is, once again, far from the cowboy hero Helen imagines him to be as he cannot control the "horse" he rides and appears feminine and fragile as he is tossed around. The sexual nature of this image is furthered when Eddie is helped off the horse. He reaches around towards his butt, claiming "it's broken bottles, oh, it's pins and needles. You stabbed me." The joke, as often before, lands on Eddie's butt. Not only does this queer Eddie by implying that he feels pain from anal activity, it

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swung each of [his] legs from one table to the other" (Cantor and Freedman 248, 252). As mentioned in the introduction, the film adaptation of *Kid Boots* (1926), includes the osteopath scene but is performed by a man.

also further engrains Helen as a masculine figure who caused the pain, noted when he claims that she stabbed him, rather than the horse.

The massage that follows is a more explicit attempt to emasculate Eddie as Helen dominates him physically. She once again picks up him with ease, one arm around his waist and the other around his thigh, an emasculating position, and carries him to the massage table. As she undresses him (takes off his jacket), she states, "You don't realize how happy I am to be able to do something for you that's gonna do you so much good." Eddie is submissive to Helen's actions, constantly protesting and asking her, "Why didn't you ask me?" What follows is textbook slapstick humor while also visually suggestive. Helen brings Eddie's legs forward and tucks them behind his head, his rear sticking up in the air. She then stands behind him as he complains, "I'm dying and she asks me riddles!" and starts to "stretch him out" by pressing his legs down, causing him to rock back and forth (Figure 2.6). Eddie's butt is in the center of the frame, moving up and down while Helen inflicts force upon him. He continues to cry out in pain while she tells him this is all "very, very necessary" for him and will make him "robust" as it is good for his diaphragm. The image portrayed on screen, for lack of a better word, is graphic. It appears as if Helen is doing something sexually to Eddie, with the suggestive dialogue making it clear if at all possibly missed while viewing. The image of Helen doing something sexual to Eddie becomes an image of Eddie's face next to his butt and genitalia as the camera captures his head in between his legs, face against his crotch (Figure 2.7). What is seen by the viewer is striking, to say the least, an image of heavily implied intercourse between the two leads while also suggesting Eddie's own queerness by having an image that implies him essentially giving himself sexual gratification.

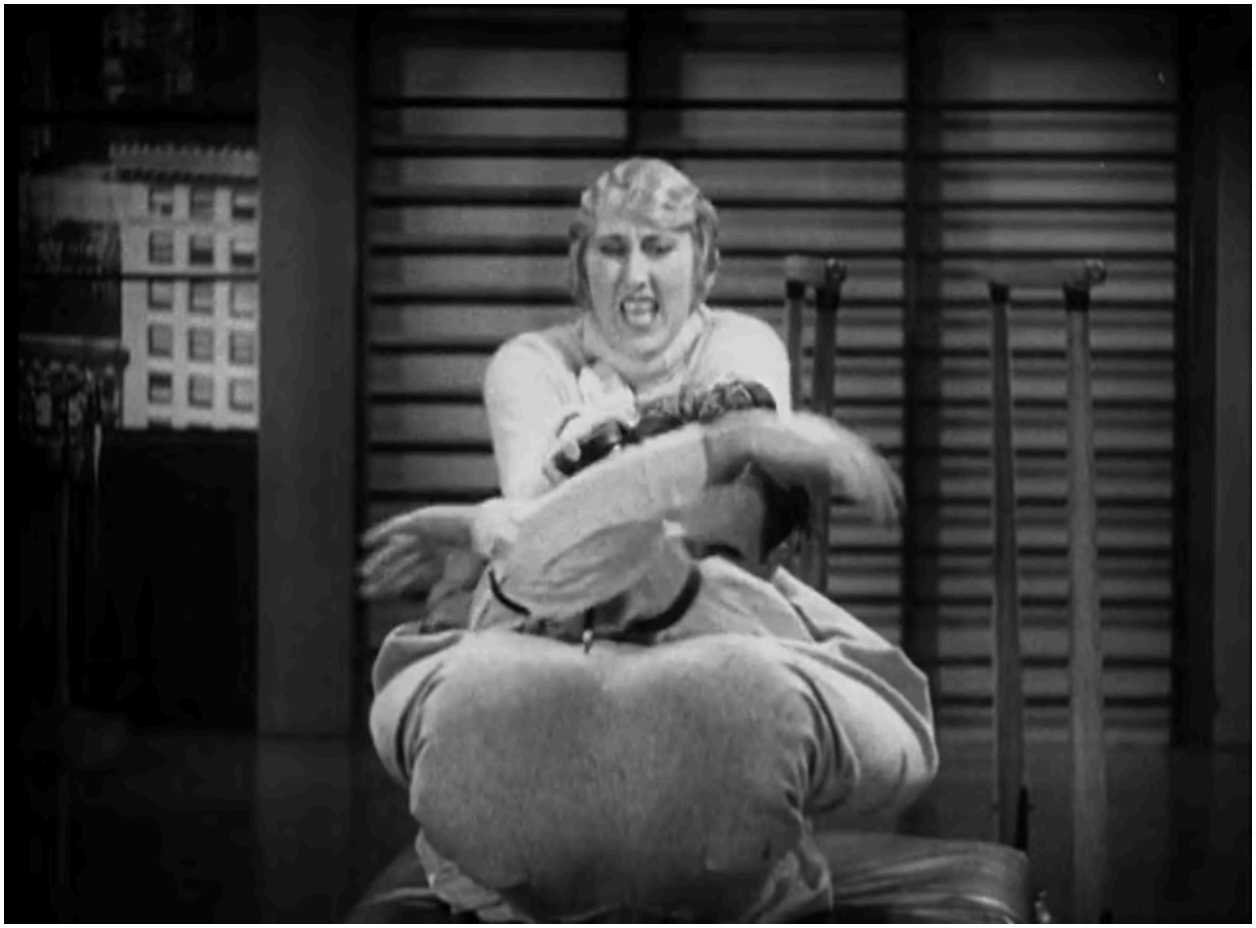

Figure 2.6. Helen stretches Eddie out as his legs are wrapped around behind his head.

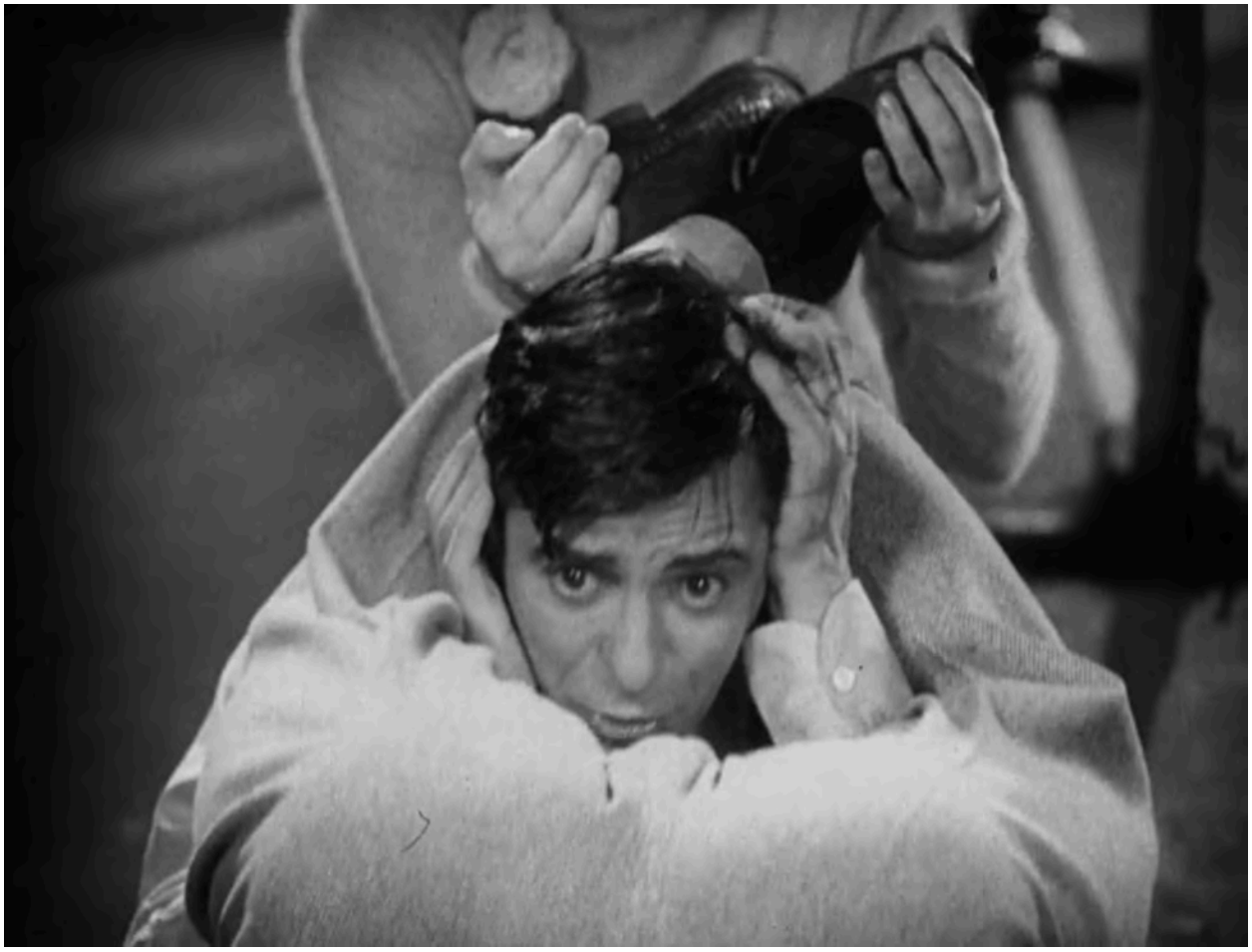

Figure 2.7. “Nothing wrong with my frying pan!” Eddie calls out in pain.

Helen’s masculine dominance continues with her having to “unravel” Eddie, who keeps lifting his butt up in the air, stabilizing himself with his head and hands, as she tries to keep him down while waxing poetic about Eddie being the man of her dreams (Figure 2.8). She uses romantic words such as “darling” while throwing him down on the massage table. The scene also comments on this abnormal depiction of love as Helen asks Eddie if he thinks he could marry her now to which he replies, “Yeah, just keep hitting me till I’m in the mood,” a moment of irony while also emblematic of how Helen views love. “Oh, if you only knew how I feel for you,” Helen continues. “There isn’t any sacrifice I wouldn’t make for you… I’d give you everything!”

she exclaims as she slams Eddie's head down side to side, an identical gag seen in *Kid Boots* (1926) where a man was in Helen's place. The sexualization of this scene is further emphasized when a cut shows the judge that Helen brought in to marry the two of them seeing Helen abusing Eddie. The audience is shown his shocked face as we hear a thwack sound of Eddie getting tossed from side to side and Helen quivering "Oh!" Although the audience is aware of what is happening offscreen, as is the judge, the auditory nature of this moment emphasizes the sexual nature of the relationship between Helen and Eddie within the gymnasium scene.

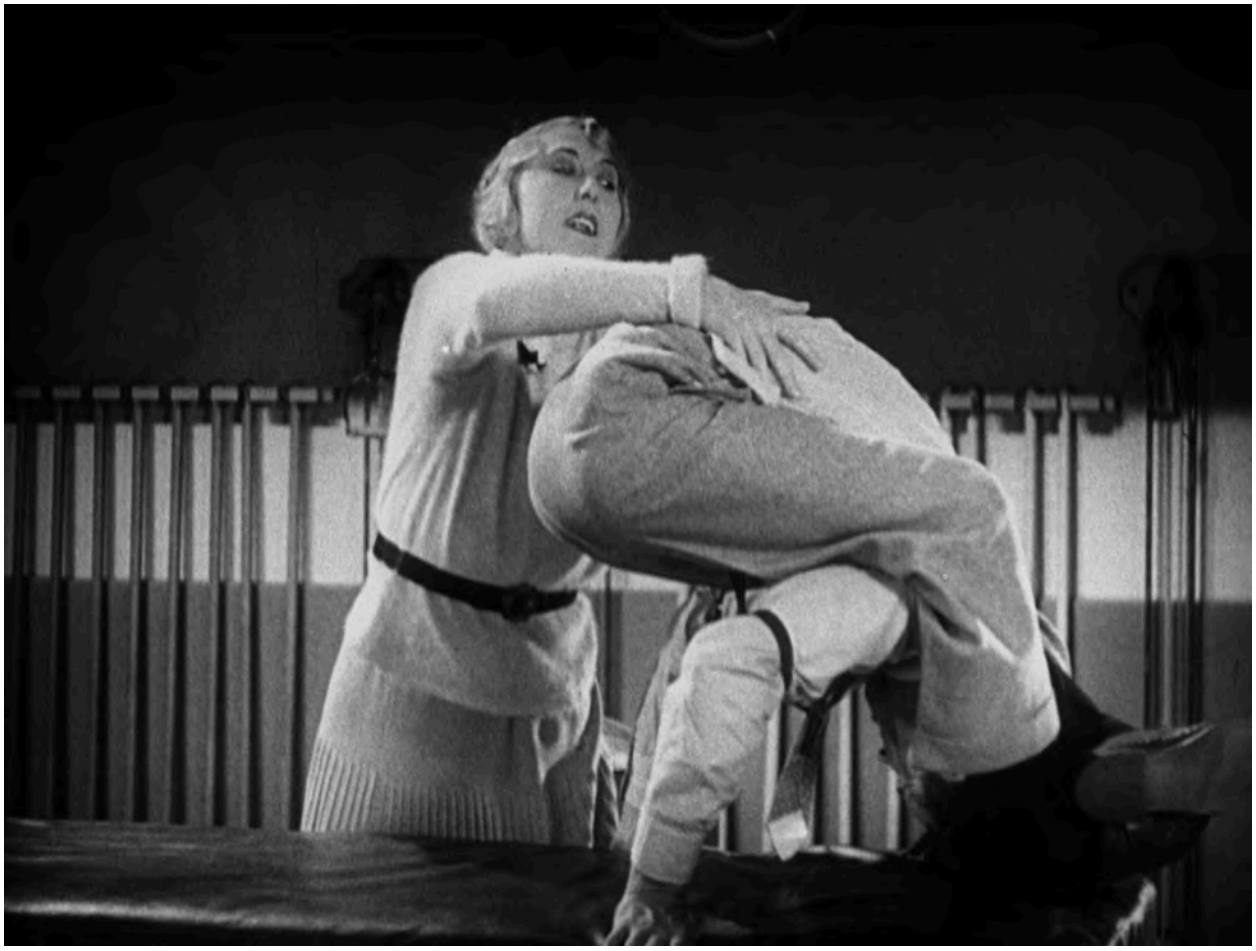

Figure 2.8. "At last, I meet the man of my dreams, face to face," Helen says to Eddie's rear.

This moment of sexualized slapstick humor situates itself within the narrative of *Palmy Days* rather than disrupting it as was often the case with slapstick in silent films like *Kid Boots*. Tom Gunning explains that some of the earliest gags in film, equivalent to something of the Three Stooges, help create "a visual correlative of the mischief" present within the narrative (Gunning, "Crazy Machines in the Garden of Forking Paths" 90). This logic can be applied to the slapstick seen in this and other Cantor films. What occurs between Eddie and Helen is, on the one hand, pure comedy, as he is tossed around and humiliated by both Helen and the camera. On the other hand, however, the slapstick humor in this scene helps drive the narrative and the relationship between Eddie and Helen. The audience learns about her overpowering and abusive role compared to his more submissive and meek role through the dynamism provided by the act of slapstick comedy. As a character, Helen is dominant and masculine: she is referred to by her last name, "Martin," in the script, and not by a (more obviously feminine) name such as Joan (Barbara Weeks), the other female lead. This stark contrast between Helen and Eddie is not only comedic but further establishes the feminine identity created by Cantor.

The film ends with Eddie realizing that he is in love with Helen rather than his crush, Joan. He proposes to Helen, standing in an upright position, and in return, she pulls out a priest from behind a bush. The two begin to sing a reprise of "Yes, Yes," which ends up reestablishing, while also continuing to complicate, gender norms. Helen sings about how she will "get a new cookbook," her taking on the traditionally feminine role of housekeeper, while Eddie asks her if she has a checkbook, placing her in a more masculine position. The two lean in to kiss and instead quack at each other, once again solidifying how the two characters go against traditional gender norms while they simultaneously return to a heteronormative narrative.

Cantor Sings Again

Cantor sings two songs in *Palmy Days*: "There's Nothing Too Good for My Baby," sung in blackface, and "Yes, Yes."[17] The second song, as opposed to the blackface number, ties directly into the feminization of Cantor that happens throughout the film. "Yes, Yes" is a unique song within the Cantor film canon in that it is, on the one hand, an integrated musical number that connects itself to the plot of the film, and on the other hand, is a performance number for Cantor the vaudevillian. Cantor's sections of this musical number constitute a feminization of both Cantor and Eddie (as they are integrated) aside from the typical Cantorisms such as bobbing up and down and hand clapping that are feminine in themselves. However, "Yes, Yes" displays a tug-of-war between his feminine and masculine identities through the use of song lyrics, choreography, and cinematography that contrasts with the consistent feminization seen in the straight scenes of *Palmy Days*.

In describing the musical numbers of Fred Astaire, Steven Cohan writes, "he halts the linearity of the story with his musical performance" as well as "stops the show to insist upon his own ability to signify 'to-be-looked-at-ness'" often used to describe femininity in film (Cohan 47). The same could be said about Cantor in this particular musical number, amplifying the femininity already displayed in his characters and choreography while also noting his masculinity through whom he surrounds himself with in these numbers and the lyrics themselves. Similar to the spectacular tap numbers of Astaire, Cantor's performances "do more

[17] Cantor did not originally appear in blackface in *Palmy Days*; the musical number was added to the film after "less-than-stellar audience previews" (Spivak 55). Despite Cantor's own wishes to abandon his use of blackface, the makeup had become so directly tied to his persona that it made an appearance in most of his theatrical performances and films (Cantor and Freedman 144).

than simply texture a characterization or advance a story's linear movement towards closure, since they interfere with the narrative economy of his films by foregrounding the value of his performance as spectacle" (Cohan 47). While Astaire tends to exude masculinity in his charm and elegance in films such as *Top Hat* (1935), Cantor's feminine style of performance adds to the inherent feminization that comes with the male musical number which puts the male body in the framework that the female body is put into in a typical Berkeley musical number such as the latter half of "Yes, Yes." Cohan claims that "men connoting 'to-be-looked-at-ness' does not imply as a consequence that musical spectacle automatically 'feminizes' the male star to the point of erasing his masculinity" and rather equates the female and male bodies on a plane of spectacularity, and though this may be true for someone as debonair as Astaire, Cantor is inherently "feminized," his masculinity not necessarily erased but extensively diminished (Cohan 48).

"Yes, Yes" begins with Eddie taking Joan aside during a party where her engagement is set to be announced, with Eddie believing that the engagement is with him as he learns that Joan's partner is not even aware of the engagement. When Joan agrees that it is a wonderful night, he squeals with delight, stands up, and begins to sing. This keeps in line with the plot point established at the beginning of the film that Eddie sings when he gets excited. "Don't stop me now, I must be on my way," Eddie sings, to which Joan asks, "Where are you going?" This small moment effectively integrates the musical number into the plot of the film, furthered when Eddie claims he is "gonna do that certain thing / [He's] gonna buy a wedding ring" and Joan protests, trying to tell him the truth that the engagement does not involve him. It is after he sings this line that he walks onto a stage at the party. As he sings the final line of the introduction, the camera

shows the party guests turning to look at the stage in a moment of shot counter shot. What begins as an integrated musical number becomes, from this one moment, a performance by Cantor that essentially disrupts the narrative of the film.

Next is a wide shot that shows Cantor bouncing around the stage, now singing and performing to an audience rather than Joan. Cantor's choreography is straight from his vaudeville days in one of the most overt displays of this technique in his films, particularly from this era. When performing with Bedini and Arthur in 1910, Cantor's first vaudeville gig, he explains:

> as I was intensely nervous and self-conscious, I walked rapidly up and down the stage, clapping my hands and bobbing about like perpetual motion. The result was something new and entirely unintentional in jazz interpretation, and the clapping of hands, the quick, jerky step and rolling eyes, have since become my trade-mark. (Cantor and Freedman 126)

This is exactly what is seen in this performance as it shifts from Eddie's voice to the voice of Cantor. By essentially recreating a vaudeville musical number on film, similar to what was done in *A Few Moments with Eddie Cantor, Star of "Kid Boots"* (1923), the performance becomes a spectacle, and, in particular, Cantor's male body becomes one as well, the physical performance alongside the auditory performance. This is, therefore, a feminization of Cantor by having his male body "unashamedly put on display in mainstream cinema" (Neale 18). This body, as opposed to the body Eddie compares with Helen's, is decidedly masculine as the lyrics suggest, even if they contradict the feminine gestures Cantor uses in his performance. He sings, "Niagara, / We're going to Niagara, / When we're in Niagara, / A-bodey-oh-doh," and rolls his eyes, of course a reference to the common consummation of a marriage in a sleeper car headed to Niagara Falls after a wedding. He then sings the chorus, "Yes, yes, / My honey said yes, yes /

I'm glad she said yes, yes, / Instead of no, no," placing Eddie (or Cantor) in a heterosexual relationship, which he assumes is with Joan. His exuberance and energy is boyish and endearing, masculine enough, but still feminine in its display and particular choreography.

The lyrics combined with the choreography of the next verse complicate the distinction between the masculine and feminine performances displayed in the song "Yes, Yes." Cantor sings, "Jealous, / She's terribly jealous, / 'Cause I'm one of those fellas / Who's a gigolo." As he sings this line, Cantor puts his hands on his hips and pretends to pet his hair, putting a hand behind his head just as he did when he posed as "Daisy Crumb" (Figure 2.9). It is also here where the audience of the performance meshes with the audience of the film, the audience at the party laughing as Cantor feminizes himself. Calling himself a gigolo, Cantor also calls back to Helen's exclamation of "my gigolo!" when Eddie first appears at her apartment in the film. The lyrics inherently contradict Cantor's interpretation of them. He continues, "Swanson, / She's jealous of Swanson, / And not only Swanson, / But Clara Bow." While the character in the song is the gigolo who gets to date Gloria Swanson and Clara Bow, two of the most famous female performers of the 1920s, Cantor instead inhabits the character of Clara Bow as he puts his hands on his hips and sways. If "dance functions as a metaphor for sexual differentiation, seduction, and consummation," what is meant by Cantor's overtly effeminate dancing in comparison to the masculine lyrics (Cohan 51)? Cantor's consistent performances as effeminate, queerish characters is subversive, drawing attention to different gender roles and playing into stereotypes while also introducing the character type to the audience as a type that can be felt for, like the nebbish.

Figure 2.9. Eddie (or Cantor) is “one of those fellas / Who’s a gigolo!”

After Cantor finishes performing his final chorus, the camera once again depicting a wide shot point of view from the audience, he is tapped on the shoulder by one of the Goldwyn Girls. She, dressed as the bakers from “Bend Down, Sister,” takes Cantor and starts to dance with him, walking backwards. As they start dancing, Cantor looks towards the audience, symbolized by the camera, and winks (Figure 2.10). This breaking of the fourth wall signals to the audience that Cantor understands his role among the women, as someone who is not conventionally attractive that uses glorified women to improve his image. In a pressbook review that could be used by theatres to promote the film, it explains that “years ago, Eddie Cantor found out that anything he

had to say, any joke or any song, was always twice as funny if he worked between a couple of beautiful girls," a tradition born out of the *Ziegfeld Follies* ("Ziegfeld Tutelage a Boon to Cantor in Goldwyn's Comedy 'Palmy Days'"). The article continues to explain that "Cantor believes that his beady-eyed, ebullient, prancing person needs the contrast of stately and shapely feminine pulchritude," with "prancing" connoting queerness or "camp" ("Ziegfeld Tutelage a Boon to Cantor in Goldwyn's Comedy 'Palmy Days'"). This aligns with the Cantor seen in the performance of "Yes, Yes" where a wink to the audience is a wink towards his actual masculinity and softening of his image through the use of beautiful women in scantily clad outfits as he continues to be tapped on the shoulder and pulled to dance by these women. This is punctuated with a joke on Helen Martin who "pretends to be" one of the Goldwyn Girls to pull Eddie for a dance. As he runs away, the camera shows Cantor's feet which jump over a Busby Berkeley prop. He lifts up the circular disk and begins a line of Goldwyn Girls lifting the objects in succession. Cantor's, or Eddie's, femininity is solidified once again by having him involved in the Berkeley choreography that is full of women whose main purpose is to be looked at as a spectacle. Cantor appears again at the end of the number for the final refrain where he is seen in a cardboard cutout of a groom with Helen appearing as his bride. "Yes, Yes" displays the unique tension between Cantor's performed masculinity and femininity, particularly within the film *Palmy Days* where Cantor's Eddie is constantly seen in positions that mark him as feminine.

Figure 2.10. Eddie Cantor winks at the camera after being pulled to dance with a Goldwyn Girl.

Palmy Days is a uniquely bizarre entry into the Cantor film canon with its outrageous plot and intense feminization of Cantor's first appearance as an "Eddie," the fictional characters within his films that use his first name, easily tying this feminization with Cantor himself. Helen Martin, Eddie's main love interest, adds to this feminized narrative by appearing masculine herself. However, this feminization is not always cut and dry, as "Yes, Yes" makes clear. After *Palmy Days*, Cantor starred in *The Kid from Spain* which continues this feminizing and queering of Eddie with scenes such as repeated anal penetration during a bull fight and a queer coded relationship between Eddie and his friend from college, Ricardo (Robert Young). As we move

forward to 1933, the year of seminal musicals such as *42nd Street* and *Gold Diggers of 1933* that set themselves fully inside the world of the Great Depression, Cantor will follow suit with his final collaboration with Berkeley as choreographer, *Roman Scandals*. *Roman Scandals* is the only film of Cantor's to have reached a "legendary status," at least within the world of comedy, cited by comedians such as Mel Brooks who referenced the film in his own work.[18] The Great Depression, although relatively silent in *Palmy Days*, looms large in *Roman Scandals*, and Cantor's career as a writer and radio host, while the feminization that began in *Whoopee!* continues to have a significant presence in Cantor's film identity.

[18] In his film *History of the World, Part I*, Mel Brooks plays a comedian in Ancient Rome named Comicus. He has stated that while playing the role, "I thought of myself as Eddie Cantor. I wore the short little toga and made my eyes pop out in reactions, like he did. My 'Comicus' was a tribute to Eddie Cantor. He was my timing, my excitement" (Fisher 4).

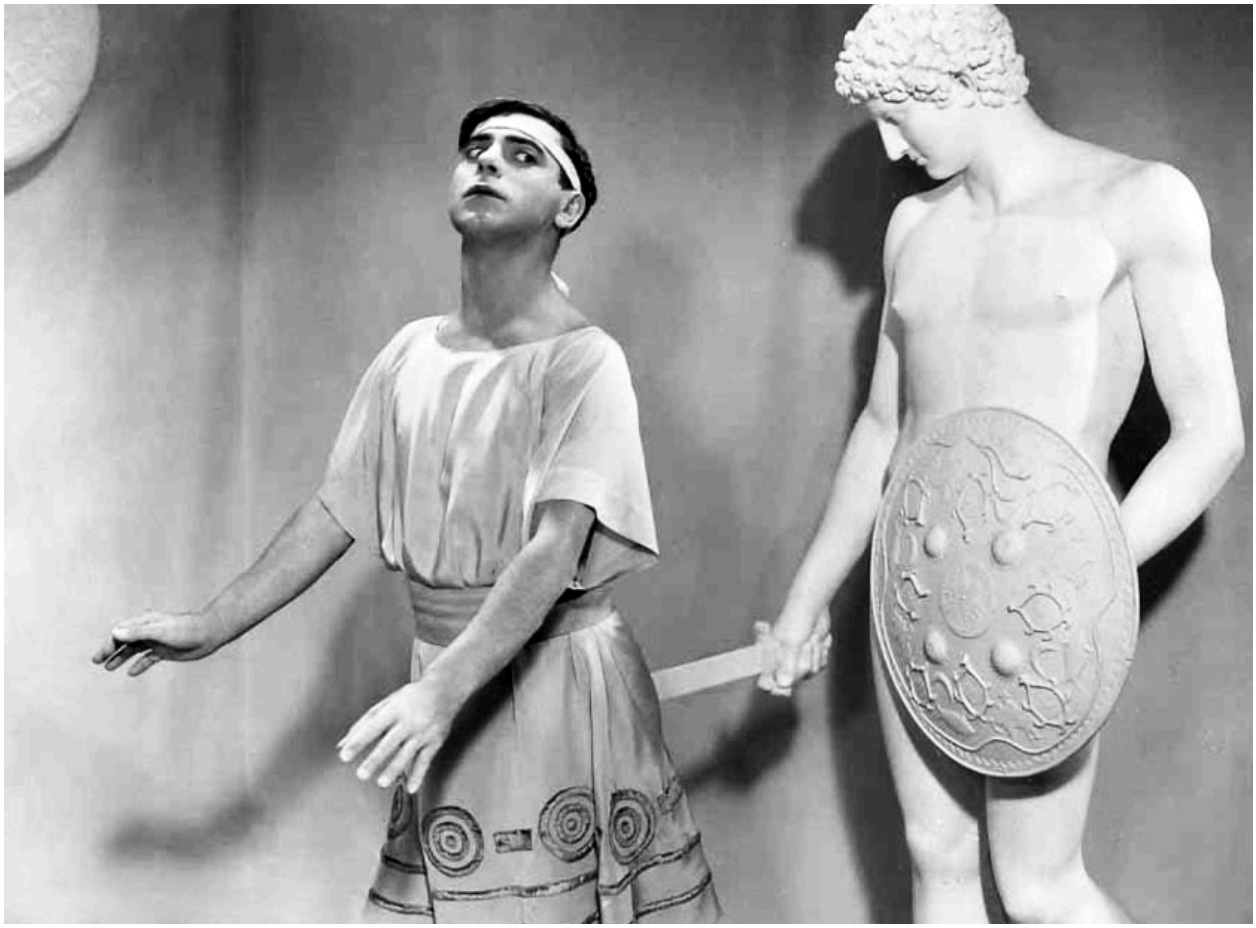

Figure 3.1. Promotional still from *Roman Scandals* starring Eddie Cantor. Courtesy of IMDb.

Chapter 3 | Build a Little Home: Populism and Every Man in *Roman Scandals*

"The lack of material on our early efforts drove me wild. I hollered loudly enough so that by the time we got to *Roman Scandals* we had a real book… [Robert Sherwood and George S. Kaufman] gave us a script that *was* a script," Cantor exclaims in his second autobiography, *Take My Life* (Cantor and Ardmore 159–60). Eddie Cantor's enthusiasm for this film compared to his others is palpable. With better integrated songs and a film with an optimistic message during a dark time in American history, it is not difficult to see why this film would have appealed to the politically active Cantor. *Roman Scandals* (1933), which was filmed and debuted during the First New Deal, combines elements of Cantor's previous films, such as feminization and Jewish humor, with Great Depression Era politics to create a persona of Cantor that would last him through the 1930s. In the film, Cantor appears as an "everyman" populist figure by not only championing the change that can be made by the little guy, but also by appearing as "every man," particularly those not even viewed as men such as women and other minorities, through play with identity. He is depicted as the good-natured American who stands up to corruption as well as the effeminate and queer Jewish man. In the musical number "Keep Young and Beautiful," Cantor represents an amalgamation of queer and feminine identities that also complicates questions of race and ethnicity. It is ultimately through this film that Cantor's full persona in film emerges that comes to define the rest of his film roles in the 1930s.

Eddie (Cantor) is an Ancient Rome-enthusiast Okie living in West Rome where wealthy elite Warren F. Cooper (Willard Robertson) has been bribing the city officers such as the mayor

and the chief of police and forcing people out of their homes and onto the streets. Eddie rallies the shantytown dwellers and encourages them to "Build a Little Home" right there on the street, causing him to be kicked out of town. On his journey out of town, he miraculously finds himself in Ancient Rome where he is sold as a slave to Josephus (David Manners), a civilian loved by the people, just as Eddie is loved in West Rome. Although Eddie naively entered Ancient Rome thinking it could be nowhere near as terrible as West Rome, he soon learns that those in charge are just as crooked. Eddie, now called Oedipus, becomes the food taster for the Emperor Valerius (Edward Arnold), a dangerous job as the Empress Agrippa (Verree Teasdale) enlists Eddie to help her poison the emperor, while he must also help the Princess Sylvia (Gloria Stuart) escape. Eddie, along with Sylvia and Josephus, escape via an intense chariot race after he discovers that the emperor is bribing the senators. When he wakes up back in West Rome, he learns he has the evidence of the chief of police being bribed and helps to restore order and give the innocent people their homes back.

In her essay on Cantor's role in media during the Great Depression, Margaret T. McFadden writes that he "generally plays an effeminate weakling who is sexually liminal, fearful of strong women, and economically powerless, and who thereby figures the widespread anxieties about the effects of economic crisis on the masculinity of men unable to provide for their families" (McFadden 256). I find this reading to be rather reductionist, even if McFadden then goes on to say that, at least in film, "this character invariably outsmarts the rich crooks, bullies, and con men who have disempowered him and forms a companionate partnership with a formidable working woman," thereby "reinvent[ing] and represent[ing] a competent, heterosexual, white working-class masculine ideal at a time when that ideal was in profound

crisis" (McFadden 257). As McFadden does recognize and address the complicated ethnic boundaries that Cantor performs, her claim that films such as *Roman Scandals* "require Eddie to regain masculine authority and credibility by triumphing over those who would cheat, steal, or manipulate to satisfy their own greed or desire for power" appears to me to undercut all she previously mentions about Cantor's play with gender and sexual identity (McFadden 272). McFadden neglects to mention that Cantor's gender and sexuality play, as I have discussed earlier, precedes the arrival of the Great Depression and its context, going back to as early as 1909. I think that films like *Roman Scandals* further assert the abilities of those who live outside the confines of the white heterosexual male by displaying them as competent instead of foolish. As Scott Balcerzak notes, the New Deal populist persona that is crafted in *Roman Scandals* and persists in Cantor's later films "could stand in for a variety of displaced populations regardless of race or ethnicity" (Balcerzak 94). I want to extend this characterization of Cantor as a populist figure who can represent different types of people by arguing that Cantor literally does stand in for these different types of people by assuming different identities in his performances. These identities include the populist figure ("From West to Ancient Rome"), a character with queer and feminine qualities that aligns with historical interpretations of Jewish masculinity ("Skins Imported from Russia"), and a complex and diverse character that combines queerness with race, Jewishness, and other elements of identity ("The Ethiopian Beauty Specialist").

From West to Ancient Rome

The most significant change from Cantor's previous films to *Roman Scandals* is the introduction of the Great Depression. As mentioned in Chapter 2, *Palmy Days* is merely Great Depression adjacent. This is far from the case in *Roman Scandals*, where fears of the Great

Depression help move the plot along. As a result, Eddie becomes a populist figure, an everyman who just wants to help the people. The persona that emerges, then, is able to combine with the other identities that Cantor crafts in this film and his others to create something that is polysemous and widely appealing; this everyman character is necessary for that appeal, particularly during a time of great strife in America.

Populism, which came about in the 1890s in America, is a political ideology that represents the interests of the average man from any political party. During the Great Depression, Americans "channeled their populist energies into FDR's reform efforts" (Greenberg). The most notable example of populism in film from the Great Depression is the work of Frank Capra. In *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), "through the determined application of the virtues of honesty, goodness, and idealism the 'common man' triumphs over this conspiracy of evil" (Phelps 379). Although these films are "outwardly optimistic" with endings that are seemingly "ludicrous" in their optimism, underneath lies "insights into the nature of power in America" (Phelps 380). The same could be said about *Roman Scandals*' view of politics and this figure of the "common man" three years before Capra's first "populist" film. Eddie represents a "common man," just like Longfellow Deeds and Jefferson Smith, an innocent, perhaps somewhat naive American who simply wants to help people and uses his intelligence and wit to outsmart corrupt political leaders.

Balcerzak's description of Eddie in *Roman Scandals* at the beginning of the film as "a harmless quirky social outcast… whimpering to the powerful town boss" characterizes him as "diminutive" (Balcerzak 95). Quirky, yes, but Eddie is hardly the diminutive social outcast that Balcerzak suggests. Although the townspeople do dismiss Eddie as a "harmless" young man with

"honest eyes" who "never really had a chance," he is introduced as someone who is quite capable; it is the society he is surrounded by that assumes he is doing nothing and hardly contributing despite him working for Keep's Grocery. From the outset, Eddie consistently outsmarts Mr. Cooper who has donated a new Museum of Roman Art, who, we soon learn, actually made a sizable profit off of his "philanthropy." As Margaret Malamud notes, "Rome and philanthropy function as a sign for corruption and as a cloak for the exploitative behaviors of the institutional elites of the town" (Malamud 167). The art, for the patrons, is simply for show, while Eddie is able to fully appreciate it, in more ways than one.

After Eddie is found sleeping in the museum on one of the statues, he gets dressed while correcting Mr. Cooper's historical statements as he gives a tour of the museum (art, here, is thus educational but also not what should be prioritized as citizens struggle to make a home). Mr. Cooper, who has said that "a character like Eddie happens in every town; he knows nothing, absolutely nothing," is outsmarted by the homeless and orphaned Eddie who tells him "No, no, no, no, you're right, Mr. Cooper, except…" and goes on to correct every fact he spits out about Ancient Rome. Even before the musical number "Build a Little Home" where Eddie takes a leadership role within the community, he remains an upstanding and notable citizen, who "helps everybody," is willing to correct Mr. Cooper, and is later seen giving away free groceries and helping a stray cat eat fish. Eddie never "whimpers" to the town boss, other than when he sends himself out of the museum so he will not get arrested, and even talks back to him in a witty comeback about Mr. Cooper lacking brains. This helps to cement the character of Eddie as an honest man and capable worker with a strong set of moral values, allowing the audience to easily connect with him while also pity him for being pushed around by stronger and taller elites.

Populism enters the broader narrative of the film with “Build a Little Home,” which follows the opening scene and sets up Cantor as a “performer for the populace and suggests his growing popularity off screen as a Depression-era celebrity” (Balcerzak 95). The well-integrated song number helps to establish the populist narrative that surrounds the character of Eddie and his political beliefs, beginning with a crane shot of the people who have been kicked out of their homes so Mr. Cooper can build a new jail there, a shot that strongly evokes images of shantytowns and specifically Hoovervilles that were springing up all across America during the Great Depression (Figure 3.2). The film blames the living conditions of the regular citizens on the corrupt politicians and elites in charge of the city, which was already known by the audience as the corruption has been set up in the narrative, but the opening shot of this sequence further implies a level of corruption within the American government on the whole through the Hooverville association.

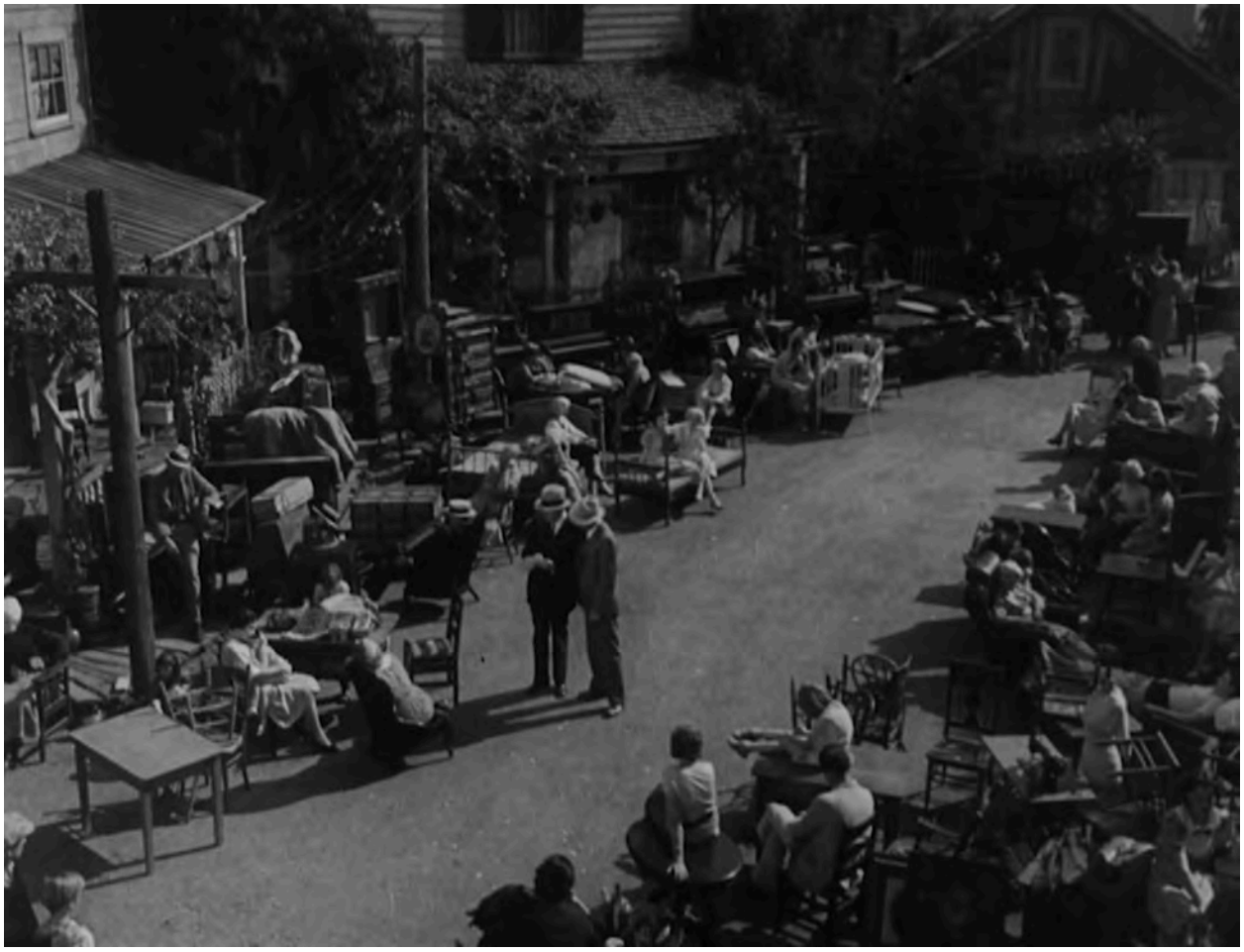

Figure 3.2. Citizens of West Rome have been forced to live on the street as their homes are to be torn down and turned into a jail.

Eddie's position of power amongst the civilians is clear as soon as he enters the scene. Although a mother says they "can't very well live on the street," Eddie exclaims, "Why not?" He continues, "Look, the city put you here. Well, you stay here until the city put [*sic*] you somewhere else." As word spreads throughout the street, Eddie gets up on a piece of furniture and begins preaching (Figure 3.3). This not only places him in a position of power amongst the people of the shantytown, but is also one of the only times in the film where Eddie is taller than those he shares a scene with, even the women. It is only during this sequence, and the song's reprise during the finale, where Eddie is visually placed in a clear physical position of power.

Any man, therefore, even the small and weak ones like Eddie, can hold positions of power; he is the everyman championed by the people he lives with. He tells them they could easily live outside, now with more fresh air. He points to a sign that reads "Build a Home, Warren F. Cooper Real Estate Corporation" and claims that "even Mr. Cooper says it's a good idea. Build a little home. You have everything here." By using the words of the elite against him, Eddie demonstrates a use of wit that lends to the "everyman" sensibility that anyone can be a leader.

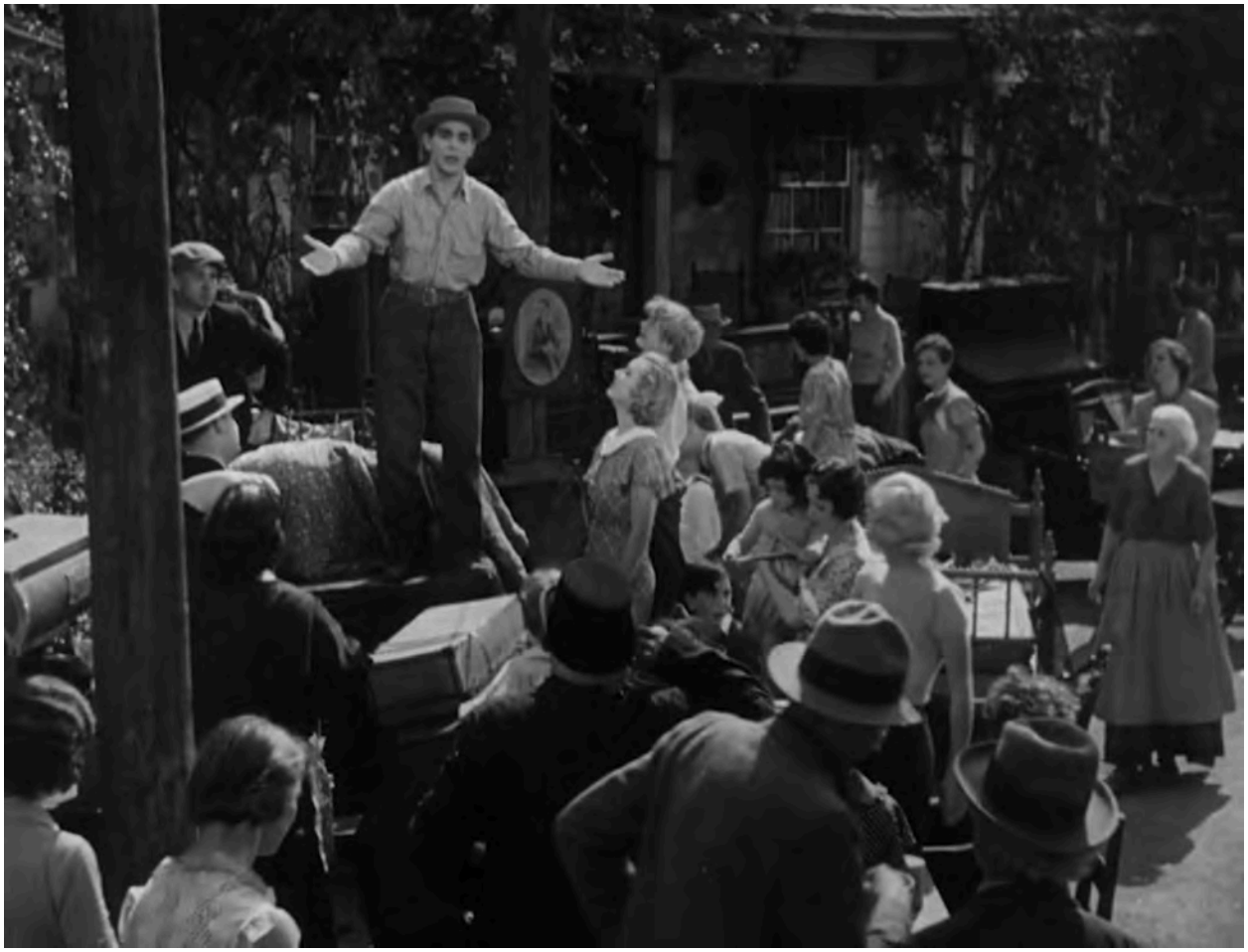

Figure 3.3. Eddie preaches to the citizens of West Rome, bringing to mind thoughts of Cantor's efforts in the 1919 Actors' Equity Association Strike.

A man with an accordion begins to play as Eddie then launches into song:

We always have a roof above us
As long as there's a sky,

> And if we have someone to love us
> We're sure of getting by.
> You don't need a lot of log and stone—
> Build a home on happiness alone.

The introduction of the song is as sickly sweet as Capra's arguably overly optimistic endings, though, as a musical, the film lies in a completely different category than Capra's drama-romance-comedy films and the sickly sweetness is more fitting. Being a musical, the film is inherently an escapist fantasy. It turns the horrific reality of the Hooverville and homelessness into something more positive, a community glued together by love and happiness. The song is fully self-aware, with Eddie singing "We can decorate the ceiling / With an optimistic feeling / When we build a little home." The song's optimism is much more digestible and persuasive than the populism employed by Capra through its fantasy. The song, which was covered by multiple artists, including Ruth Etting who was in *Roman Scandals*, is not a far cry from some of the popular songs of the era such as "Life is Just a Bowl of Cherries" and "Happy Days are Here Again."[19]

Eddie continues to sing and preach to the people of West Rome who have just been kicked out of their homes and invites them to live with him:

> It's not a palace
> Or a poor house,
> But the rent is absolutely free.
> This is my house,
> But it's your house
> If you'll come and live with me.

As he sings this, an angle is shown from the people quite literally looking up at Eddie (Figure 3.4). This speaks to the position many Americans watching the film would have been in, equal to

[19] Popular songs of the era that were about the Depression such as "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" were exceptions to the often uplifting popular song (Young and Young 73–74).

the citizens of West Rome. They too are looking up to Eddie, or Cantor, as someone who speaks for them in a populist sentiment of support for "the interest of average citizens rather than the interest of an elite few" (Holcombe 27). Audiences, too, would literally be looking up at Eddie in the theatre. Cantor, with his radio show and humorist Depression books, had established himself in the zeitgeist as a populist figure, one of the many who lost everything on Black Tuesday, and *Roman Scandals* extended that persona into the sector of film, thus "capitalizing on his nationwide popularity by making him a champion to the lower classes" (Balcerzak 95). With the lines "This is my house, / But it's your house / If you'll come and live with me," Eddie evokes the Cantor radio persona which "travels the air waves every Sunday into your home for a private performance" (Teichner). Eddie is both the performer Eddie Cantor, who sings upon a stage in front of a crowd, as well as the innocent character of Eddie who simply wants to help people and stand up to the evil actions of the elite. This becomes abundantly clear as Eddie hops off the furniture and shows the people where the living and dining room could go, and then asks for help with the couch, while then hopping onto it and lying across it and singing as the citizens carry him and quite literally prop him up (Figure 3.5).

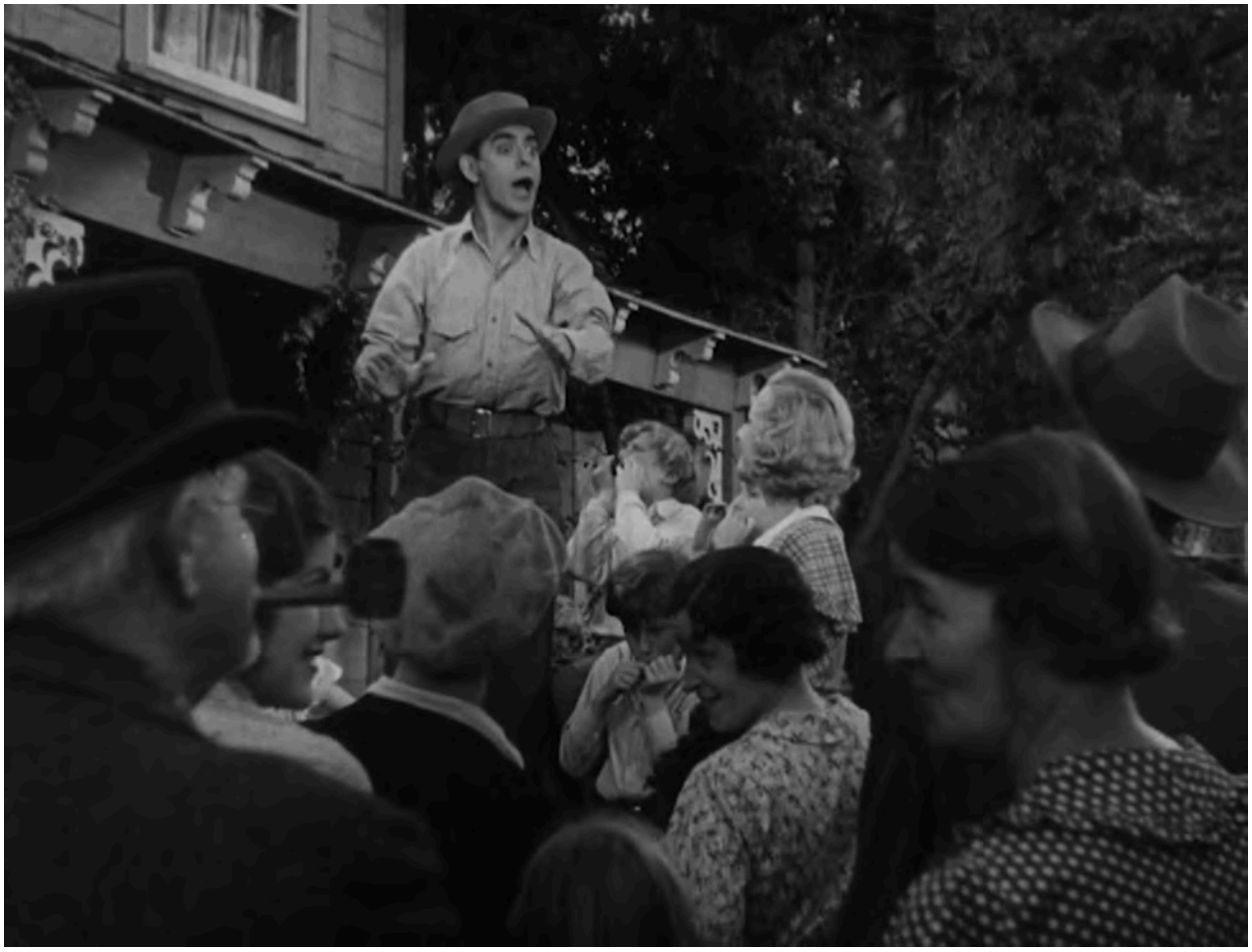

Figure 3.4. The audience, along with the citizens, look up at Eddie as he tells us to “build a little home.”

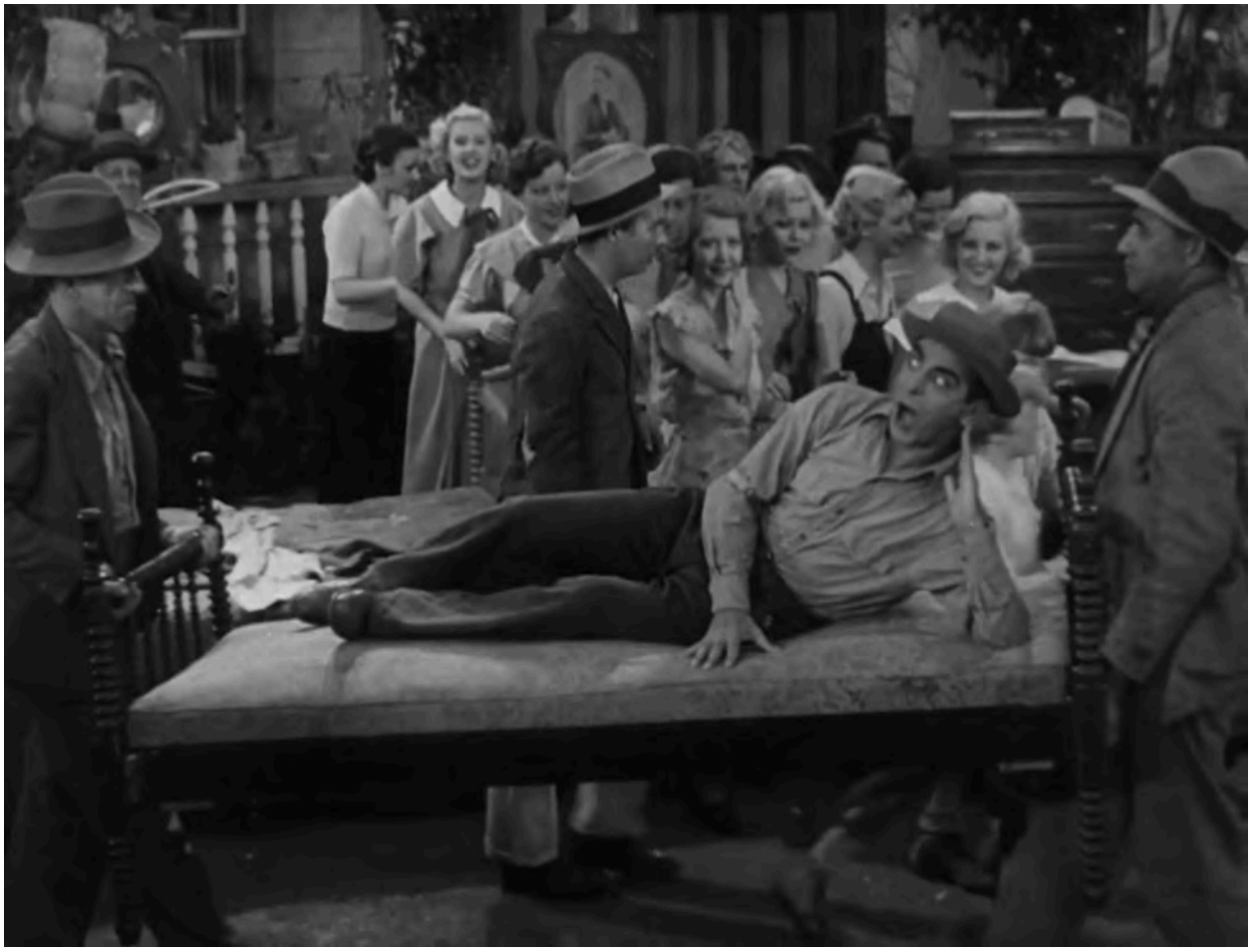

Figure 3.5. Eddie is both Cantor the performer and Eddie the popular town hero as he reclines and sings.

Eddie eventually joins in and helps carry laundry and plays with the children, feeding them donuts. He embodies the populist spirit as he rips up a sign posted on a fence that reads "This Property Sold to the City" and dances around. He then spins a record and the score becomes a full orchestra rather than just an accordion, harmonica, and a few other folksy instruments. In having the song be loosely diegetic and not simply a performance, the musical element of the number adds to the fairytale escapism of the genre, that breaking into song and dance, singing "All our troubles will be over / When we build a little home," is completely possible in real life even if seemingly absurd; it is escapist but offers a sense of being baked into

reality, presenting the audience, who is part of the audience of citizens, with the possibility of optimism in a time of strife. The scene, however, is also a spectacle in an unusual fashion. It does provide the viewer with scantily clad women (Eddie accidentally vacuums up a woman's robe and takes a screen away from a woman showering), but what is more on display, rather than the beautiful women of a typical Berkeley number like "No More Love," sung by Ruth Etting in Ancient Rome, is Eddie's optimism and populist ideology as all of the citizens eventually join hands and dance around in their new home.

Populism, being pan-ideological and widely appealing, is present in the imagery of the people who make up the shantytown. Malamud interestingly notes that the citizens of West Rome that appear in the musical number "look like second-generation European and East European immigrants: an organ grinder with a monkey, a man playing accordion, men with beer steins, and people eating donuts" (Malamud 168). This aligns itself with Cantor's own heritage as the son of Russian Jewish immigrants and speaks to this "everyman" figure being representative of "working-class whiteness that is fluid, constructed, inclusive of a variety of ethnic identities" (McFadden 273). During the song, the citizens set up a long table full of food, the camera slowly pulling back to show the massive length of this table. Eddie then gets up on the table and walks down, singing (Figure 3.6). The table is representative of the sense of community that Eddie has created through his message to the people and Cantor, being the performer, uses his "to-be-looked-at-ness," discussed in the previous chapter, as a way to become the populist figure that he is. Spectacle combines with an underlying message of Great Depression Era politics to promote populist ideology, similar to the function of "Remember My Forgotten Man" in *Gold Diggers of 1933*.

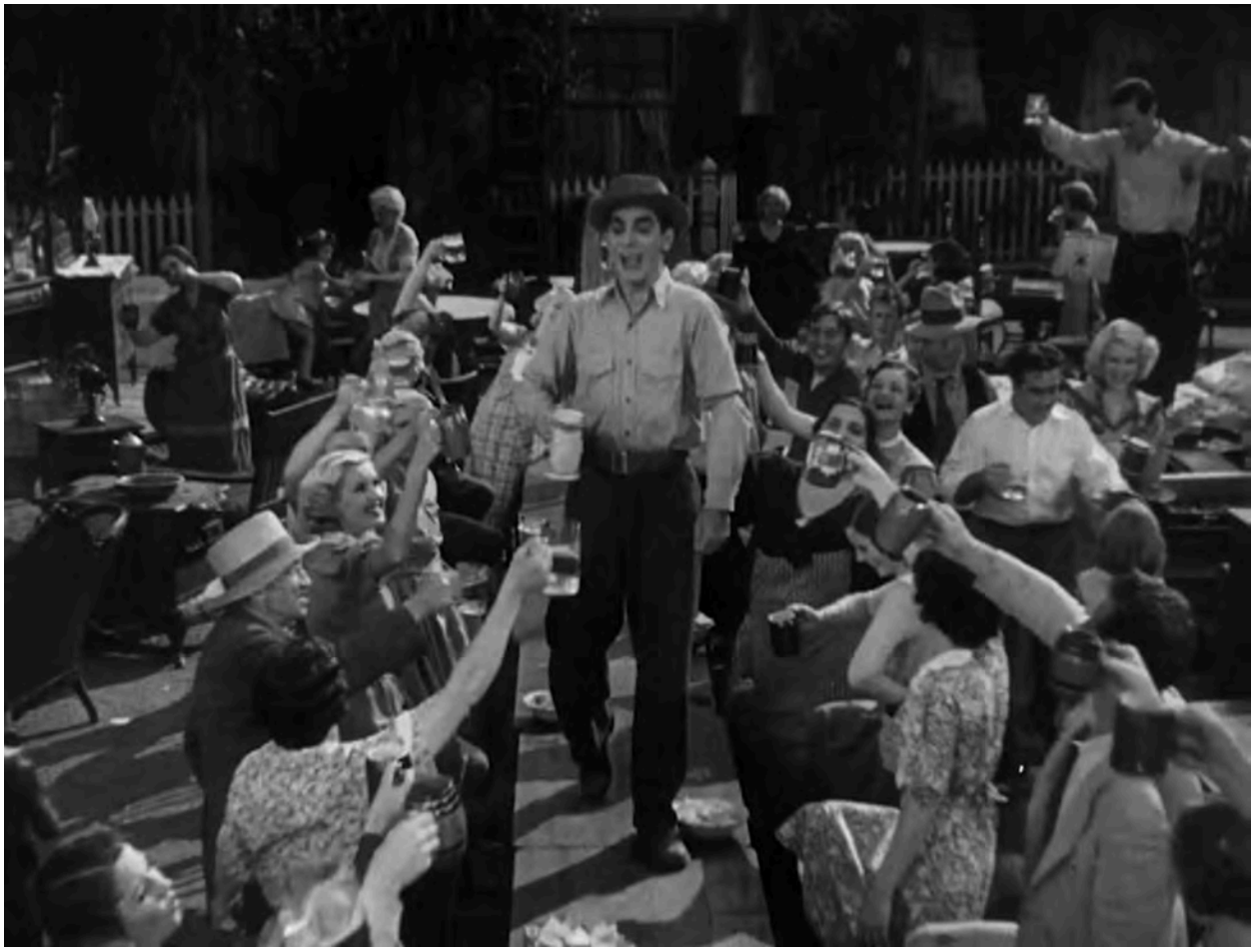

Figure 3.6. Eddie dances and sings on top of the long table.

Eddie, with his charm and charisma, is able to get the citizens, as well as police officers who try to stop the excitement, to join hands and dance in something akin to European folk dancing. Eddie swings around the larger motherly figure from earlier in the scene and then wraps Mr. Cooper, who has come to stop the nonsense, in a hug and dances with him before realizing who it is he just danced with, effectively ending the musical number. Mr. Cooper tells the homeless citizens that he plans to build a brand new jail where their homes stand. Eddie, always one with a quick comeback, responds, “Say, the old jail was good enough for your father, it ought to be good enough for you.” He continues, on behalf of the citizens, “You think you’re a

great man, but look what you do. You build homes for statues and criminals and put these people out on the street. Mr. Cooper, you're… you're…" At that moment a cuckoo clock chimes to which Eddie replies, "You took the words right out of my mouth." Naturally, Eddie's reasonable response (he says to his horse, "They're throwing me out because I told the truth") to the evildoings of the elite gets him finally kicked out of West Rome, and to keep his dignity, he walks out of the city limits, thinking about Ancient Rome and how "they didn't put people out on the street in Rome."

Soon after ending up in Ancient Rome, Eddie gets a rude awakening to the reality of politics there, which he learns are not that much different than those in West Rome. After being sold to Josephus at the slave market, the audience gets a brief interlude with the song "No More Love," sung by Ruth Etting as the slave Olga, marketed as "the Emperor's favorite." Although there is no indication that Eddie witnesses this musical number, it sets up the dangerous and fraught life of Ancient Rome as the choreography tells the story of a young female slave, her body exploited and sold, who decides to kill herself rather than be the slave to an elite.

Populism continues its presence in the film by asserting itself in Ancient Rome as well as America. After running into two senators who "never listen to the people," Eddie finds a bribe from the emperor (ironically played by Edward Arnold who played a very similar role as the "machine" James Taylor in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*) in a situation mirroring what happened in West Rome. Eddie has been told that "the [nightingale] without the parsley is the one without the poison," but at dinner finds that both nightingales have parsley on them. He says to the emperor, "That's food for your stomach, but is it food for your soul? No," referring to

music. This short intro Eddie uses to avoid eating the nightingale allows for him to break into song.

"Put a Tax on Love" is a typical Cantor song full of eye-rolling and double entendre. Eddie is increasingly feminized and queered in the lead up to the song, entering the banquet with a flower crown on his head, pulling out his own lunch of a hot dog and pickle, two phallic-shaped foods, and getting bit on the rear by the royal crocodile (Figure 3.7). He even refers to cheese blintzes, a traditional Ashkenazi Jewish delicacy, relating to Cantor's heritage. This is then naturally continued in the song with typical Cantorisms such as hand clapping and bouncing around. The song is, like other songs within these films, first and foremost a way to let Cantor perform. However, "Put a Tax on Love" exists in a more complicated realm than a song such as "Makin' Whoopee." The song, like others, is loosely integrated as Eddie, through song, runs up to Empress Agrippa and tells her that both nightingales have parsley on them and therefore he cannot easily take part in the conspiracy to poison the emperor.

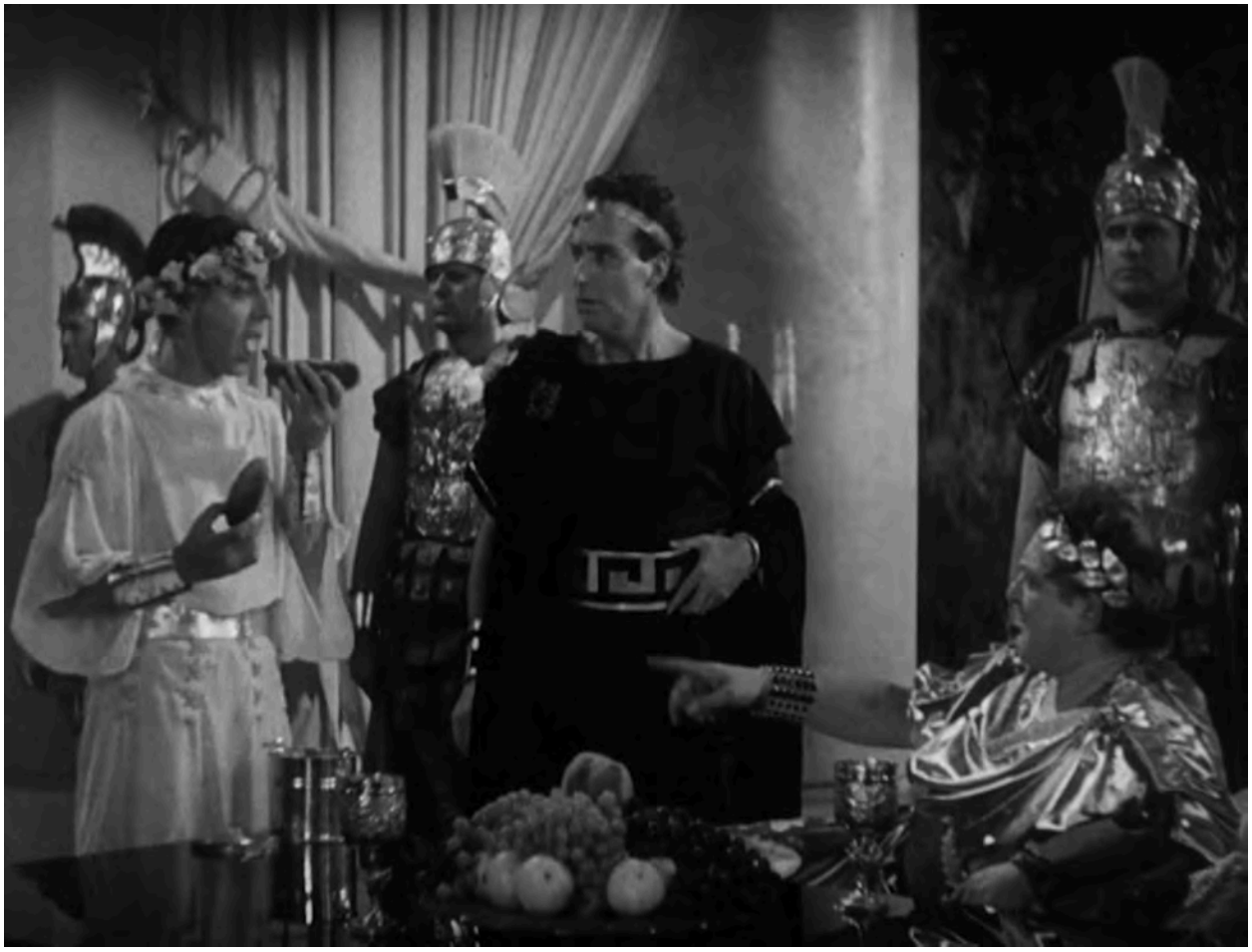

Figure 3.7. Eddie attempts to eat a hot dog and a pickle, two phallic-shaped foods, as he wears a flower crown.

What makes this song more complex, though, are the political aspects that the song takes up. Eddie begins the song by bringing up his current situation as a modern person having been whisked away to Ancient Rome. If he was "home for just a day," he would be able to "settle all [his] country's cares and fears" through his proposition to "put a tax on love" as he would "call up [his] president" and tell him the lyrics of the song. This is particularly poignant during the Great Depression as Roosevelt was, by that time, the most accessible president in history with his presence on radio with his Fireside Chats. The "cares and fears" mentioned in America mirror the "cares and fears" of Ancient Rome as Eddie knows of the bribery and has heard the

complaints of the citizens such as "the emperor parades while we starve." His proposition is thus intended for both Roosevelt and Emperor Valerius. He tells them they can do away with taxes on income, food, and other necessities, and should instead "put a tax on love." Claiming his leaders should "put a tax on love" is, of course, idealistic, romantic, and nothing short of cheeky Great Depression optimism. However, it represents a viewpoint that exemplifies populist ideology with a focus on the role of the average citizen that emphasizes the optimism that often contextualizes populist films from this era. He sings, "Break your Frigidaire and then / Let's go back when men were men! / Bring the iceman back again," which brings up images of turn-of-the-century Americana as many of these populist films were celebrations of the America of old. Eddie combines romance with nostalgia to promote populism to the elites through the use of song.

After an extensive chariot race, the film ends with Eddie waking back up in West Rome, worrying about how he needs to get to Josephus to give him the evidence of Emperor Valerius bribing the senators. However, when he checks his coat pocket, he finds evidence of Mr. Cooper bribing the chief of police which was dropped when his car crashed into Eddie's grocery cart. Mr. Cooper is indicted as "local boy secures evidence" of the bribery. The people cheer and welcome back Eddie since if it was not for him they would "still be living in the streets." Offscreen, Eddie can be heard singing a reprise of "Build a Little Home" and parades through the street. The film ends with Eddie once again positioned above the people, their hero, who saved them with his smarts, optimism, and honesty, imagery that is similar to Mr. Deeds' homecoming in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (Figure 3.8). In the spirit of populism, the film "offers a vision of social reconstruction through a reaffirmation of the values of American democratic tradition rather than a politics of social revolution" (Malamud 178). Some have argued that in his populist

films, Capra might have been "forced into his 'fantasy' endings to assuage the fears of the Hays Office" (Phelps 389). However, "fantasy" may in fact be part of populism: it ensures the unrealistic optimism that populism as a movement fostered but was unable to provide, seen in this film made before the enforcement of the Hays Code.

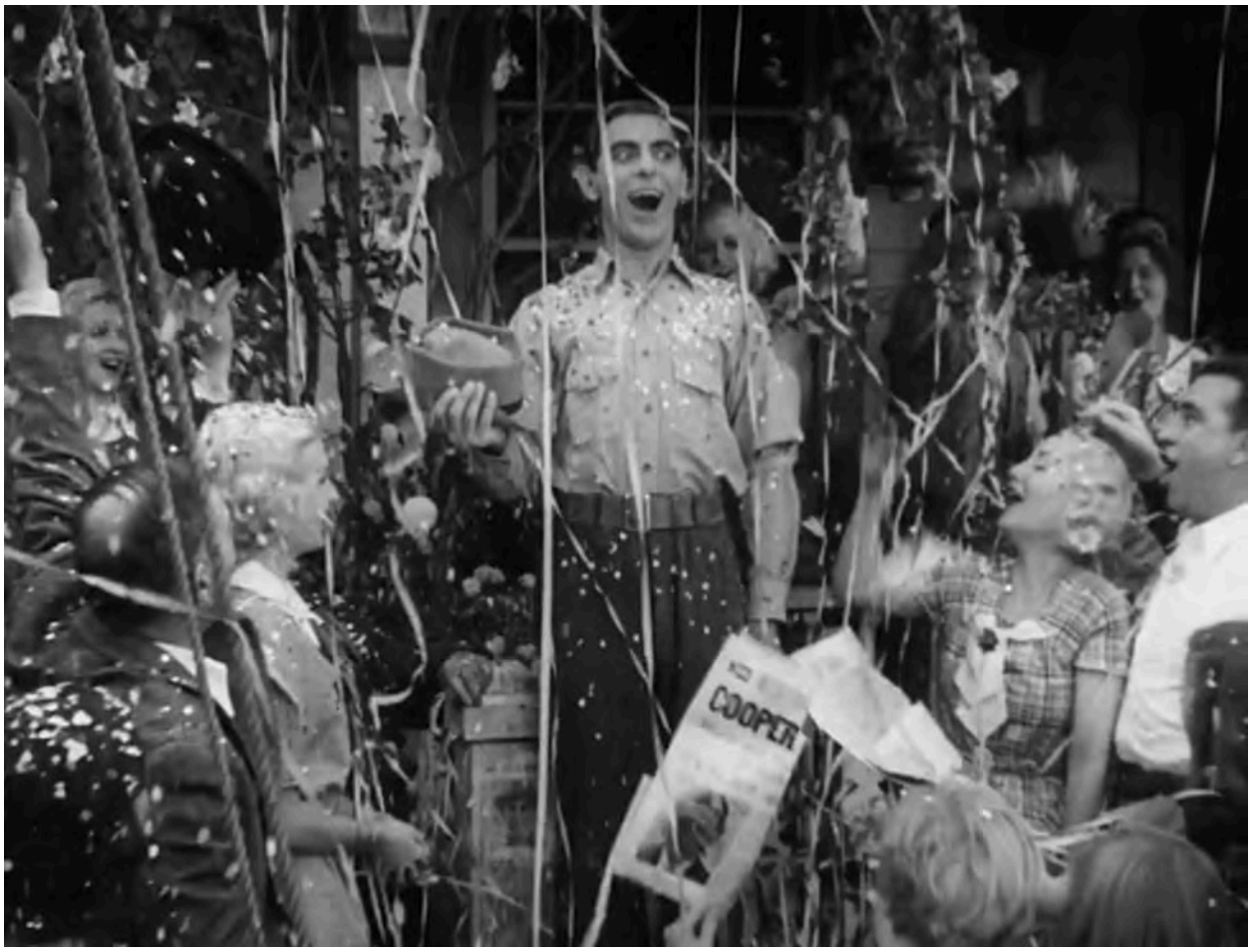

Figure 3.8. Eddie is celebrated by the people of West Rome for saving them.

Skins Imported from Russia

Cantor's performance as Eddie in *Roman Scandals* may not "require the audience to acknowledge that Jewishness is core to the performer's identity" in the way that *Whoopee!* does, but Cantor as a performer is less on display in *Roman Scandals* than he is in *Whoopee!* where the

audience watches him perform as himself in numbers such as "Makin' Whoopee" (Jenkins, "Shall We Make It for New York or for Distribution?" 44). The only reference to Cantor's Jewish identity in his 1930s films after *Whoopee!* appears in *Roman Scandals* as Eddie is being sold at a slave auction. He tries to make himself look appealing to buyers as he taps his arms and leg and exclaims, "Look at these skins! Imported—all the way from Russia!", a reference to Cantor's Russian Jewish background. And while Cantor is clearly the star of *Roman Scandals*, what Cantor is selling in the film is not himself (he is already one of the biggest stars in America, and vocally Jewish). What Cantor is selling, rather, is a persona that combines effeminacy and homosexuality that aligns itself with conceptions regarding the Jewish male figure.

When Eddie first appears in Ancient Rome, he appears far more effeminate than any of the men he encounters. Just as the nebbish Henry Williams is out of place in a Western setting, the scrawny Eddie is out of place in Ancient Rome. This is hinted at when Eddie is first seen in the film, sleeping on the statue of Empress Agrippa, lying down in the same, feminine position as her, equating himself with an Ancient Roman woman as opposed to a masculine figure (Figure 3.9). However, this feminization as well as queering is made more overt when Eddie arrives in Ancient Rome, a culture which has lended ideas of certain gendered performances being read as nonmale such as passivity (Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct* 5). As Eddie enters Ancient Rome, he encounters three soldiers, all of whom appear much larger and stronger than him, and flips the flap of one of the men's uniforms, appearing as if he is touching the man's phallus (Figure 3.10). Although he acts as a sexual being, claiming that he sleeps with Empress Agrippa every night, referencing the statue, he acts incompetent (and passive) with a steel sword in his hand as if he does not understand how to use it, clear phallic imagery. This speaks to the

"stereotyping of Jews (male and female) as outside the realm of normal sexuality, as queer, as sexually predatory, or as entirely sexless," the first two evident in the scene and the latter present in the song "Keep Young and Beautiful" (Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct* 3). The idea of being sexually predatory as well as sexless finds itself in a later scene, after having already been told by Josephus that he will make him "feel [his] whip" where Eddie is unable to snap Josephus' whip, instead accidentally strangling the emperor's Majordomo (Alan Mowbray).

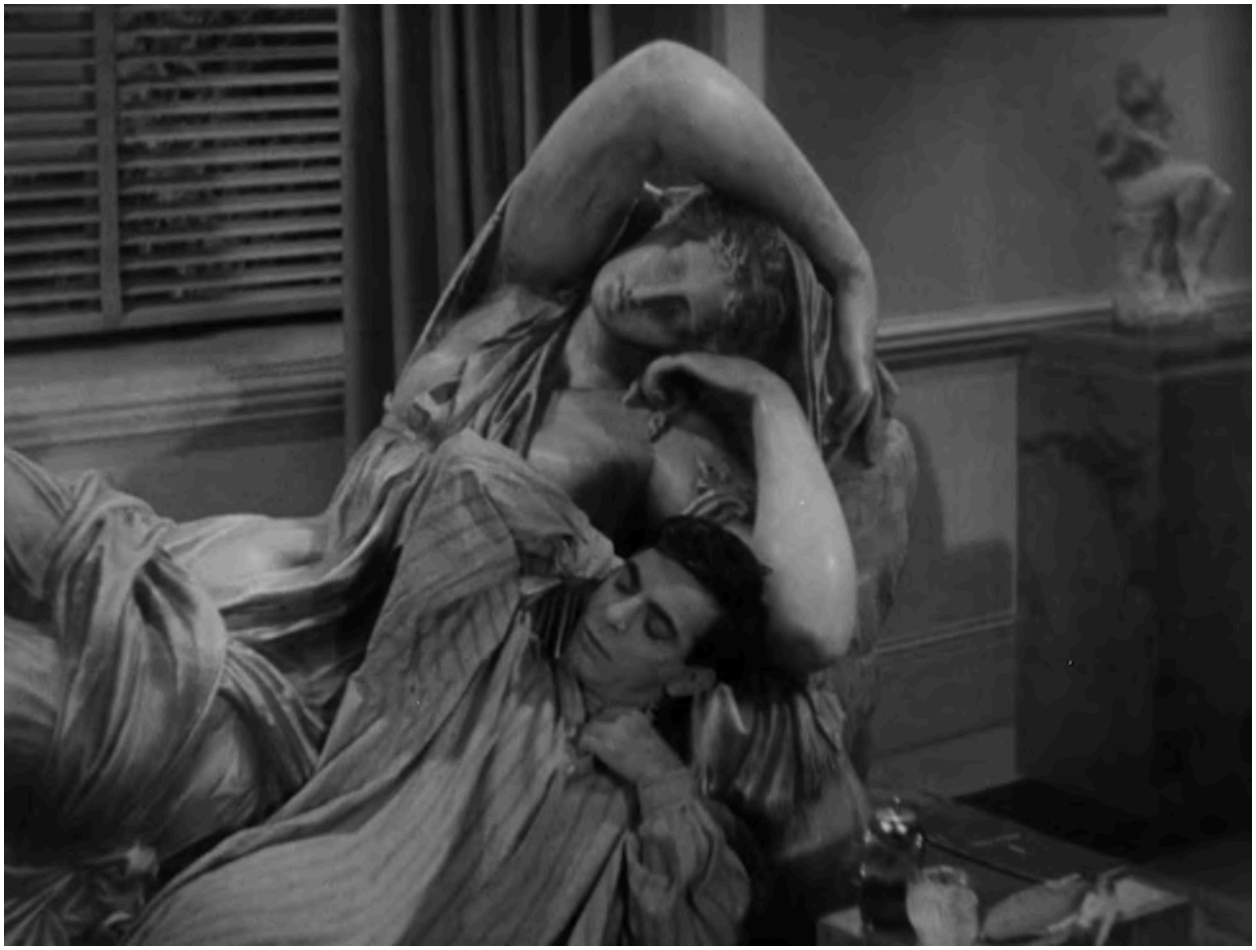

Figure 3.9. Eddie sleeps every night with the Emperor's wife, Agrippa.

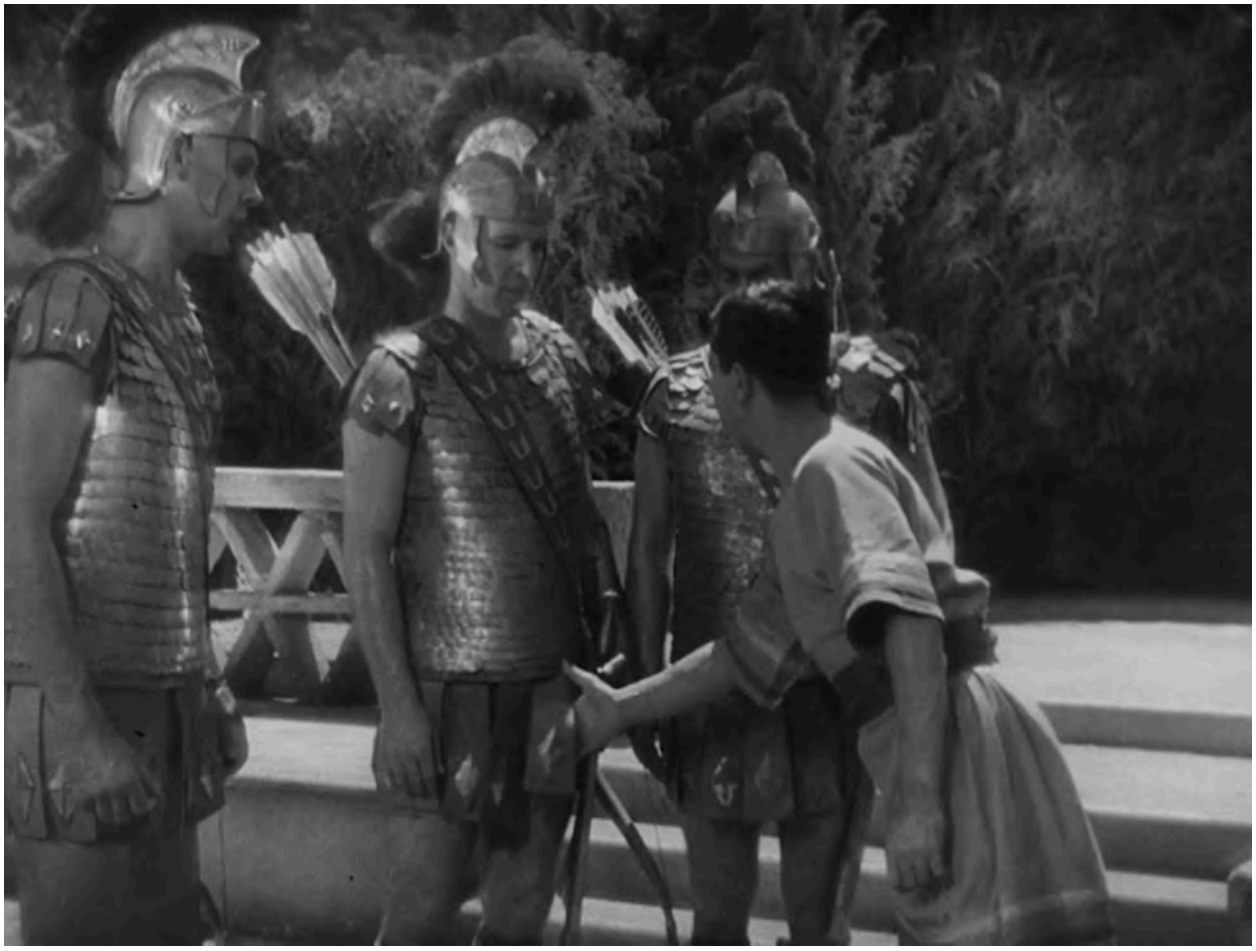

Figure 3.10. Eddie messes with the soldier's uniform while appearing as weaker than the men of Ancient Rome.

Eddie is then brought to the slave market where he is to be sold to the highest bidder, allowing for the joke from the beginning of this section to be told: "Look at these skins! Imported—all the way from Russia!" Throughout the scene, however, Eddie appears increasingly incompetent in Ancient Rome, aside from his heritage. Described as a "sturdy little captive," he is initially not bid on until he starts to sell himself as a bargain who can complete traditionally female tasks ("I can cook a little. I can take care of the children"). He continues, "If there are no children, I can take care of that… by being a son to you." Even when given the opportunity to take on a masculine role, he takes on that of a child. He shows off his abilities to

sing and dance, once again displaying traits that would not be valued in a male slave in Ancient Roman society. A woman eventually bids on Eddie, to which he replies, "wrap me up." However, he then confronts the woman, telling her, "I'm weak, I can't do any work." When the older lady says "I'm not buying you for work," Eddie then "prefers a male sadist with a whip," Josephus, and even says to him, "you could even whip me on my day off," a reading which could be interpreted as queer (McCaffrey 57). Josephus then carries Eddie off in a similar position to how Helen carries him in *Palmy Days*, with an arm wrapped around his thigh. The effeminacy continues throughout the film but appears most prominently during his arrival to Ancient Rome, with some of his weaknesses stressed during the masculine chariot race at the end of the film where he has to be nailed down to the chariot.

The Ethiopian Beauty Specialist

One of the most interesting musical numbers to come out of Cantor's filmography is the Busby Berkeley choreographed spectacle "Keep Young and Beautiful." The number is complex, visually and textually, and fully captures the wide array of elements that combine to create the Cantor film persona. The "metaphoric incarnation of polymorphous perversity" and its "mad surplus" is on display in this blackface musical number (Routt and Thompson 22). For the remainder of this chapter, I plan to close read "Keep Young and Beautiful" and relate the depictions of Eddie to the persona he has crafted throughout his past three films in what is a culmination of spectacle and an overabundance of meaning.

The sequence begins with Eddie stumbling his way into the bathhouse, where women are barely clothed, so he can talk to Sylvia, imagery similar to the "No More Love" Berkeley sequence from the beginning of the Ancient Rome segment. His eyes pop and he shakes his head

before encountering a woman receiving a mud mask. He lies down where the woman had been and covers himself up with the sheet. One of the women in charge of the bathhouse refers to Eddie as a "little girl" and starts covering his face with black mud. Although Eddie stands out amongst the pure white women that have been seen so far, part of the humor coming from the meek Eddie placed in this scenario, he is still routinely feminized along the lines of "I'm a naughty girl," repeated by Eddie when he is found having snuck into the coeds' dorm in *The Kid from Spain* (1932). As the woman walks away, Eddie pops up and looks at his face in the mirror. A fade transition depicts him rubbing his leg which is now black. This is the second time Cantor is actually seen putting on the blackface makeup, the first time being in *The Kid from Spain* when he rubs burnt cork on his hand and face.

In showing him "blacking up," Eddie is further removed from the blackface persona he creates in this scene; it is just that: a persona. Once again, as was the case with *Whoopee!*, the blackface is used for the purpose of hiding his identity. William D. Routt and Richard J. Thompson argue that by adopting this blackface persona in the women-only space rather than appearing as a woman like he does in *Palmy Days*, Eddie is "taking off his physical masculinity. He has become a sexually neutral and racially hysterical sign," a eunuch (Routt and Thompson 30). Scott Balcerzak argues against this, stating that "the adoption of blackface results in the comedian being more sexually charged than seen in the rest of the film" (Balcerzak 103). On the one hand, Eddie is more sexually charged in this musical number than in the rest of the film where he is dodging the advances of Empress Agrippa as he sings about glorifying your body to appease a man. However, to say that Eddie is made "hypersexual, with visual sexual excitement barely contained underneath his blackface make-up" would not be entirely accurate (Balcerzak

103). In fact, “more women look at Eddie than he looks at. It is remarkable how little looking at women Eddie does” (Routt and Thompson 28). While he does roll his eyes during euphemisms during the song, the character of the “Ethiopian beauty specialist,” who the lady who runs the bathhouse supposes he is, is perceived by the women in the bathhouse as homosexual. In painting himself black, Eddie does get rid of a traditional sense of masculinity; however, that is not necessarily tied to “being Black” itself. Black men have been seen in the film throughout Ancient Rome as slaves, yet only Black women are present in the bathhouse. Why, then, is the “Black man” who is Eddie allowed in the bathhouse? It is because he is not attracted to the nearly nude women. The excitement that Balcerzak describes aligns itself more with feminine Cantorisms than with an excitement at viewing the women.

Routt and Thompson refer to Eddie’s Black man as a eunuch, castrated and often an attendant to women’s quarters. This characterization, though, is not necessarily related to the blackface. Instead, it speaks more to Cantor’s Jewish identity and the Jewishness of the Eddie (or Henry) character where circumcision jokes have presented themselves on numerous occasions. The Black men Eddie has interacted with before are all much bigger and stronger than him, much more masculine. Right before this scene, Eddie follows a line of Black men carrying buckets, but carries a small pail himself. The blackface may be tied to the audience’s interpretation of Eddie as a eunuch, but he has never been thought of as an actual man, always a boy or at least someone who is lacking what would make him be perceived as a man by those in Ancient Rome as well as West Rome. Whether he is a eunuch now or always has been is second to the queerness presented by the character who is able to spill beauty secrets to the women in the bathhouse. This is further understood by his confession on behalf of Josephus that he loves

Sylvia. Previously, Eddie was clearly infatuated with her. Now, in blackface, which has fully turned Eddie into a queer man, he has no romantic feelings for Sylvia and instead communicates Josephus' feelings. Although moments throughout the film imply a queerness to Eddie's character, this sequence solidifies that reading as part of his persona.

The song begins with Eddie being asked for some "beauty hints." Eddie rolls his eyes and says, "Well, all I can tell you is…" before then breaking into song. He tells them to "keep young and beautiful" if they "want to be loved," because as women "it's [their] duty to be beautiful," as he lifts his toga like a skirt. After he sings this first verse, he pats the butt of a Black woman tending to a white woman. This moment is referenced as part of Eddie's hypersexuality by Balcerzack. It is a moment of fetishization, certainly. However, the woman does not act perturbed in any way. To me, this implies that Eddie is read as homosexual and therefore non threatening to the woman. When he pats her rear, it enforces the belief that the Black woman is "young and beautiful," something to be lusted after just like the white women in the scene, with Eddie's face even framed by the long, smooth legs of Black women, a radical suggestion at this time (Figure 3.11). Eddie is not necessarily the one lusting after her. Rather, he recognizes her beauty as someone who is doing their part in keeping young and beautiful, which hinges on the need for commodity.

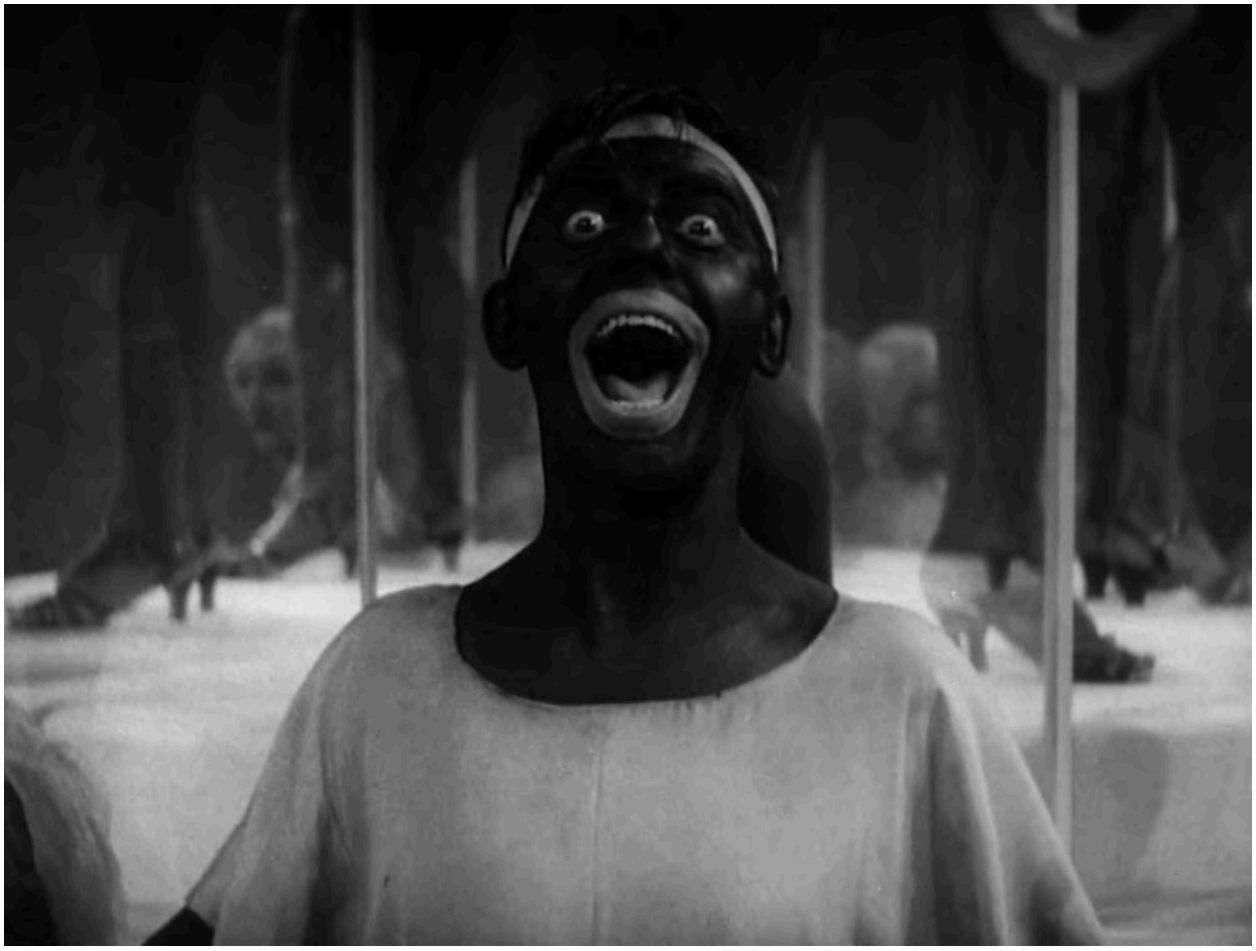

Figure 3.11. As Eddie sings the chorus, the Black legs, made into multiples by the reflections, frame Eddie's face.

Eddie acts as a salesman, singing, "Don't fail to do your stuff / With a little powder and a puff," clapping and flapping his wrist as white women powder themselves. As noted by historian Melanie Selfe, promotional materials for the film told movie theatres to "use the songs to sell your show," with "Keep Young and Beautiful" being one of the main benefactors. Lyrics such as "Let him get a whiff of Christmas night," which acts as a euphemism in the song, could be used to sell perfume called Christmas Night. It is evident that the number, with a clear social hierarchy (even if the Black women are also fetishized), falls into the "advertising practice of using imagery of happy, helpful black slaves/servants to market modern aids for traditional feminine

competences to increasingly time-pressed white women" (Selfe 667). Where, then, does that put Eddie in this hierarchy? As a man, rather than as a eunuch, he holds power over the women in the scene as he holds the secrets to beauty. Routt and Thompson fail to answer the question they pose: "why doesn't he disguise himself as a woman?" (Routt and Thompson 30). Against the argument claiming he is a eunuch, Eddie has to "keep his masculinity" (possess a phallus) in order to have any agency over the women. Richard Dyer explains that "in practice queers can practice an exclusionary or domineering masculinity, often control[ling] those woman-centered sectors of employment that make space for them" (Dyer, *The Culture of Queers* 5). Even as a perceived queer Black man, he has more agency than the women, white and Black. He has been perceived as a woman in the beginning of the scene which placed him among the ranks of every other white woman in the bathhouse, simply getting a facial. He cannot be a white male slave, as that is just Eddie; he cannot be a woman, as that causes a loss of power in the hierarchy. By disguising himself as Black while keeping his masculinity, to at least an extent, he manages to keep his position as a man with power, but he is not threatening, like a white man would be. It is the blackface which signals his homosexuality to the women.

How much power, though, does Eddie actually have over the women in the bathhouse? Aside from giving beauty tips to the women, Eddie does not do much to suggest that he holds that much power as a man within this female homosocial space. He is often placed in positions that picture him as shorter and submissive to the women with whom he shares the scene (Figure 3.12). However, he is also clearly on display, with all of the women looking towards him, both when positioned below and above the women (Figure 3.13). Just as in the *Ziegfeld Follies of 1927* where Cantor was the featured performer and the Ziegfeld Girls were props for lavish

musical numbers, Cantor is the featured performer of this scene, the camera following him. The women only become the focus when Eddie is off camera. He may lack the physical advantages that would place him in a position of power, but he does not try to disguise himself any further than the makeup he has put on, an inherently paradoxical act that speaks to the amalgamation of identities that create the persona. The blackface itself draws attention to Cantor in a way that whiteface would not. As Routt and Thompson note, "*Cantor* is on display here… He calls for our attention, and he is positioned so as to attract that attention" (Routt and Thompson 28). Within the scene, Eddie is as much Eddie Cantor as he is Eddie the Okie in Ancient Rome, calling back to some of Cantor's earliest performances such as "Makin' Whoopee" where he is surrounded by beautiful women but is clearly the main attraction.

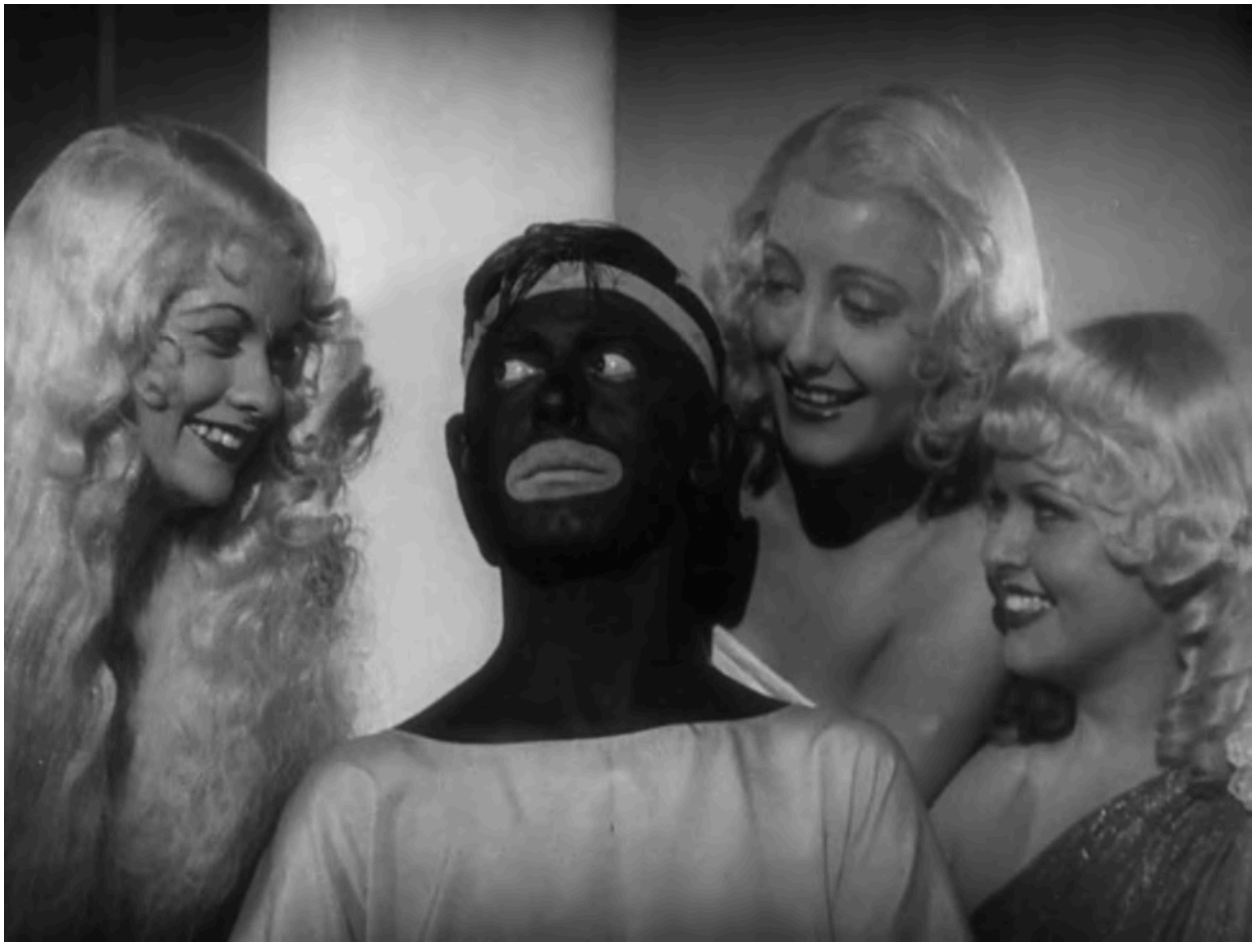

Figure 3.12. “Even after you grow old, baby, / You don’t have to be a cold baby,” Eddie sings, appearing shorter than several of the women who all look at him.

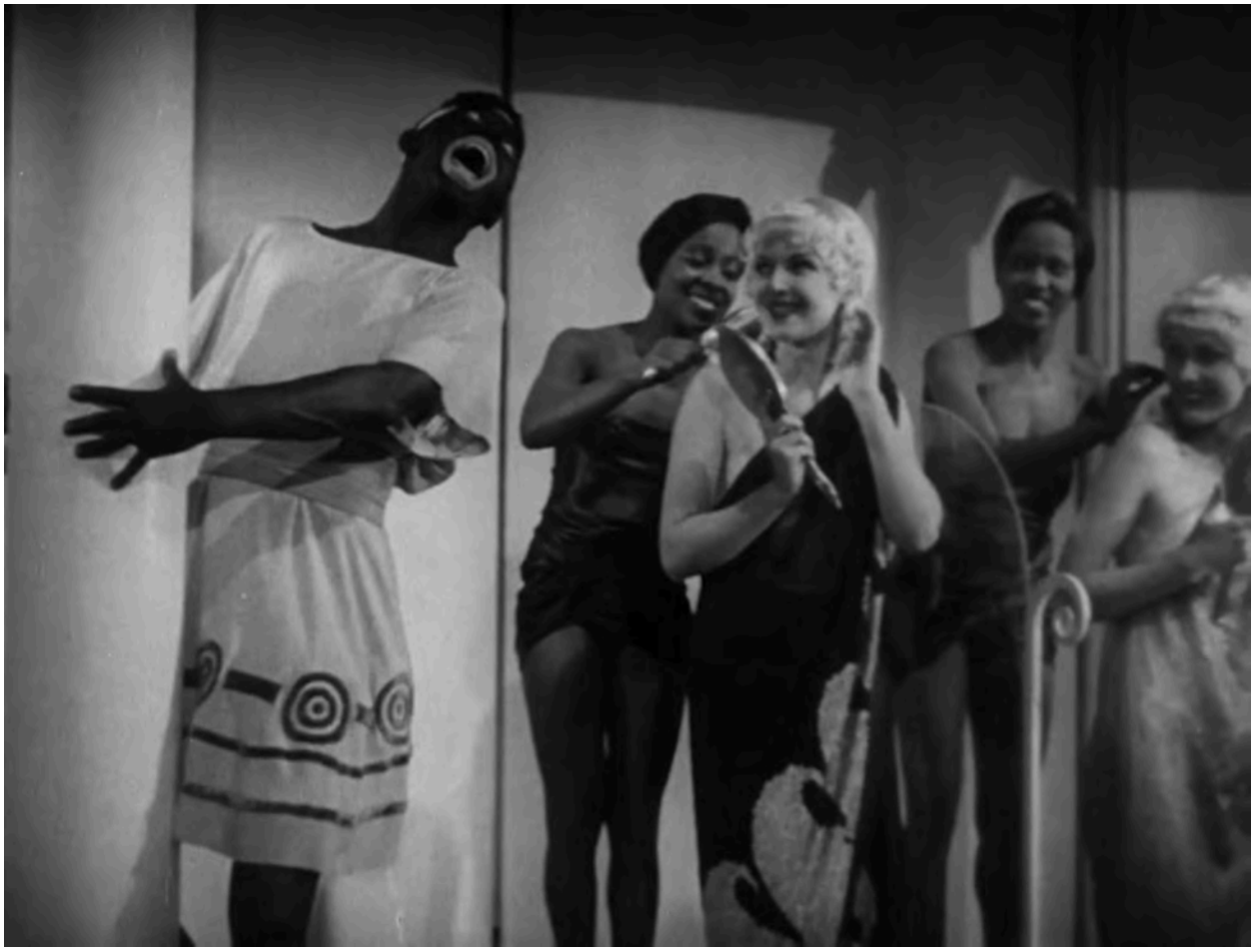

Figure 3.13. Eddie is not always shorter than the women in the scene, but he does take command of the space as the women look towards him.

It is during a dance break in the song when Eddie's true identity is discovered by the women. However, what exactly is that true identity? Is it as simple as Eddie is in fact white? As he dances with the Black women, hoofing around as the women dance a Charleston-esque, more "wild" dance than the white women in the scene on the other side of the room, he lifts up his toga and exposes his bone white thighs (Figure 3.14). It is suggested by scholars such as Balcerzak and Routt and Thompson that this moment "indicat[es] that this supposed eunuch has a phallus hanging slightly above this area" (Balcerzak 102). However, these women are already fully aware that this Ethiopian beauty specialist is male, supposed eunuch or not. If blackface is

what turns Eddie into a perceived homosexual, then the white thighs would reveal that this man is not, in fact, homosexual; he is attracted to women and thus a threat in this female space. He is then chased around the space, the women, both Black and white, clamoring for his downfall. Eddie, in the chase, is often seen alongside the Black women as opposed to the white women. He is more of an outcast in the space as perceived as Black instead of being perceived as white, hence the association with the Black women.

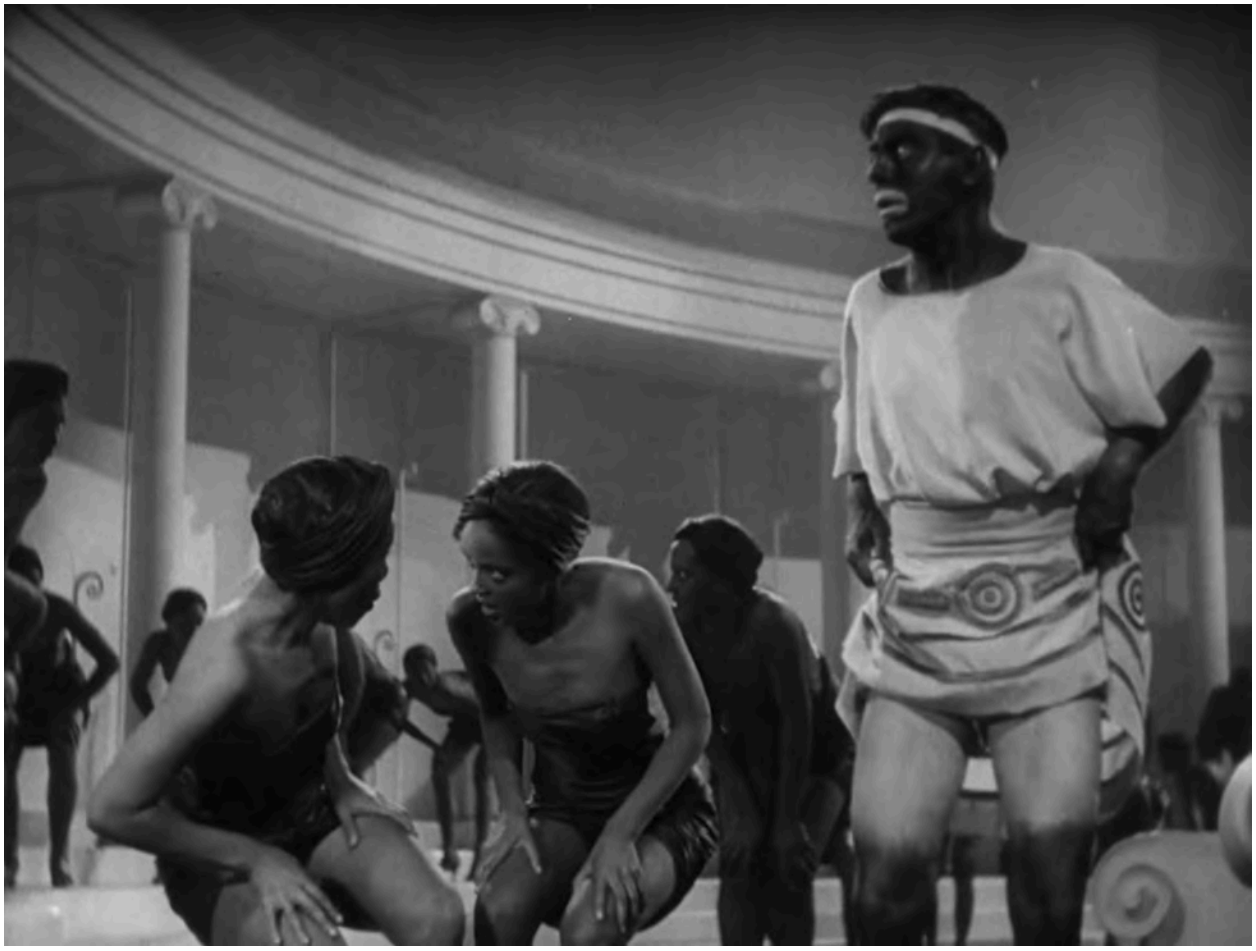

Figure 3.14. Eddie's white skin is discovered by the Black women as he lifts up his toga during the dance.

When the women surround Eddie, a Black woman is seen turning on the steam and Eddie begins to "melt." Rather than the makeup melting off of him, Eddie is then shrunk down to the

size of a child (Figure 3.15). While Eddie's discovery may not be related to the phallus, it is difficult to separate his shrunken figure from the phallus. In an act of humiliation and retribution, Eddie, and as a result his penis, is shrunken down; his ability to be sexual, both homo- and heterosexually, is significantly reduced. His masculine signifier, which he may or may not have had to begin with, is rendered useless. This once again connects to the concept of the Jewish male "lack" that is now physically represented by the shrunken down figure. His ability to unite the women, however, lends itself to the populist reading from the beginning of the chapter as he is quite literally the "little person" who can unite the people (who raise their fists at him) against a dominant figure, Cantor.

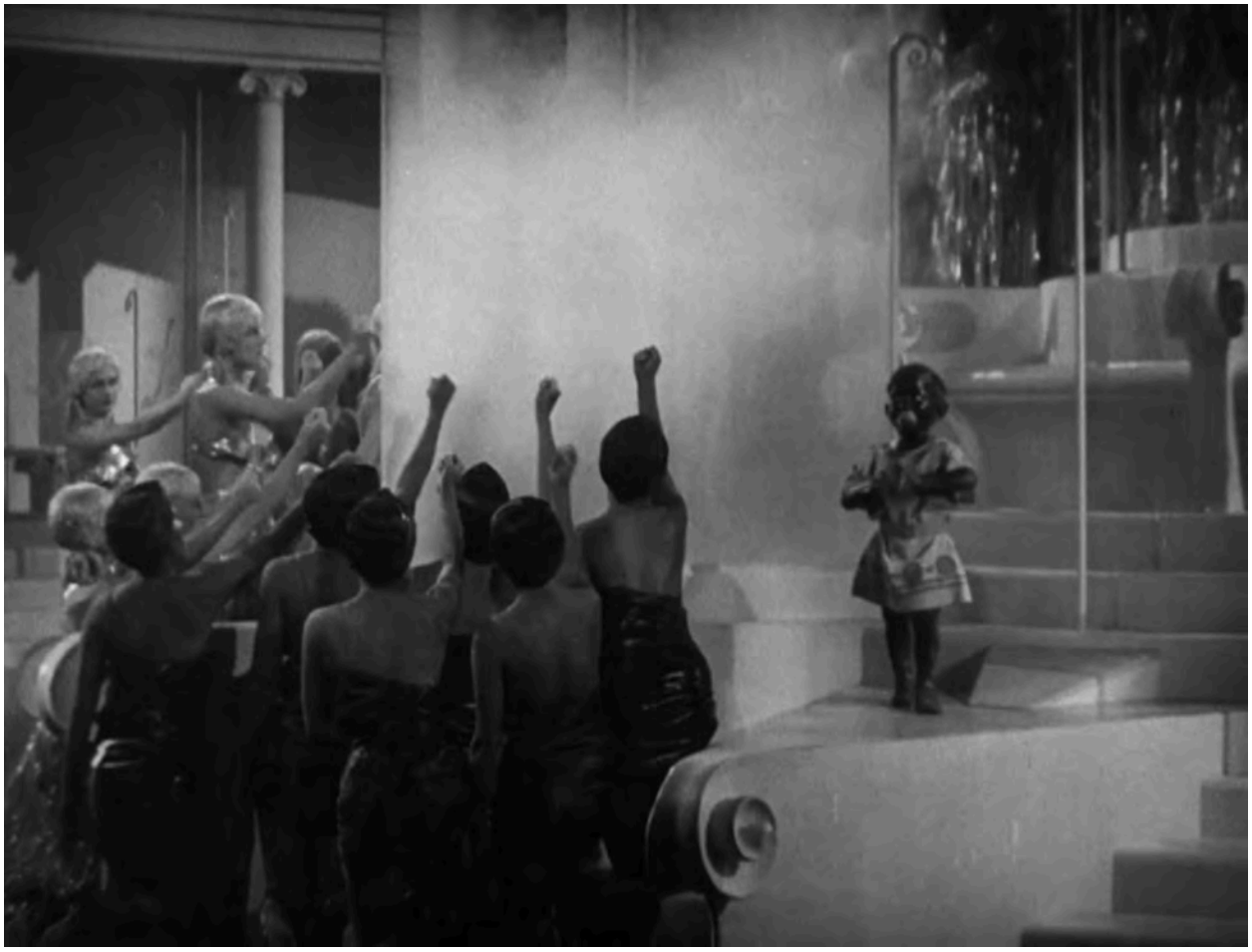

Figure 3.15. The women bang on the steamed up glass as Eddie, now shrunken (Billy Barty), escapes.

Eddie, now discovered as shrunken, is chased into a pool which returns him to his normal size and washes away most of the black makeup. He concludes the song by singing, “Oh, death, where is thy sting? / I don’t care ‘cause I’ve seen everything,” while rolling his eyes (Figure 3.16). Balcerzak refers to this as part of his argument of Eddie’s hypersexuality in the scene, with the jump in the pool being an “orgasmic release” (Balcerzak 103). If blackface, though, is meant to align itself with hypersexuality, which Balcerzak notes is an association since early 19th-century minstrelsy, why is hypersexuality aligned with, in this shot, the erasure of blackface makeup? Perhaps it is because the blackface was never meant to signal hypersexuality in the first place. Rather, as Eddie has been discovered, through whiteness, to be heterosexual, his true enjoyment, the meaning behind any possible leering, is only revealed once the makeup, which signals no sexual attraction to women, is wiped away. In returning to a heterosexual viewpoint only once the makeup has been washed off, blackface comes to mean the opposite: blackface, or to be viewed as Black, as a minority, aligns itself with the minority of homosexuality; returning to whiteness means a return to heteronormativity.

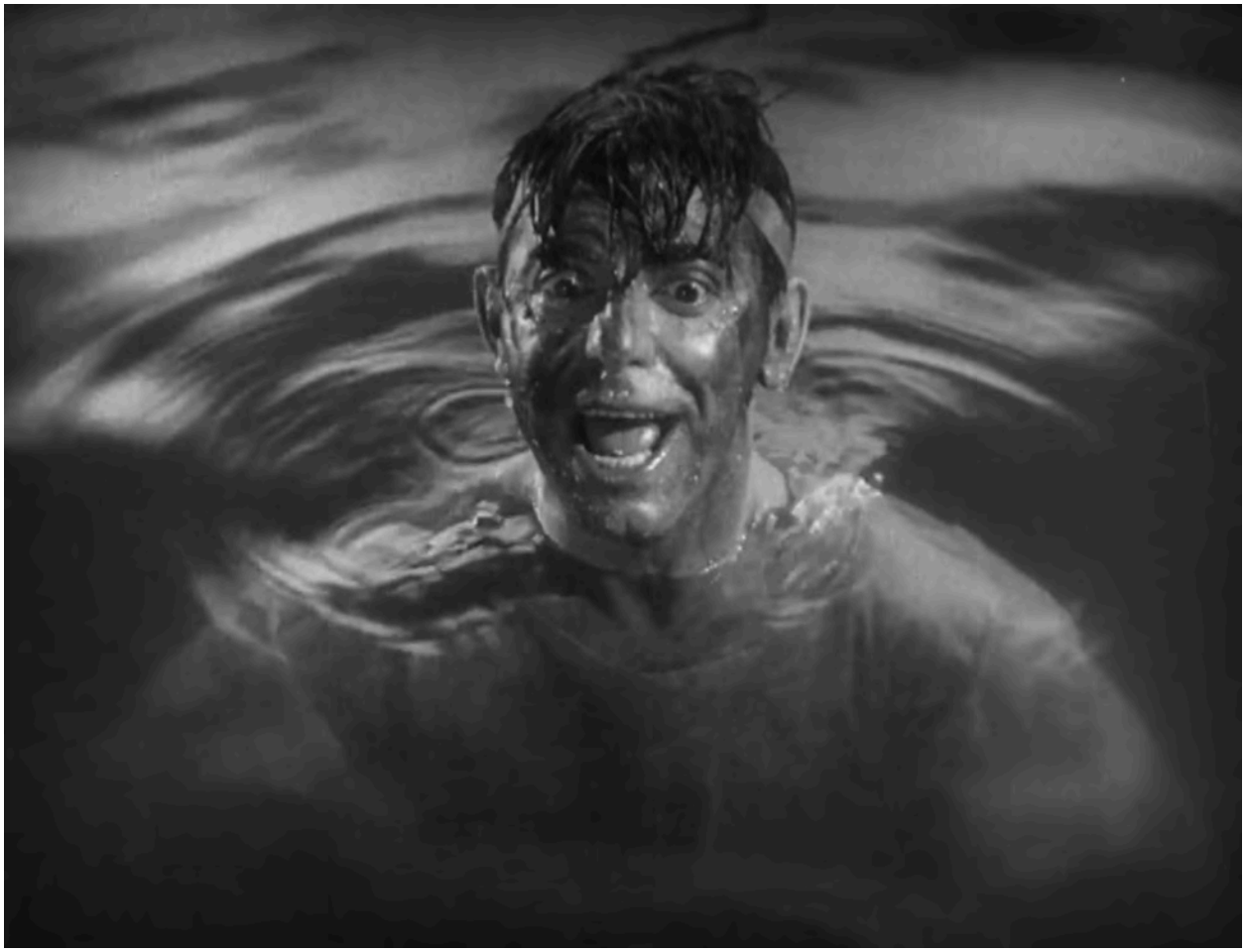

Figure 3.16. “Oh, death, where is thy sting? / I don’t care ‘cause I’ve seen everything,” sings Eddie, the makeup washed away.

After listing the different identities that Cantor takes on in the song “Keep Young and Beautiful,” Routt and Thompson conclude that “Cantor here is the masses incarnate: the People” (Routt and Thompson 31). This is not just the case with this musical number, but rather, is indicative of Cantor’s role in the entire film. Throughout the film, Cantor gestures as a populist everyman figure, a queer and effeminate Jewish man, and a mix of a Jewish man, a eunuch, a homosexual, and a Black man. He is not only an “everyman” but “every man.” By adopting these different identities, Cantor adopts a unique persona that combines the identities of different minorities living in America during the 1930s. With this polysemic persona, Cantor can be

identified by these different minorities and resonated with. *Roman Scandals* would end up being one of United Artists' most popular films of the year (Churchill, "TAKING A LOOK AT THE RECORD"). It is clear that Cantor's popularity was only growing and through the amalgamation of identities he performs in the film, he does indeed represent the people.

Conclusion | Merrily We Roll Along

Throughout this paper, I have taken you through the life of Eddie Cantor, especially his career as a film actor, focusing on his film heyday in pre-code 1930s. We are thus brought back to the question of why: Why discuss the film career of Eddie Cantor, a popular comedian whose fame has long subsided into a distant memory of your great grandmother? What can we, as modern viewers, get out of watching these seemingly outdated films, by following the persona Cantor carefully crafted as he headed out west? Are these films as outdated as they appear? Maybe not. In close reading *Whoopee!* (1930), *Palmy Days* (1931), and *Roman Scandals* (1933), I tracked how Cantor was able to use his different talents as a performer to create characters that addressed issues of race and ethnicity, Jewish identity, gender and sexuality, and Great Depression-era populism.

Eddie Cantor's career in film would continue after 1933, lasting for another twenty years, and would go on to develop and change the persona he created on film. He would continue to work with Samuel Goldwyn for two more films before completing a film with 20th Century Fox. These films, now under the Hays Code which censored what could be put in film, use many of the same tropes and identities that Cantor had established within his first four films. In *Kid Millions* (1934), he plays an incredibly naive, childlike character who inherits a large fortune, and performs a minstrelsy number, "Mandy," whilst getting "out-tapped" by the very young Nicholas Brothers. *Strike Me Pink* (1936), the only film of the 1930s in which Cantor did not perform in blackface, displays him as an extremely nebbish character who must learn how to be courageous through the book *Man or Mouse*. *Ali Baba Goes to Town* (1937) might best be remembered today for its appearance in Zadie Smith's novel *Swing Time*, where the narrator and

her friend watch Jeni Le Gon dance in the blackface musical number "Swing Is Here to Sway." The film itself was Cantor's final film of the 1930s and completed at 20th Century Fox. Cantor once again plays a nebbish character and, as in *Roman Scandals*, returns to a political aspect as he implements New Deal politics in 10th-century Baghdad. He also ends up on the ballot for President, a nod to when Cantor himself ran for President in 1932 "as a true patriot in response to the urgent call of my people," chronicled in the comedy book *Your Next President!* (Cantor et al. 1). *Ali Baba Goes to Town* ends with Cantor's character, Al, interacting with the real Eddie Cantor. Al's crush, Dinah (Virginia Field), is absolutely smitten by Cantor, much to the chagrin of Al, who constantly makes snide remarks. This was not the first time Cantor would portray himself as he did in the *Follies of 1927* where he was a featured performer, and it most certainly would not be the last, but it gives insight into the "critical" perception of Cantor as a ham.

Cantor would make a statement after breaking with Fox, saying "I want to play something else besides an insipid character which the audience does not believe" (qtd. in Weinstein 126). His return to the screen would be in 1940, finally breaking away from the "ridiculously naive movie buffoon[] half his age" (Weinstein 126). Partnering with Busby Berkeley once again, this time as director, Cantor would appear as Gilbert Jordan Thompson in the dramedy *Forty Little Mothers* (1940). The film follows Gilbert, a down-on-his-luck former professor who finds an abandoned baby and takes care of him. He gets a job as a professor at an all-girls school, where the faculty is not allowed to have a family, and the girls try to fire him because he is not the eye-candy their former professor was. Cantor plays the role of Gilbert completely straight; the Cantorisms that were present in every film prior to this are absent. Although he does sing in the film, it is a sweet, lullabye-esque song full of sentiment rather than

pre-code naughtiness. The review of the film in the *New York Times* makes note of the lack of Cantorisms, with one patron saying, "I'm glad producers have discovered that Cantor has a soul and are letting him show it" (Churchill, "A COMIC'S COMEBACK"). Cantor himself said that "he is happy to play his own age instead of striving for youth in a romance with a girl who might be his granddaughter" (Churchill, "A COMIC'S COMEBACK"). Although relatively unsuccessful, as Cantor strayed from his well-known persona, the film effectively counters the persona Cantor had been building in film for a decade by positioning him as serious, kind hearted, and subdued.

In 1943 and 1944, Cantor would play himself in two World War II-related fundraising films, *Thank Your Lucky Stars* and *Hollywood Canteen*. *Hollywood Canteen* is a film set at the famous Hollywood Canteen, founded by Bette Davis and John Garfield, where celebrities would entertain and wait on enlisted men (and women). The stars of the film, almost all of whom play themselves, were regular volunteers, with 40% of the film's gross going to the Hollywood Canteen (Hanson and Dunkleberger 1070). Cantor, who volunteered at the Canteen (famous photographs show him dressed as Santa Claus), has a short but memorable cameo in the film. His appearance in this film more closely aligns with the persona Cantor created on radio as a philanthropic family man.

Thank Your Lucky Stars (1943) had a similar story, with the stars donating their $50,000 salary to the Hollywood Canteen, helping to raise over $2 million (Spada 255, 256). Cantor, once again, plays "himself" in this film—an exaggerated, egotistical ham who takes over every project he is in. He also plays a wannabe serious film actor Joe Simpson, who cannot get a job because everyone thinks he looks like Eddie Cantor so they start to laugh. In the dual roles, Cantor gets to

exaggerate his media persona into something that can best be described as outright irritating and cruel. The idea to depict Cantor as immensely vain for *Thank Your Lucky Stars* comes from radio as rumors had circulated among the comedy writers that Cantor was "a rude, talentless taskmaster" (Weinstein 175). However, in taking the role that was meant to humiliate him with radio writers enacting revenge, Cantor demonstrates an ability to laugh at himself that "summoned a combination of self-awareness, courage, humility and savvy" (Weinstein 175). While "Eddie Cantor" is a nasty portrait of the artist, Joe Simpson aligns with the persona Cantor had crafted in film. He is nebbish and appears weak, the opposite of Eddie Cantor, constantly getting hit, but also manages to use his wits. In this case, it is his acting talents that save the day, as he gets the opportunity to play the role of a lifetime, "a chance to impersonate your own worst enemy" which allows the star fundraiser to operate as intended.

Cantor would appear in *Show Business* in 1944 and his final featured film role would be in 1948 with *If You Knew Susie*. He would then have two final cameos as himself in *The Story of Will Rogers* (1952) and *The Eddie Cantor Story* (1953). *The Eddie Cantor Story*, which was a commercial flop, tried to capitalize on the successes of *The Jolson Story* (1946) and other biopics such as *The Story of Will Rogers*. Cantor provided the vocals for his most famous songs, but the actor who played Cantor, Keefe Brasselle, does an exaggerated impression that comes off as hokey and the film fails to capture much of what made Cantor so interesting (his film career is also completely neglected). He and Ida, his wife, make a brief cameo at the beginning and end of the film, where Cantor looks at the camera and says "I never looked better in my life," as he rolls his eyes, a testament, one might say, to the quality of the sluggish film. This line, as the *New York Times* put it, shows that Cantor "not only is talented but kind" (W.).

Cantor, ever a man to keep up with the popular entertainment of the day, eventually ventured into television in 1950, becoming one of the hosts of *The Colgate Comedy Hour*, alongside comedy duos Martin and Lewis and Abbott and Costello. He suffered his first heart attack in 1952 after a broadcast of the show, slowing his appearances on the show, and he eventually retired from hosting in 1954. His final appearance on television, after several dramatic roles in television theatre and guest appearances, and after many small heart attacks, would be in 1960, a year after the death of his eldest daughter and secretary, Marjorie, from cancer, and two years before Ida would die of a heart attack. Eddie Cantor would pass away after a final heart attack on October 10, 1964 at age 72.

His Life is in Your Hands

Scholars have noted that Cantor, through this connection to populism, becomes an "everyman." However, he is not just an "everyman." In drawing attention to his Jewishness or performing numerous races and ethnicities, depicting different genders and gender roles that situate themselves outside the norm, playing characters that could certainly be read with queer subtext, and in portraying the typical American "everyman," Cantor becomes "every man," someone any American could identify with. The themes and topics addressed in these films are not always handled with delicate care, but the elements of Cantor's persona give the viewer an insight into what was popular at the time.

Reviews make it clear that Cantor was the star of these films and audiences craved more of him. As Henry Jenkins notes, "what audiences wanted from a Cantor film was Cantor and more Cantor, Cantor singing, Cantor dancing, Cantor clowning, Cantor romancing" (Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts?* 171). Why would someone whose persona so closely aligned with

marginalized identities be so popular? As media scholar John Fiske writes in *Reading the Popular*, "Popular culture is made by various formations of subordinated or disempowered people out of the resources, both discursive and material, that are provided by the social system that disempowers them. It is therefore contradictory and conflictual to its core" (Fiske, *Reading the Popular* 1–2). In his companion book, *Understanding Popular Culture*, he states that popular culture "always bears traces of the constant struggle between domination and subordination, between power and various forms of resistance to it or evasions of it" (Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* 19). Apply this thinking to Cantor and his popularity becomes clear. Cantor, as I have explored, consistently plays with marginalized identities: female, queer, Jewish, Black. He himself also belongs to a marginalized identity, being Jewish. His amalgamation of identities, particularly those of marginalized communities, draws in those often forgotten about audiences. His subversive nature is appealing. He is also a heterosexual white man; he is safe. He is not actually a member of the communities he represents, aside from Jewish. However, that Jewish identity is an important one. Cantor's style of humor that was a "form of cultural expression rooted in urban immigrant experiences from the early twentieth century" and became the root of Jewish humor, while his "tireless commitment to Jewish communal organizations and his principled engagement with politics from an explicitly Jewish perspective" has yet to be seen by a Jewish celebrity to the same extent (Weinstein 232, 233). Jewishness, in regards to Fiske's argument, continues to mark him as subversive, but also appreciated by Jewish communities.

Jewish comedian Lenny Bruce in 1961 famously described Eddie Cantor as "goyish" or not Jewish (qtd. in Bush). Lawrence Bush explains this by saying Cantor "rolled his eyes like a black-face comic, and he dealt in unsophisticated immigrant humor with little social bite,"

concluding that Bruce's comment was a claim that Jews "are no longer immigrants, even if we sprinkle our English with Yiddish" (Bush). This comment by Bush is uninformed, even if to Bruce Cantor's brand of humor seemed incredibly old-fashioned. Social commentary *was* Cantor's brand of humor, even if it may not have been obvious to the average fan. By creating a persona that adopted elements of marginalized communities, Cantor was inherently making social commentary: he put these identities on a platform that allowed them to be appreciated and laughed with rather than at.

Filmmakers and actors have come close to creating a similar persona: Woody Allen as the neurotic Jewish comic Alvy Singer in *Annie Hall* (1977) and even Gene Wilder as the immensely anxious and childlike Leo Bloom in *The Producers* (1967). Each of these seem to take on different aspects of Cantor's persona. Allen in *Annie Hall* and later Larry David in the show *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000) take on more of the wisecracking, observant Jewish man who makes up for his "lack" in wit. Wilder's roles in Mel Brooks films such as Bloom in *The Producers* and Jim in *Blazing Saddles* (1974) utilize the popular everyman persona that holds onto optimism in the face of adversity.[20] While connections such as the Allen one have been made before (it is a natural follow up to the hypochondriac Jew Henry Williams in *Whoopee!*), these comparisons fail to include the uniqueness about Cantor created persona beyond the nebbish: that of an amalgamation of marginalized identities that is overabundant in meaning. Just as Keefe Brasselle in *The Eddie Cantor Story* does an exaggerated cartoonish impression of Cantor that extends beyond the stage, it would appear that his legacy has become just that: a cartoon of what it really was.

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[20] Mel Brooks has discussed his enthusiasm for Eddie Cantor, citing his radio show in particular as "very influential on [his] work. Along with his timing was his particular delivery. He took his time, didn't rush. There was nobody like Eddie Cantor, that's why he was great" (Fisher 3).

Toward the end of this project, I had the opportunity to talk to Cantor's granddaughter, Amanda Gari (whose favorite film of her grandfather's is *Strike Me Pink*, tied with *Kid Millions*). I asked her what was something she wished people knew or would remember about her grandfather's work in film. She told me:

> My grandfather mastered the art of being a "nebbish." But you'll noticed [*sic*] that it was an [*sic*] nebbish that always ended up with the girl, because he was also adorable! He also learned how to translate his expressions from the stage to the screen, which was not as simple as it sounds. Clara Bow told him, "you don't have to reach the balcony anymore, Eddie!" PS he was the greatest grandpa ever!

Through this paper, I have analyzed different aspects of Eddie Cantor's persona from a performer to gender and sexuality to race and ethnicity, especially Jewishness. I only scratched the surface of his entire media career, including film. I began by explaining how Cantor was once the most popular entertainer in America. His fans have gone from the hundreds of thousands to an 800-member Facebook group. Maybe you'll be member 801.

Selected Filmography

**42nd Street*. Directed by Lloyd Bacon, Warner Bros., 1933.

A Few Moments with Eddie Cantor, Star of "Kid Boots." Directed by Lee De Forest, De Forest Phonofilm, 1923.

A Ziegfeld Midnight Frolic. Directed by Joseph Santley, Paramount Pictures, 1929.

Ali Baba Goes to Town. Directed by David Butler, Twentieth Century Fox, 1937.

**And She Learned About Dames*. Warner Bros., 1934.

**Annie Hall*. Directed by Woody Allen, Jack Rollins & Charles H. Joffe Productions, Rollins-Joffe Productions, 1977.

**Blazing Saddles*. Directed by Mel Brooks, Crossbow Productions, Warner Bros., 1974.

**Curb Your Enthusiasm*. Home Box Office (HBO), Production Partners, 2000.

**Dames*. Directed by Ray Enright and Busby Berkeley, Warner Bros., 1934.

**Der Blaue Engel*. Directed by Josef von Sternberg, Universum Film (UFA), 1930.

**Footlight Parade*. Directed by Lloyd Bacon, Warner Bros., 1933.

Forty Little Mothers. Directed by Busby Berkeley, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), 1940.

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If You Knew Susie. Directed by Gordon Douglas, RKO Radio Pictures, 1948.

Insurance. Directed by Mort Blumenstock, Paramount Pictures, 1930.

Kid Boots. Directed by Frank Tuttle, Paramount Pictures, 1926.

Kid Millions. Directed by Roy Del Ruth and Willy Pogany, The Samuel Goldwyn Company, 1934.

**Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*. Directed by Frank Capra, Columbia Pictures, 1936.

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* Indicates a film mentioned in which Eddie Cantor does not appear.

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