

Barbara Kay: A joke is all in the delivery (do you hear me, son?)

[National Post](#) - Tuesday February 5th, 2019

I finally got around to watching *The Marvellous Mrs Maizel* on Amazon Prime. I love it. I love Miriam “Midge” Maizel, whose trajectory from dutiful Jewish 1950s housewife to struggling, then successful standup comedian constitutes the main story arc. I identify with her and her era. My mother was also obsessed with clothes. I too wore pointy bras and flared skirts. And I too was pretty funny. A few episodes are set in one of many Jewish resorts in the Catskill mountains (a.k.a the Borscht Belt). The show’s zany reconstruction of the over-staffed, hyper-programmed routine there is only slightly exaggerated. In one scene, Midge does a gig on the “small” stage — nightclub size — at the lavishly appointed Concord Hotel (indoor skating rink, stables, fabulous entertainment nightly, first-tier comedians). It was all very familiar. The Concord was the main rival to Grossingers, the most famous of the resorts. My family vacationed at both. There were scores of other spoiled Jewish kids our age to hang out with. Once, we put on a teen talent show — on the Concord’s “big” stage — with me as the MC. Standing in the spotlight’s circle facing hundreds of people, I was scared to death. I forgot what I said. But I remember there were laughs. It was heaven. Midge has been waiting for you! #MrsMaiseI  
[pic.twitter.com/bgtP6FCix6](https://pic.twitter.com/bgtP6FCix6) — The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel (@MaiseITV) January 31, 2019 I come by my hamminess honestly. Had his circumstances been different, my handsome, charismatic father, Teddy Richmond, could have been a professional standup comedian, in both Yiddish and English. My son Jon recently published a feature article in the *Canadian Jewish News*, “The story of Jewish immigrants to Canada and how they prospered.” Half of the article dealt with history, and the other half is a profile of my father as an example of his generation’s rise from immigrant poverty to business success. Jon quotes Bob Rae who, during an unrelated Facebook discussion, told him, “Your grandfather was the funniest after-dinner speaker I ever heard — a comic genius.” That was heartwarming to read, as well as reminding me that Rae is any comedian’s dream audience. Some years ago, when my sister Anne Golden and I teamed up for the charity Leacock Foundation Debate in Toronto, Rae was at a table close to the stage, and his booming laughter was a priceless boost to our confidence. Entertaining others was a serious business in our household, and we three daughters were encouraged to be funny, but we were not indulged with unmerited laughter. We learned from watching our dad perform that telling a joke or a funny story well involves very precise rhythm and timing. You can’t internalize that without practice and occasional failure. In her early gigs, Midge sometimes bombs. It’s excruciating, but she doesn’t quit. Slowly she finds her mojo and the laughs roll in. There is nothing so painful for me as a joke told amateurishly (--image--)

(--image--)

I assumed that my kids would inherit my performative nature. Neither of them did — or at least not the standup kind. They’re hilarious on Facebook though. They both have a fabulous sense of humour, but Jon’s is self-conscious, quirky and mediated by intellect, while Joanne’s is sly, spontaneous and nonchalant. She cares less about being funny than Jon and I do, and as a result is funnier than both of us. When I learn my favourite kind of joke, one that depends on a counter-intuitive punch line after a carefully crafted build-up, I rehearse it thoroughly before taking it public. One false step and it isn’t funny. My best jokes are those I have told a hundred times. I have the rhythm down pat, so I can tell them with breezy assurance. There is nothing so painful for me as a joke told amateurishly. Which brings me to *Wrongspeak* podcast #10, which Jon did recently with science journalist Debra Soh, on the topic of professional comedians who have run afoul of the humour police. To end on a light note, Jon told Debra one of “my” jokes, which he has heard many times. But there’s many a slip between hearing and delivery. He screwed it up, and as a result Debra didn’t laugh. Mid-90s, Jonah Hill’s coming of age tale, balances its severe subject matter with a fresh sense of humour. Barbara Kay: Kids today need to get a sense of humour. Not so serious: Superhero movies worked on their senses of humour this year. Oy! How I suffered. Like many amateur joke-tellers, Jon embellished the build-up with over-explanatory dialogue designed to ensure the listener “got” the premise so as to emphasize the irony of the punchline. No! Wrong! Less is more. In jokes of this kind, there is an optimally proportionate relationship between build-up and punchline. Jon’s distracting word clutter drained the funny from the joke. Naturally I now have to tell the joke correctly. It would be better if you could hear me telling it, with the exact right (Jewish but not too Jewish) inflection, and the timing just so. Anyway, here it is. Two Jewish psychiatrists meet in the street. Sam: “Max, how are you?” Max: “Fine.” Sam: “Really? Because you seem a bit down.” Max: “It’s nothing.” Sam: “Azoy, Max, you’re the last person I should have to tell that nothing is ‘nothing’ in our business.” What is it?” Max: (sighs) “Really, it’s nothing ... it’s ... just that my mother hasn’t spoken to me for a week.” Sam: “What Jewish mother isn’t speaking to her son? That doesn’t sound like ‘nothing’ to me. What could you possibly have said to her?” Max: “Exactly. That’s the whole point. I made a trivial slip of the tongue that could have happened to anyone — I can

believe she's so angry." Sam: "Nu, so tell me what you said." Max: "Really, it's too trivial." Sam: "So let me be the judge that." Max: (sighs) "We were having lunch at a restaurant. We were in the middle of a very pleasant conversation. Nothing unusual at all. Then, at a certain point, what I meant to say was 'Pass.The.Pepper.Please.' But by mistake, I said, 'You f\*\*\*ed up my whole life, you bitch.'" Now go listen to Jon's version on his podcast. Let me know who told it better. National Post Kaybarb@gmail.com