Doctors prescribe laughter

Sabes JCC bring back the Twin Cities Jewish Humor Festival for its eighth year

By MAX SPARBER

Laughter is healthy; doctors prescribe laughter.
— Yiddish proverb

There is a case to be made that American humor is Jewish humor. It’s the viewpoint of the 2013 documentary *When Jews Were Funny*, and you’ll hear versions of this idea here and there. An example: Al Jaffee, cartoonist for Mad Magazine, has argued that his publication helped mainstream Jewish humor, and there’s some truth to that.

There were also the Jewish comics, who dominated vaudeville and later the stand-up circuit. There were Jewish novelists and television actors and film stars, each of them bringing a certain Jewish sensibility to their comedy. It continues today, in television shows like *Transparent*, *Broad City* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, in films like those of the Coen Brothers, in comics like Eric Andre and Andy Samberg.

And the variety! American Jewish humorists have significantly contributed to entire genres of comedy, including insult comedy (think Don Rickles), improv comedy (Chicago’s founding improvisational theater, Compass Players, were largely Jewish) and the mockumentary (Woody Allen’s *Take the Money and Run* is arguably the first example of this film genre.)

It’s no wonder the Sabes JCC has been able to sustain a Jewish Humor Festival for eight years. There is so much to pick from.

This year’s event includes a number of legendary names in Jewish comedy, starting with their opening night performer, Carol Leifer. Although she is not the household name that she should be, Leifer’s résumé is enormous, including work as a script writer on *Seinfeld* (she wrote *The Hamptons*, which you may recall as including a kosher girlfriend, a spectacular ugly baby and the word “shrinkage.”)

Jerry Seinfeld has credited Leifer as an inspiration for the character Elaine on the show, which Leifer downplayed in the past, although she told The New York Times that it was easy to write for the character as she “simply flowed from [Leifer’s] own experiences.”

Leifer is also an author and mo-