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MOVIES

## The Perils of Improvising a Racial Self

By JOHN LELAND

**E**arly in the new movie "The Human Stain," the protagonist, Coleman Silk, hears a recording of "Cheek to Cheek" and breaks into spontaneous dance. Silk, played by Anthony Hopkins, is a light-skinned African-American college dean, who passes himself as white and Jewish.

"That's Irving Berlin," he says. "I hear that and everything in me just sort of unclenches, and the wish not to die, never to die, becomes almost too great to bear."

This connection to Berlin, which does not appear in the Philip Roth novel from which the film was adapted, reveals more than it lets on. Berlin's life, like Silk's, was a story of racial improvisation. The son of a Jewish cantor, Izzy Baline began his career singing minstrel and ragtime songs in a downtown Manhattan cafe known as Nigger Mike's, and wrote his first hits for blackface performers like Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor. He was so adept at composing ethnic tunes like "Alexander's Ragtime Band" — the name Alexander was shorthand for a pompous blackface character in the world of minstrel shows and ragtime — that rivals accused him of keeping a "little colored boy" in his basement to write them.

Silk and Berlin, then, are opposite versions of the same story. Berlin, a first-generation Russian immigrant who reinvented himself through black musical traditions, became a Jewish-American success story. Silk, an African-American who recreates himself totally as white and Jewish, is destroyed for abandoning his racial identity. In a cruel joke, he is undone by student charges of racism, which he allows to sink his career rather than revealing his secret.

Robert Benton, who directed the movie, said he wanted to show how much more complex questions of race and reinvention had become since midcentury, how "we have become a nation that invents itself generation by generation, cutting ties from the past.

"And as much as we gain by this, there are also consequences."

But the juxtaposition of Silk, Berlin and Mr. Hopkins, who is white, invites the opposite reading: that in the entertainment industry, conceptions of race and passing have proved as unchangeable as Silk's past.

Passing has always told a complicated story, with different ramifications for white artists like Berlin than for African-Americans. In his 1976 history, "World of Our Fathers," Irving Howe argued that for the waves of Jewish immigrants in the early 20th century, blackface was not a

denial of their ethnicity, but a device that translated it to America. In this period Jewish performers like Jolson, Sophie Tucker and George Jessel dominated the minstrel stage, succeeding a wave of Irish-American performers. Berlin was their most successful composer.

"When they took over the conventions of ethnic mimicry," Howe wrote, "the Jewish performers transformed it into something emotionally richer and more humane. Black became a mask for Jewish expressiveness, with one woe speaking through the voice of another." He added, "Blackening their faces seems to have enabled the Jewish performers to reach a spontaneity and assertiveness in the declaration of their Jewish selves."

Though the portrayals were often demeaning to blacks, according to the historian Jeffrey Melnick, author of "A Right to Sing the Blues: African Americans, Jews, and American Popular Song," they were at heart not about African-Americans but an intragroup conversation about the status of Jewish identity in America.

Berlin played this racial make-believe in two directions. As late as 1942, he was proposing blackface numbers for the War Department musical "This Is the Army." But he crossed the other way as well, washing his ethnic identity or nationality in anthems like "White Christmas" and "God Bless America." When it suited him, he declared his musical lineage to be of "pure white blood."

Yet popular culture has never been kind to African-Americans claiming this same license. In fact, in its destruction of Silk, "The Human Stain" is closer to another tradition, older than Hollywood, said David Pilgrim, a professor of sociology and curator of the Jim Crow Museum at Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Mich. In what is known as the "tragic mulatto" myth, bi-racial or light-skinned characters who pass as white are destroyed by their deceptions. Unlike blackface characters, they are indelibly stained. When whites put on blackface, the result is comedy, Mr. Pilgrim said; when characters of African ancestry say they are white, the result is tragedy.

The tradition dates back at least to an 1842 story called "The Quadroons" by Lydia Maria Child, about a slave girl of mixed race who passes for white, temporarily gaining her freedom, only to be discovered and fall victim to white violence. The stories reflected a bias on the part of writers "that blacks didn't belong in white company, that they had aberrant traits that would find them out," Mr. Pilgrim said.

Mr. Roth said in a 2000 interview that the Silk character was inspired by an African-American woman he knew in the 1950's, who told him of relatives living as whites, lost to their families. "That was the phrase she used 'lost to all their people,'" Mr. Roth said.

"The Human Stain" seems, unwittingly, to play both sides of the passing story. While it treats passing as tragic on screen, it hopes it will pay dividends in real life. That is, Silk is punished, but audiences are expected to applaud the passing of Mr. Hopkins, the white actor who plays him, as audiences did the blackface performers of an earlier time.

Critics, however, have objected to the casting. Mr. Benton, the director, called this a kind of liberal racism. "No one complained that he wasn't Spanish in `Surviving Picasso,' " he said. Nor a cannibal in "The Silence of the Lambs."

In a sense, he is right. Actors pass every time they take on a new character, and in any case, these days, people experiment with racial identity every time they play a hip-hop CD.

This may make Silk's refusal to disclose his secret, even to prevent his downfall, feel quaint. But is it? In today's America, it seems, neither Silk nor Mr. Hopkins can transcend his race.

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