

# Bar Mitzvah Boy

UK TV play : 1976 : dir. Michael Tuchner : BBC : 75 min  
 prod: Graeme McDonald : scr: Jack Rosenthal : dir.ph.:  
[Jeremy Steyn](#) .....  
 Maria Charles; Bernard Spear; Adrienne Posta; Cyril Shaps

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Halliwell's *Television Companion* review:

"A boy finds the pressures too much and ducks out of his own barmitzvah. Hilarious and moving Jewish domestic comedy which surprisingly failed as a stage musical and was never quite snapped up as a movie. BAFTA awards: Best Play, Best Writer \*\*\* "

"If you missed it, do yourself a favour and seek out the repeat." - *Daily Mail*

"A great delight, funnier than anything Jack Rosenthal has written since - well, the last thing he wrote, and just as touching as the somewhat over-praised **"THE EVACUEES"**. The plot described a perfect sentimental

parabola; the build-up of anticipation and mild foreboding as the ceremony loomed; its central figure's sudden walk-out, the flattened summit while Momma wept and sister argued, and then momentum gathering for the swoop down to the happy-ironic ending."

- Philip Purser

[no listing in "History of Television" or "Television's Greatest Hits"]

Elliot Green is due to have his passage marked. A classmate assures him this is a traumatic and humiliating experience. His sister assures him it's the most important event in his parents' lives. A girl in his class only wants to know "**What** passage? Is it rude? It **sounds** rude!"

It is of course the passage from boyhood to manhood, still celebrated by 5,000-year old Jewish tradition at the age of 13. The Bar Mitzvah ceremony is in every respect like a wedding, except that the bride is a boy, and there is no husband at the altar.

Elliot is not looking forward to it much. Not that he's nervous about forgetting his lines - he can do them standing on his head - but he has other, more subtle, misgivings, about whether manhood is a goal worth attaining.

Elliot's mother (Adrienne Posta) is a bubbling cauldron of anxieties and reproofs, his father a London cab-driver who finds television more engaging than family (this is the 1970s - before the two things became synonymous) and his sister's fiancé Albert is a spineless ingratiating schlemiel. Then there is Zeda, Elliot's stock Jewish grandfather, with a very *small* treasure trove of threadbare homilies: "If the *kids* are happy you're happy. If *you're* happy I'm happy. If *I'm* happy why should I worry? It's my happiness". Zeda coos over Elliot as though he were still four years old - "Aren't you going to sit on your Zeda's knee?" "I'm doing my homework, Zeda!". "How about a kiss for your Zeda?" "I'm brushing my teeth, Zeda!"

Taking stock of the menfolk around him, Elliot begins to wonder what the point is of a grand ceremonial accession to manhood. Not that he's without blemish himself. He slopes about the house repeating every utterance in French, then Latin, to the great annoyance of his sister. He absents himself from the family and household chores, and thinks very little of Albert for doing the washing up whenever he visits. He has a poster of Slade on his bedroom wall (never the subtlest of pop groups) and has deposed Olivia Newton John for Pan's People as the object of his pre-adolescent lust. A fairly ordinary English schoolboy then.

But his protest is anything but that. After Elliot has marched out during the climax of his ceremony at the synagogue, and his stunned family are gathered around the rabbi for comfort, his sister asks "What normally happens in cases like this?". "There **are** no cases like this" the rabbi firmly replies.

The family retire home to ponder in misery what they should tell the 150 guests converging from all parts of the country to a hired hall for Elliot's Bar Mitzvah feast. An informant tips off his sister where he's to be found, and she scolds him for his spinelessness and thoughtlessness, thinking that he simply lost his nerve. Elliot proceeds to show her that he could do the ritual standing on his head, and his real misgivings finally come to light. The men he sees around him are not men, in any sense that he could respect, and he doesn't care to be like them.

A grubby but face-saving compromise is reached, and Elliot has his Bar Mitzvah feast after all, delivering with poker-faced insincerity his prepared speech of admiration for parents, grandfather, Albert, who have all been "a tower of strength" to him "in no uncertain terms". His sister has seen his true colours at least, and has a newfound respect for her small brother.

Anyone who has seen Neil Simon's "**PLAZA SUITE**" (71), and the Hubbeley-Eisler wedding episode, will recognise very many parallels. In that sketch, Jewish father Walter Matthau is driven frantic when his daughter Mimsy locks herself in the toilet of their hotel suite as the wedding guests assemble in the function room below. Her misgivings, it transpires, are exactly the same as Elliot's. She has taken a long cool look at her parents, and is appalled to think one day she may be just like them.

What is striking about the humour of Jack Rosenthal and Paul Simon, not to mention Woody Allen (whose writing is more caustic, but comparable), is their use of stock Jewish character types, particularly the whingeing, sniping Jewish mother, to an extent that might be taken as offensive from a non-Jewish writer. Adrienne Posta here and Maureen Stapleton in "**PLAZA SUITE**" are completely interchangeable, the rhythms of East coast American Jewish speech and North London Jewish speech so much alike that only the accents tell them apart. Mimsy relents and goes through with her wedding, Elliot's performance of the ritual, even in a municipal playground, is judged to be sufficient in the eyes of god. Both protests then are nullified in the end, and the sweet-and-sour rhythms of family life go on as before.

Nothing else is known of Jeremy Steyn, who did no further TV work that I'm aware of. His character Elliott was reborn in gentile form a decade later for the popular TV comedy series "**The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 12 3/4**". "**BAR MITZVAH BOY**" is a pleasantly amusing sitcom, and a time capsule of British family life in the early seventies. **Recommended.**

See also "**[THE EVACUEES](#)**", Jack Rosenthal's earlier success about two wartime boy evacuees, and subject index under **COMEDY**, **[GRANDPARENTS](#)**, **[KID STRIKERS / PROTESTERS / DEMONSTRATORS](#)**, **[OSCAR-WINNERS / AWARD-WINNERS](#)**, **[RELIGION](#)**, **TV PLAYS** and **RECOMMENDED TITLES**.

