

BY EVELYN TAUBEN

Just before Yom Kippur, a new online video went viral, the likes of which the world had never seen: two Montreal guys break the fast at midday, tearing into a local delicacy not known for its kosher properties – poutine – all while debating the sanctity of the day and Jewish dietary laws... in Yiddish. And therein begins the witty new web-series from Montreal natives Eli Batalion and Jamie Elman, *YidLife Crisis*, taking the Jewish gifts of gab and nosh to new levels, completely in the *mameloshen*.

I went to high school with Jamie and Eli, where Yiddish was part of the core curriculum. We caught up to discuss the duo's unlikely comedic collaboration, building on their experience in film, TV and theatre. After the requisite round of Jewish geography and sharing of current illnesses, we talked about the roots of their brand of humour, newish Jewish culture, and Chinese food.

JAMIE ELMAN ELI BATALION

YidLife Crisis

Sex, Drugs, and Milk & Meat.
In Yiddish.



“I believe that Yiddish should be preserved for the great value it has and its kind of a store of culture.”

— Batalion

Evelyn Tauben: *An online web-series in Yiddish with a healthy dose of Quebecois French – what were you thinking?!*

Jamie Elman: Eli and I had been talking for a while about working together. We've been friends for years. He pitched me on the idea that we should do something in Yiddish. I realized right away that it would be something really funny and also scary and daunting because I don't actually speak Yiddish. It was sort of a tribute to the North American Jewish comedy that we grew up with, that we feel is highly influenced by and descends from Yiddish comedy and mentality.

ET: *We all went to Bialik High School where Yiddish is taught. What was your attitude towards learning Yiddish then and what are your thoughts now?*

Eli Batalion: For many, Yiddish period meant roaming the halls incessantly and doing anything other than learning the Yiddish language. But I took it seriously. I think because my parents spoke Yiddish. My grandparents certainly only spoke Yiddish for the most part. I was very much brought up in that environment. I ended up actually being the Yiddish valedictorian at Bialik, which I got by default. It was a forfeit position – no one else wanted to do it.

I believe that Yiddish should be preserved for the great value it has and its kind of a store of culture. I also think the language encompasses a certain form of thinking and comedy that doesn't necessarily come out textually but it comes out in conversation, it comes out live in theatre, and now in this century in video. It comes out in our language, our comedy, the way we use our hands, the cadence and the way we speak.

I don't believe in just blindly preserving the Yiddish language just for the sake of preserving the language. I don't think it's worth doing dogmatically or at the expense of anything else. As we know, there are other situations where people try to preserve languages and culture at the expense of others.

I believe in preserving what's good for everyone about the language and sharing the joy of the language.

ET: *You have described the show as a love letter to Montreal and in one episode you refer to "Montrealese". The show is indeed deeply infused with Montreal references. What has the reaction been like from people who don't speak "Montrealese"?*

JE: We tried to make it so that anybody can understand most of it. We are trying to reflect [all these] different aspects of our lives as Jews, as Yiddish speakers (or as "Yiddish appreciators" anyway), as Montrealers, as Canadians.

EB: I have been surprised by how much people get it, even if they're not Montrealers. I think that the city actually has a bigger footprint than we would imagine. In addition to that, there's a certain universal theme that people get. Even if people don't know the Cavendish Mall, I think people get it because somewhere in a New Jersey suburb they have their equivalent mall. There's the same structure of Jewish suburbia or Jewish life in L.A., New York, Cape Town, Sydney, and London. To a certain extent among Jewish communities, there are some similarities.

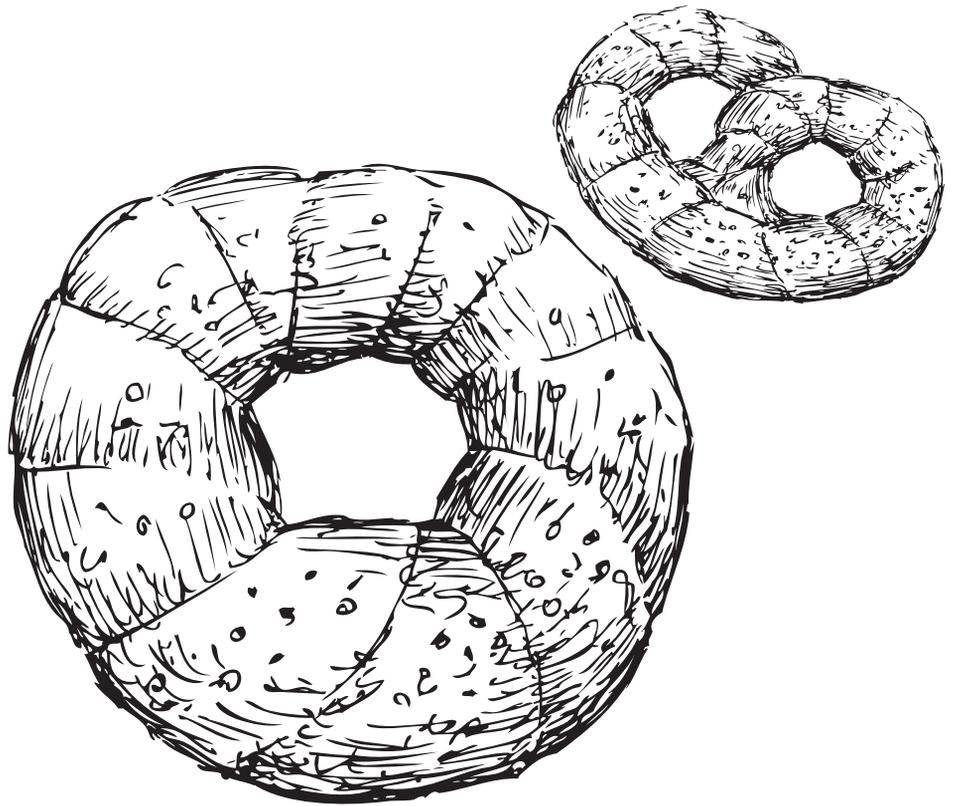
ET: *But as Jewish Montrealers, we like to believe that there's no place like Jewish Montreal.*

JE: Sure, we try to do that in the third episode. We certainly feel that the Mile End and Plateau are those special places where worlds really collide.

EB: There's just something about the Mile End. You have your Satmar Hasid almost literally brushing up against "hippie chicklech".

JE: But not literally because that wouldn't be kosher.

ET: *Amidst the comedy, you touch on very real issues of contemporary Jewish life. Was that the plan for your show: to take on hard questions in a humorous way?*



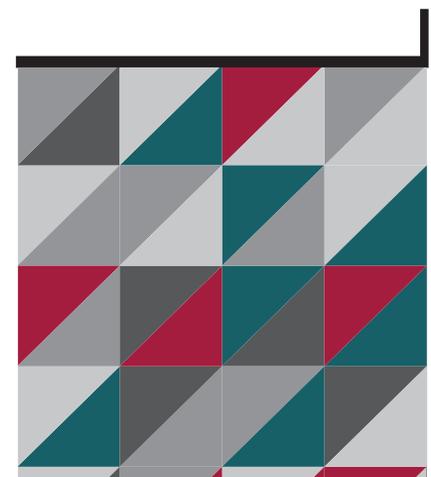
JE: As critical as we're being about fundamental Jewish values, there are very few Jewish values that are more fundamental than asking questions. We've actually been having these conversations for years and years. And we decided to talk about the things [in the show] that we talk about anyways. For example, should we fast on Yom Kippur? Do we need to not eat bread for eight days on Passover? Do you need to believe in God to be a good Jew? Is circumcision really the thing that makes someone Jewish or not? These are topics that have become increasingly real, especially with friends of mine who are now having kids and they need to decide if they're going to circumcise or if they're going to send them to Jewish Day School.

ET: *Are you aiming to spark discussion through the series or is the focus on giving people a good laugh?*

EB: I would see it more as comedy art that in short vignettes sums up issues and debates that



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We get feedback about how hungry we're making people, and a lot of times its not people from Montreal. Sometimes though, its ex-Montrealers expressing their faux anger at us.

JE: I don't know what you're talking about: "faux anger." We've gotten hate mail from ex-Montrealers who say, "I've just gone six weeks for the first time in my life without waking up in the middle of the night screaming for St. Viateur bagels. Thanks guys!"

I know, that shot cutting into the bagel dough...

JE: Oh ya, I want to wrap myself like a tallis in that dough... As Eli said, we realized that food could be a metaphor for some of the things we wanted to talk about. But there's also the archetype of Jews fighting and talking over eating in restaurants. [Batalion: Literally, overeating.] We're huge fans of Seinfeld, so we had in mind this Jerry-George-style diner conversation.

ET: *What featured foods can we look forward to in future episodes of YidLife Crisis?*

JE: We have already written the Sunday night Chinese food episode. It's a classic but we'll put our spin on it. We've heard from various Montrealers who have asked, "Are you going to get out of the Mile End?" Eli, imagine the episode when Chaimie and Leizer take a road trip down the 401 to go see all their friends who have defected to Toronto...

EB: Ya, we stock up and we go on a pilgrimage to Thornhill. We don't even say anything. We just drop off a dozen bagels. It's a mitzvah.

For episodes of YidLife Crisis, visit www.yidlifecrisis.com

Originally from Montreal, Evelyn Tauben is a Toronto-based independent producer, curator and writer with a focus on contemporary Jewish arts and culture. www.evelyntauben.com ■



we all struggle with, basically the "YidLife Crisis".

JE: We do say at the top "Jewish discussion is inevitable", which is both because we think its unlikely that Jews who are interested in community and culture will watch something like this and not get into discussion about it, as virtually every Jew practices religion differently, and also because we're making fun of the fact that Jews just talk endlessly. Our M.O. was to be entertaining. But Eli and I do have these discussions. To an extent, we wanted to expose the conversations that were happening in hushed tones after the seders as you run out to the Orange Julep to get a poutine. We'd be thrilled if it does encourage discussion. We'd be thrilled even more if people find it funny and want to share it around. It is a very personal project for both of us that we had to get off our chest.

ET: *The third star of the show is really the food. How did you arrive at the decision to centre the show on food?*

EB: At a certain point in the process, we realized there's something clever about being able to have the food be a metaphor within the conversation.

