

The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel Season Four: Less “marvelous” and more “Mrs.”

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The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel on Amazon Prime suffers a palpable decline in Season Four. The producers, Amy Sherman-Palladino and Daniel Palladino, retain their penchant for interpersonal dramatics and comedy. Certain difficult subjects even receive a meaningful treatment, including mortality. But as a general rule, the closer *Maisel* comes into contact with history, the weaker the results are. There is a tendency to impose contemporary upper-middle class concerns onto characters—even historical figures—with harmful results.

By the season’s end, the recurring character Lenny Bruce—an anti-establishment comic who earned fame in the late 1950s and early 1960s—has devolved into a shameless career coach for the title character.

As the fourth season begins, stand-up talent and divorcee, Midge Maisel (Rachel Brosnahan) has just been fired from her European tour with singer Shy Baldwin (Leroy McClain) for making jokes that hinted at his homosexuality. Dead set on redefining her industry, Midge starts to emcee at an illegal “jiggle joint” where she can exercise total creative control. (Lenny Bruce got his start in the burlesque scene.) To the dismay of her manager, Susie Myerson (Alex Borstein), Midge refuses any gig except where she can headline, and her career plateaus.

“There’s a special place in hell for women who don’t help each other.”

Madeleine Albright—who, due to crimes against Iraqi children, might be in a position to know about hell—said as much while campaigning for Hillary Clinton in the 2016 US presidential election. There is a notion in the upper echelons of *every* identity group that a bit more unity, mutual aid, etc., would be a kind of rising tide to lift all of *their* boats.

While prior seasons of *Maisel* avoided this duplicitous—and one might say *privileged*—claptrap,

Season Four jumps into this swamp with both feet.

Thus, a newspaper columnist takes every occasion to trash Midge, suggesting that she gets gigs through sexual favors. L. Roy Dunham (homophonic for Elroy, a man’s name—played by Hari Nef), he writes this and that ... but, it turns out, *he’s a she*. Traitor!

“Do you have any idea how hard it is to do what I’m doing, to go into these clubs run by men, *dominated* by men and go up there and try to make men listen to me?,” inveighs Midge during a dramatic confrontation.

Dunham’s reply drips with cynicism: “Of course, that’s why I write about you because when I hand my editor a piece about you, the rougher, the better. I get print. I get placement. I get this desk. I’m no longer a skirt. I mean, hey, it’s tough being a woman in journalism. Keep up the good work!”

Midge’s disappointment at the lack of solidarity among professional women smacks of contemporary ladder-climbing, even presidential politics.

In Season Four, Midge and her comic mentor, Bruce (Luke Kirby), deepen their relationship.

After a set at Carnegie Hall, Bruce drags Midge onto the empty stage to gaze at the vast, empty auditorium. A stomach-turning lecture ensues.

“Do you understand that this is a business? Like anything else: you get hired, you get paid. And the trick is to get good and get paid,” he yells at a bewildered Midge.

“I want people to fucking laugh. Think and laugh? Sure, but laugh. I’m a comic, an entertainer ... I’m not the standup messiah. *This* [gesturing toward the audience] is what I want. *This* is what I have worked for. Don’t you want this? Don’t you want to be here?”

But there’s even more advice:

“You’re not gonna get *here* hiding yourself away in some little club that technically doesn’t exist ... 90

percent of this game is how they see you. They see you hanging with Tony Bennett, they think you deserve to be there. They see you hauled off to jail at a strip club, they think you deserve that also. Wise up!"

"There is a moment in this business when the window's open. If you miss it, it closes." He chokes up, "If you blow this Midge, I swear, you will break my fucking heart."

One need not idealize Bruce to know that this sermon would have been *totally* out of character for him. The bawdy comedian who inspired George Carlin and Richard Pryor was not a careerist. He certainly *did* want people to think, and about unpleasant realities, including segregation and racism. It may be hard to conceive of such a thing as a principled performer today, but that doesn't justify turning reality (and history) on its head.

In fact, Bruce gleefully bit the hands that fed him. He made great fun of the sleazy pseudo-intellectual Hugh Hefner on the very first episode of the latter's television show, "Playboy's Penthouse."

"This is really fun for a fake party," he said, before making fun of *Playboy*'s snobby demographic and the profit motive in entertainment more generally.

It's one thing to have a particular "take" on an historical figure, but artistic license is not the same thing as *carte blanche*.

Season Four fares better when dealing with the dynamics of a blended and extended family.

Successful patriarch Moishe Maisel, Midge's ex-father-in-law (Kevin Pollak), falls victim to a heart attack when hearing about his son's intention to remarry—a coincidence, he insists!

Previously, Moishe and his wife Shirley (Caroline Aaron) hosted Abe and Rose Weisman, Midge's parents (Tony Shalhoub and Marin Hinkle) during a period of financial instability. That configuration yielded some of the more comic moments of Season Three, including Abe's description of Shirley's constant cabbage-and-onion cooking as "punitive!"

After Moishe checks into the hospital, the dutiful Shirley and Abe share a tender moment at the latter's apartment. Shirley is staying the night while Moishe convalesces, his future uncertain. "It's cruel that people know they're going to die," Shirley laments. "It's like someone telling you the end of a movie before you've seen it." After some reminiscing, she

makes a humane offer, "Abe, I want you to know that if Rose goes first, I will be there to help."

The hospital stay gives Abe—an intellectual frequently at odds with his more worldly counterpart—a chance to reconcile with Moishe through the medium of a draft obituary.

In another sequence touching on the theme of mortality, Susie Myerson organizes a funeral for her roommate and former coworker. Displeased by low attendance, she hijacks a funeral across the hall to properly honor the deceased. This man *lived*. He had preferences and interests and talents.

As in previous seasons of *Maisel*, one can hardly help rooting for Susie. She helps an alcoholic magician find his audience. Moments of humor and sincerity follow her efforts to build her business, including her hiring and near firing of a secretary, Dinah (Alfie Fuller), who has eyes for scouting talent too.

Season Five will conclude the series, perhaps two seasons too late.



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