

Marty Supreme: a table tennis star's frantic fight for fame

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Marty Supreme, the fast-paced story of Marty Mauser, aka Marty Supreme, a table tennis whiz determined to let nothing stand in the way of a world championship, has become a critical and commercial hit since its release in December.

Mauser—portrayed by Timothée Chalamet and very loosely based on Marty Riesman, a top US table tennis player in the 1950s and 60s—is a narcissistic hustler who is prepared to lie, cheat and steal his way to success. A Jewish kid (23 years old) from Manhattan's Lower East Side, his approach is that of a wheeler-dealer always looking for a way to turn things to his advantage. But there are many complications in Marty's life, mostly of his own making. These lead to some disasters along the way.

The director and co-writer of *Marty Supreme* is Josh Safdie, and the film bears some artistic-emotional resemblance to his earlier *Uncut Gems* (2019), a movie—on which he shared directing credit with his brother Benny—dealing with another hustler, this one from New York City's Diamond District.

Like *Uncut Gems*, Safdie's latest movie is an example of what has been called “propulsive filmmaking,” characterized above all by breakneck speed, assaults on the senses and rapid editing and camerawork, often with few opportunities to stop and think about what is being depicted.

But *Marty Supreme* is something else as well. As we shall discuss in further detail below, it has been marketed and promoted as a film about issues of identity, and specifically Jewish identity and “Jewish pride.” One critic has gone so far as to call it “one of the great Jewish movies,” one that “has a lot to say about being Jewish in America.”

Marty Supreme has taken in over \$150 million at the box office worldwide since opening a few days before Christmas, about two-thirds of that figure coming from the US. Critics from the *New York Times*, *New Yorker*, *Variety*, *Guardian*, *Hollywood Reporter* and others have been singing its praises. It has already won several awards, and has been nominated for Oscars in nine categories, including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor and Best Original Screenplay.

The movie has been called a “screwball dramedy,” suggesting it shares some qualities with classic comedies like *Bringing Up Baby* (1938). This comparison is wide of the mark, and praise for the movie is mostly undeserved. There are far too many distractions and plot contrivances that make little sense. The title character shares too many personality traits with the compulsive gambling addict and schemer portrayed by Adam Sandler in *Uncut Gems*.

In the rushed opening minutes of *Marty Supreme*, we meet Marty working as a shoe salesman in his uncle's store. When his childhood friend Rachel Mizler (Odessa A'zion), now married, enters, he takes

her in the back of the store for sex. Determined to compete for the British table tennis championship in London, Marty steals \$700 at gunpoint from his uncle's safe so he can make the trip.

Arriving in London, he ensconces himself in the posh Ritz Hotel, where he catches the eye of retired 1930s actress Kay Stone (Gwyneth Paltrow), who is attempting a comeback on stage. While seducing Kay, Marty also manages to find the time to meet her wealthy, swinish businessman husband, Milton Rockwell (Kevin O'Leary), whom he hopes will help him get to the world championship match in Tokyo.

This is barely the beginning of Marty's adventures, which from this point on make less and less narrative sense. He eventually returns to New York, where he is arrested for the theft from his uncle, but then escapes and finds himself in a seedy hotel, where he ignores the warning not to use a bathtub and falls through the floor, injuring gangster Ezra Mishkin (filmmaker Abel Ferrara) in the room below. There are many more improbable twists and turns, including Marty's temporary custody of the gangster's dog, hustling for quick cash at a bowling alley with his cab driver friend Wally (Tyler Okonma, aka Tyler, the Creator), and the dog's escape. The animal is later found at a farm in New Jersey, with fatal consequences.

In the film's final scenes, Marty reconnects with Rachel, who has had a baby. Marty has come back from Japan and is reunited with her, and he begins to cry when he sees his newborn son in the hospital.

As a serious film, *Marty Supreme* comes up short. The “propulsive” style has drawn praise, but it is something that needs to be thought about critically. Almost an iron law of filmmaking is that a work insisting on “non-stop,” ceaselessly “breathtaking” action does so because it has relatively little of interest to say when it slows down. Often, the relentless motion substitutes for capturing life in a *genuinely* dynamic manner and obscures an essentially *static* drama or comedy. Safdie's type of art, and there are many directors from the same “school,” is a form of violent moving in place. Too many of the sequences are tedious and pointless.

Linked to that static approach, is an almost obsessive worship of the accomplished fact. Safdie and his collaborators approach various degrading and dispiriting features of American postwar life and contrive to make out of them, in the words of the film's admirers, a delirious “underdog” “thrill ride” through New York's “underbelly.”

Along the same lines, Safdie explains to an interviewer, “These wide-eyed determined people who live with a sense of urgency, outside of time, are very attractive to me,” and refers to “Budd Schulberg's *What Makes Sammy Run?* and Mordecai Richler's *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*.” But both of those novels are sharply critical of their unscrupulous, ruthless “entrepreneurial” protagonists (Sammy Glick had “not a single principle to slow him

down,” wrote Schulberg, who was in the Communist Party when he started writing the book), even while taking into account the circumstances, including antisemitism, that produced them.

Safdie’s accommodation to what exists extends to the “villain” of the piece, Rockwell-O’Leary. Tellingly, the director told the *Guardian*, “Milton [Rockwell] is a vampire. He’s a cold, corporate, capitalist colonialist. And they’ll be around forever; I don’t see them going anywhere. There is an art to what they do—obviously a lot of destruction, too—but sometimes a beauty.” Finding beauty in the activities of a vile capitalist is not a strength in an artist, it is, in one way or another, a form of social capitulation.

The secret to *Marty Supreme*’s critical success, in a more fundamental sense, likely lies in the appeal it holds for certain identity politics-obsessed journalists and commentators. They clearly identify with the character of Marty, whom they see as a lovable rogue, and a kind of standard-bearer for Jews who have “made it” or are role models for how to live and how to fight. These critics see *Marty Supreme* as a tale of how to achieve fame and fortune in capitalist America, not just for Jews but for other “identities” as well.

(Not only is “Jewish pride” celebrated, but so is “Japanese pride.” Safdie chooses to see the world of 1952 as one dominated by fierce ethnic and racial tribalism.)

The *New York Times* is leading the identity politics parade once again, as it did with racial identity politics in the discredited 1619 Project, which appeared as a special issue of its Sunday Magazine some six and a half years ago. More than 20 separate articles on *Marty Supreme* have appeared in the *Times* in recent weeks, one more enthusiastic than the last.

Manohla Dargis, chief film critic for the *Times*, calls *Marty Supreme* “one of the most thoroughly pleasurable American movies of the year and one of the most exciting.” According to Dargis, “The film touches on big, weighty subjects like Jewish identity, family, community, class, assimilation and success, but it isn’t didactic and doesn’t serve up any life lessons, in the pious finger-wagging manner of many American independent movies.”

Another in the long list of *Times* articles extolling *Marty Supreme* is a piece by Esther Zuckerman, a freelance contributor to the paper, entitled, “*Marty Supreme* Has a Lot to Say About Being Jewish in America.” According to Ms. Zuckerman, Marty is “allowed to be audacious, sexy and driven. He is, as he says, ‘Hitler’s worst nightmare’: a Jew who makes no apologies for his Jewishness and highlights that on a global stage. And that is reason to celebrate.”

“For some viewers,” Ms. Zuckerman adds, “the portrayal of a ruthlessly ambitious American Jew borders on the antisemitic. For others, myself included, *Marty Supreme* is one of the great Jewish movies, an unapologetic depiction of the Jewish American experience in all of its complications.”

What is it that Dargis, Zuckerman and so many others find so pleasurable and exciting? There are a few clues. In the midst of two and a half hours of hijinks, the title character affirms from time to time that he is proudly Jewish. Claiming he will beat an opponent who is a survivor of the Nazi death camps, for instance, Marty boasts that he will “finish the job” that Auschwitz couldn’t. To the shocked journalists who are trying to interview him, he adds that he can make the outrageous comment because he is Jewish—as if that were any excuse.

Later, Marty brings back a small piece of an Egyptian pyramid as a souvenir for his mother. “We built that,” he proudly explains, thus rooting himself in thousands of years of history and sounding a bit like

the Zionists who claim all of the Occupied West Bank and Gaza, as well as Israel, as the “homeland of the Jewish people.”

This is the language of ethnocentrism. There is one subplot in *Marty Supreme* that clearly develops this tribalist theme. The presence of Kay Stone and her husband in the movie serves an allegorical purpose. Marty cuckolds the WASP businessman who looks down on Jews, and later he defies this same businessman’s instructions that he intentionally lose a table tennis match. Marty in this way affirms the entrance of American Jews into the ruling elite.

Of course there is a filthy history of antisemitism in the US as all over the world. Marty’s response to it is not to fight against all racism and bigotry, but to cheat and outsmart the capitalists at their own game. At a certain point, when confronted with his lies and otherwise unprincipled behavior, Marty explains himself: “It’s every man for himself where I come from.” Marty comes from a world of poverty in New York’s Lower East Side. But not everyone who came from that world responded with the dog-eat-dog mentality exhibited by Marty Mauser. In fact, American Jews (and European Jews as well) have historically played a disproportionate role in mass social movements and revolutionary struggles that unite workers in struggle.

What does Zuckerman mean by “a Jew who makes no apologies for his Jewishness”? Which Jews make such apologies? Was it literary critic Alfred Kazin, who lived until 1997 and wrote a series of famous memoirs of what it was like to be the son of Jewish immigrants? Was it one of the many protagonists in the novels of Philip Roth, who died in 2018 and who brought to life dozens of characters who make no apologies for their Jewishness but see it as only one part of the wider world? Was it Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, who were killed in 1964 when they participated in the drive to register African American voters in Mississippi? Today, in 2026, growing numbers of young Jews affirm their Jewish heritage by denouncing the genocide in Gaza.

Zuckerman’s article is perhaps the most blatant of a number of signs leaving the impression that *Marty Supreme*, at least for some of its supporters, is seen almost as an answer in Hollywood to last year’s Academy Award to *No Other Land*, dealing with the oppression of the Palestinian people in the Occupied West Bank, and the first time that a Palestinian film had been so honored.



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