

# Theatre Review:

## ‘A Jewish Joke’ at United Solo 2016

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[nytheatreguide.com/2016/09/theatre-review-a-jewish-joke-at-united-solo-2016/](http://nytheatreguide.com/2016/09/theatre-review-a-jewish-joke-at-united-solo-2016/)

By Jacquelyn Claire September 18, 2016



Phil Johnson in “A Jewish Joke.” Photo credit: Rin Ehlers-Sheldon.

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This production is a totally mouthwatering, jelly-filled Hamantaschen of extraordinary writing, brilliant acting, and skillful staging. United Solo 2016 is the world’s largest theatre festival with over 120 productions from 6 continents taking place at Theatre Row on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street from September 15 to November 15. Making choices of which shows to see at these huge festivals can sometimes feel like you are buying a lucky packet and hoping for the best. “A Jewish Joke” felt like I was getting the perfect present, number one on my wish list, and

the best surprise. It gave me a glorious endorphin rush fueled by being in the presence of this superb theatre-maker.

**“ . . .shakes your foundations like a seismic event.”**

We are in the office of Hollywood screenwriter Bernie Lutz on the eve of his big premiere of a new film. His writing partner Maurice hasn't shown up to work yet, and Bernie is on edge looking for a letter he was supposed to have responded to regarding the Communist Blacklist. Over the next hour and a half, we feel the four walls of the office start closing in as his perfect life is threatened and starts unraveling with every phone call coming in on his Black Rotary Dial multi-line telephone. He and Maurice have been placed on the “Red Channels” list – the right-wing pamphlet-style journal – for apparently having Communist ties.

Bernie has to start tap dancing quickly to salvage the situation as doors start instantly closing. In between each incoming and outgoing call, fragments of Bernie's life start aggregating so we get a more composite picture of what is at stake. He never loses heart and keeps trying to find the solution – driven by an endless supply of Jewish-themed jokes on roller deck-style information cards. The timing and content of each “joke” is highly entertaining and perfectly placed in the context of the horror that is happening outside the door. Bernie is giving it “shtick,” throwing every piece of comedy and lovable charm at the situation, but keeps coming up empty. An FBI agent proposes a solution which would entail Bernie giving up his friend to the Communist Blacklist. We watch the agony of a man teetering on a cliff on indecision, about to spontaneously combust.

Phil Johnson and Marni Freedman wrote this ode that expertly captures the dilemma of the more than 300 actors, writers, directors, radio commentators, and particularly screenwriters, who were boycotted by studios during this time. Many of these artists, like Charlie Chaplin and Orson Welles, either left the U.S. or went underground. Some writers created pseudonyms to continue to work or wrote under friends' names with only about 10 percent able to rebuild careers in the entertainment industry. This reign of sanctioned terror is felt through the missives coming down the telephone wires into Bernie's safe haven and into our fragile 2016 sensibilities. The combination of comedy and tragedy in this script is beautifully crafted, and you feel every tension-filled second viscerally. As the witch hunt gathers momentum in the "most un-American thing in America," Bernie tries to find the "mensch" in the situation.

Johnson has created an authentic character of the time with detailed mannerisms and expressive physicality. It was a pleasure to watch this highly-skilled performer in action, using every moment to amplify Bernie into the tragic hero whom we wanted to save. The feats of dexterity required to master the seamless dance of phone calls, jokes, and anecdotes was deeply satisfying to witness. Johnson is a sensational performer, able to portray a range of emotions that shake your foundations like a seismic event.

David Ellenstein's direction is chicken soup for the soul. It is extremely filling. He knows how to add the right ingredients in the right quantities to make you salivate for seconds. He creates the tension so impressively, allowing Johnson to relieve the pressure of the built up steam in the most effective ways. Bernie's breaking points were powerfully crafted. The build to the climax at the end was spine-chilling and

heartbreaking. A strong and precise directorial hand was evident in every moment.

I give it more than a top Neil Rosen four-apple film rating and more stars than five. I give it full houses, standing ovations, and a thunderous applause. This impressive production needs a lengthy run in NYC.

Running Time: 90 minutes, with no intermission.

“A Jewish Joke” played on September 17, 2016 at Theatre Row in New York City as a part of United Solo 2016. For more information, click [here](#). For more information on United Solo, click [here](#).