Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Alex Edelman

Elisa Leonelli · Thursday, October 31st, 2024

I was not familiar with Alex Edelman when I was invited by HBO to participate with other journalists in a virtual interview conducted by his friend Mandy Moore, star of the TV series *This Is Us*, about his Comedy Special *Just for Us*. So I did some research, found a 2023 review of the Broadway show in this publication, learnt that the 35-year-old Jewish comedian had first written and performed *Just for Us*, which centers on a meeting of neo-Nazis that Edelman attended in Queens, New York, at the Edinburgh Fringe in 2018. The TV special was taped in New York in August of 2023, and broadcast on HBO-MAX in April 2024.

Alex Edelman (c) Sarah Shatz-HBO

You may find more info on this website and watch the trailer at this link.

After hearing Edelman speak so thoughtfully about the current state of the world in relation to his art and his Jewishness, I concluded that he is not only a funny comedian, but a serious human being worth listening to. That's why I decided to edit excerpts from the Q&A.

Alex Edelman (c) Sarah Shatz-HBO

Q: What did winning an Emmy for Outstanding Writing in a Variety Special mean to you?

A: Something happened while I was on stage and for the rest of the night, where it felt like I was reliving all the moments of the seven years of doing the show, from starting in England and touring it through Wales and Scotland, Germany and France, bringing it to Australia, doing it on Broadway and in L.A. I was experiencing all the senses of it, which felt complete and very nice. Sorry, it's very mawkish.

Q: Are there any specific live performances of your show that stand out for you?

A: The opening night in Los Angeles was really special, because it was my adopted hometown. The night that Jerry Seinfeld came, it was unbelievable to look in the audience and see Seinfeld and Cameron Crowe sitting in the second row. Also when Zelda Williams, whom I really love and respect and is a good friend of mine, came to see the show, I didn't tell her how a big part of it is about Robin Williams, because I didn't know how to have that conversation. I asked her once why she didn't like stand up comedy, and she said, "because when you're raised by Mozart, you don't need to go see a lounge pianist," which is a really great answer.

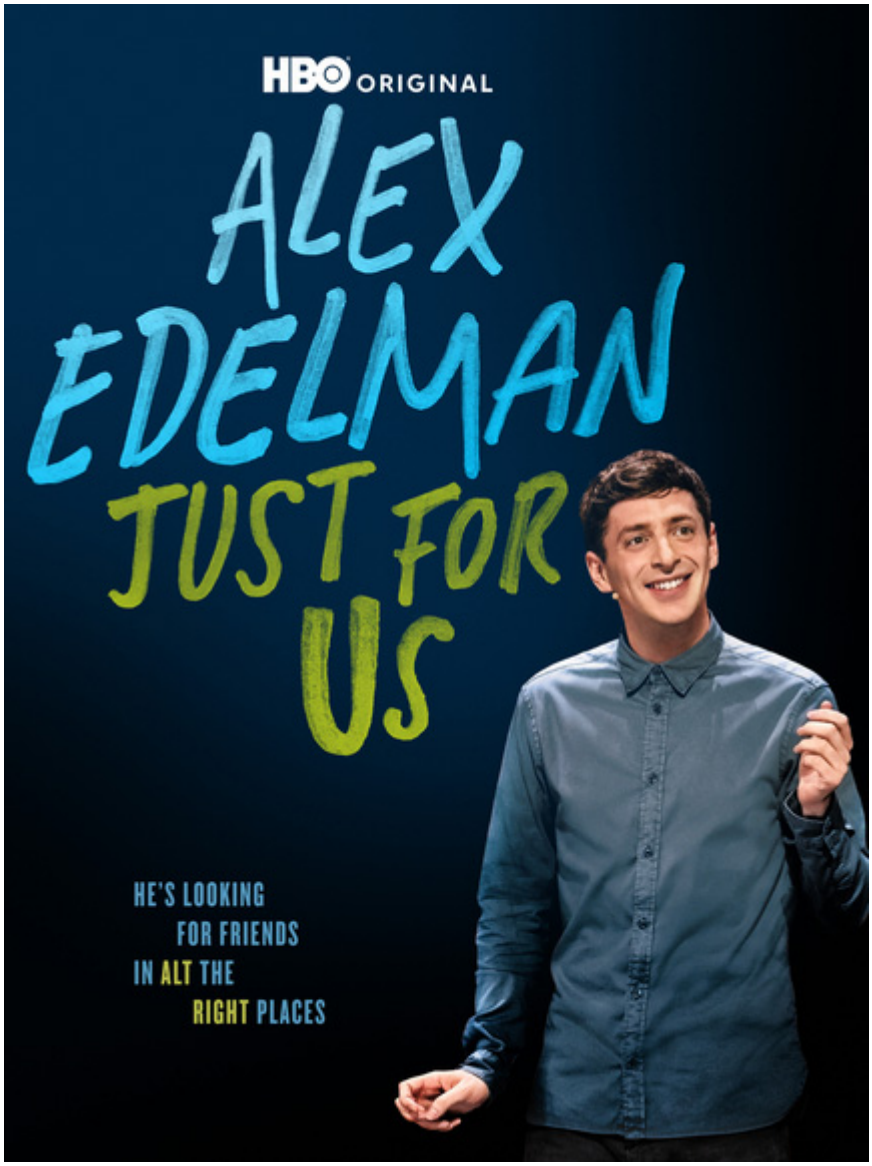
Q: You performed the show all over the world for the past seven years, during which the political

landscape changed dramatically. Have you felt that shift, did it alter the way that you talked about things?

A: It felt like it was an exercise in widening my aperture, in terms of how people encountered the show, and it was really useful to be going all over before it came to New York and Los Angeles. People assume that their worldview on identity or whiteness, American-ness or antisemitism, is the only view. So for me to have the experience of seeing how the show landed in places like Berlin and Melbourne, London or Edinburgh, gave me a base where the show could reflect the moment that we were in and be conversant with it, but not be totally changed by it. Also it carried me through night to night, when the news got really bad and tough, even before this past year, like the attacks on the synagogue in Poway and the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgn. So being conversant with this piece of art, which asked the question of what is a Jew's place in the world, or anyone who feels like they're an outsider within a country or a certain group, was useful for me to constantly reflect on it.

Q. What was the most helpful feedback that you received from different audiences?

A: Early on in the run people were fascinated by and constantly asking, "Are Jews white?" It was the number one question I was asked after the show, because I'm telling this story about Jews and whiteness, but I would never answer it, because the truth is yes and no. First of all, there are many, many Jews of color, a huge number. But the question they're really asking is, "Are American Ashkenazi Jews white?" And the answer is: "Whiteness is a construct." Jews are privy to some of the benefits of white privilege, but not other benefits, and that's very confusing to Americans. International people never really ask the question, it feels like there's much less of an obsession with binaries outside the United States. When I was touring in Australia or England or Europe, people seemed largely fine with it. They understood that what I was saying is that I'm white enough to get into a room full of white nationalists, but not white enough to be accepted as white by people for whom whiteness is an important thing. So once I was able to explain that this isn't about binaries, the show kicked into another gear. Part of the reason that the show has done all right, it's because folks have understood it as a polemic against polemics or a show that asks people to be a little bit wary of certainty. And given where we are in our rancorous political moment and what's happening in parts of the world, including and especially the Middle East, the show benefited from leaning towards the desire for nuance and radical empathy for people who are not on your side, and for humanity.



Q: How did it feel to release the special at a time when anti-Jewish hate has been the worst that it's been in decades?

A: It felt good, it was really helpful and grounding to have a show to talk about what is on my mind and not being entirely about the current moment, but the eternal question of what it means to be Jewish, and it was really nice to hear from other people who shared that experience. Right after October 7th, when it all started in Gaza, I'm not being controversial by saying that the whole thing has been horrible to watch, and every day has brought new horror. So I was wondering if I should even be doing the show, after a couple of people sent me some pretty unsavory messages. I called my producer, and she said, "You have to do the show, it will be a nice escape." When I went to the back of the theater, before the show started, and I looked at the audience, I saw everybody watching the war on their phone. So I was like, "For an hour and a half, people don't have to watch a war."

The broader question is, how conversant with the exact moment should art be? Should it be evergreen, prismatic and the moment refracts through it, or should it be topical, a direct conversation? Should art be immediately responsive to topicality? The TV special was recorded before everything started happening in the Middle East, with antisemitism rising in the United States. But I found it's been a useful refractory, as opposed to a direct conversation. I think that, as an artist, you have to always weigh that. If you make a piece of work, how do you balance

timelessness with timeliness? Thank God it feels like *Just For Us* has been able to do both.

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