Not your typical Yiddish humor

Fuchs stars in spirited 1940 comedy

By Daniel M. Kimmel

Chanukah’s over. Winter’s here. What better to brighten up a cold evening than a 1940 musical comedy starring Leo Fuchs, a man dubbed “the Yiddish Fred Astaire?”

His mother consoles him by noting his resemblance to his uncle in the old country, who also had bad luck with women. Instead of marrying he became a shadchen, a matchmaker.

Inspired, Nathan pretends to go to Europe on travel, but he’s really changed his name to Nathan Gold and moved to the Bronx, where he opens a “Human Relations Bureau.” He doesn’t need the money from the fees, so he charges nothing, immediately leading the local shadchanim to picket him for unfair competition.

In the process of matching up others, Nathan meets the ideal woman for himself (Judith Abargel), but decides his duty is to see her married ... to someone else. You can guess how the story turns out.

This was the last of four Yiddish films done by cult Hollywood director Edgar G. Ulmer, and the only one set in America. Unlike “The Singing Blacksmith,” “Green Fields” or “The Light Ahead,” this was a film that looked forward at how Jews were living in America, not at life — good or bad — back in Eastern Europe.

It’s also a movie where you can see hints of issues (assimilation, Jewish continuity, intermarriage) that would emerge in the Jewish community in the decades to come.

Accompanying the film is the short “I Want to be a Boarder,” which shows Fuchs as much Stan Laurel as Astaire. He and Yetta Zwerling play a bickering married couple on the verge of separation. Zwerling suggests Fuchs stay, not as her husband but as her boarder.

As the new boarder, he starts romancing his landlady. He occasionally shifts back to the role of husband and accuses her of being unfaithful to him with her tenant. It’s an absurdist sketch showing a wacky side of Yiddish culture often overlooked in the haze of nostalgia.

“American Matchmaker” is not the film you would use to make the case for the artistry of Yiddish cinema, but its quirky humor and high spirits make it worth seeking out on its own.

Daniel M. Kimmel is a Boston-based film critic and author. His latest book is "I’ll Have What She’s Having: Behind the Scenes of the Great Romantic Comedies." He lectures widely on a variety of film-related topics and can be reached at daniel.kimmel@rcn.com.

"American Matchmaker" is available through the National Center for Jewish Film for $36. Public performance rights separately available. Call (781) 736-8600 or go to www.jewishfilm.org.