

Oy to the World

Jewishness is a groove. The Jewish dating scene isn't.

Marty Fugate

“Jewtopia,” according to playwrights Bryan Fogel and Sam Wolfson, is an enchanted kingdom containing 500,000 unattached Jewish women. (i.e., JDate, a website for Jewish singles.) Chris O’Connell (Patrick Noonan) leads his friend, Adam Lipschitz (Brandon Beilis), into that realm on a quest for the ideal Jewish Princess Bride. It’s Chris’ quest too. Adam, a non-observant Jew, wants to find a nice Jewish girl to please his family. Chris is a gentile of Irish-Catholic extraction who has converted to Judaism. He wants to find a nice Jewish girl who will relieve him of the burden of decision-making. Forever.

Adam’s Jewtopian journey becomes a series of bad dates—155 dates in all, all hilariously played by Jessica Smolins. Along with Jewish soul mates, the Gen-X guys find every possible Jewish stereotype—including Jewish stereotypes of gentiles. (Such as, “Top Ten Traits that Identify You as a Goy,” which include taking less than an hour to say goodbye and NASCAR fandom.) All seems well, until Adam and Chris and their fiancées celebrate Passover Seder with Adam’s family. Why is this night different from all other nights? Because it’s the Seder from hell.

Jay Berkow directs with the verve and rhythms of stand-up comedy. (Fittingly, as Fogel and Wolfson’s play was born as sketch material.) Beilis and Noonan click nicely together as the two male leads. As supporting players, Smolins (as bratty sister, the J-Date babes and Adam’s bride) always steals the show; Bonnie Black puts a woman-on-the-verge-of-a-nervous-breakdown spin on *two* different Jewish mothers; Jon Kohler

keeps his head down as Adam's Jewish dad; Peter Levine makes for a slightly off-center rabbi; Cabrera plays her character totally straight with loads of gravitas—and it's a stitch. Nayna Ramey's clever set (which resembles the JDate website) is a comedy-creating character in its own right. Did I mention this play is funny?

It's funny. There, I mentioned it.

Is it culturally sensitive?

Not exactly. This play has a few stereotypes. I'm lying. It's stuffed with stereotypes. It's like the stateroom scene in the Marx Brothers where every conceivable stereotype has been packed into a tiny room. Some reviewers have referred to this as Borsht Belt comedy. Or broad comedy. They don't get it. It's broad comedy, but smart broad comedy, in the tradition of Mel Brooks, the early Woody Allen and Lenny Bruce. The play isn't cramming people into narrow definitions of identity to make fun of them. The narrow definitions of identity are the joke. Is Jewishness a religion, an ethnicity, a culture? All of the above and none of the above.

In the end, the characters burst out of the tiny room. Chris reveals the epiphany that drew him to Judaism—a Hasidic wedding where everyone knew the words to a song and joined in, one at a time, like characters in a musical. Fulfilling his dream, one by one, the characters on stage start singing (with Adam on guitar) in a loopy, Adam Sandleresque groove. Chris joins in and gets his definition of Judaism.

It's a groove.