

Los Angeles Times

THEATER

'Jewtopia': the date's still on

By DON SHIRLEY
Times Staff Writer

IT'S true confessions time for Bryan Fogel and Sam Wolfson, the creators and stars of the long-running comedy "Jewtopia" at the Coast Playhouse.

The program for the play, which is about two guys adrift in the Jewish singles world, credits associate producers Joel Goldstein and Ernie Brodsky for fundraising, advertising and group ticket sales. In fact, those are pseudonyms.

The two 30-year-olds were afraid it would look bush-league if the producers, writers and stars of the show were also hawking tickets. Jewish singles groups, they knew, would be their first target audience, so they made up Jewish-sounding names for themselves as "associate producers."

Fogel and Wolfson, assisted by their parents, were the main investors. Each man charged \$7,500 on credit cards, and each set of parents — Wolfson's in Jacksonville, Fla., and Fogel's in Denver — contributed \$25,000.

"It was scary," Wolfson recalled. "In most families you get only one shot to ask your parents for that kind of money." And it came with strings attached: Fogel's parents made him promise to quit show business if "Jewtopia" didn't work out.

It worked out. "Jewtopia" will mark one year of mostly sold-out performances on May 8. The credit card bills have been paid, the parents reimbursed. Mass media conglomerate Clear Channel is even making plans to present it in June in Chicago and next fall off-Broadway in New York, with versions customized for each city.

At a recent Sunday matinee, most of the crowd howled at the antics of Adam Lipschitz (Wolfson) and Chris O'Connell (Fogel), childhood neighbors who reunite as adults at a Jewish mixer. Chris is quickly exposed as a faux-Jew. He's attracted to Jewish women, he explains to Adam, because they spare him the effort of making decisions. Adam is a mostly secular Jew, laboring to find a nice Jewish girl. They strike a deal to help each other search, with mixed results.

At the matinee, 40 seats were occupied by sophomores from a Jewish high school in Houston and their adult chaperons, who had scheduled "Jewtopia" alongside the Museum of Tolerance and the Skirball Cultural Center on their itinerary. At intermission, some of the teens discussed the play's parallels to their own families. The character Adam, for example, claims Jews are frequently on the phone with their parents, often ending the conversations with "I love you." One of the sophomores said he'd just finished such a call to his parents before the play started.

In real life, Fogel is no faux-Jew. He grew up in a modern Orthodox family and had bar mitzvah ceremonies in both Denver and Jerusalem. Wolfson's Reform family was less observant. He had a bar mitzvah, but also went to an Episcopal high school. Unlike his character Adam, however, he has dated only Jewish



MICHAEL LAMONT

FOR LAUGHS: Bryan Fogel, left, and Sam Wolfson (with Lin Shaye) wrote and perform in "Jewtopia," now approaching its first anniversary at Coast Playhouse.

women since "Jewtopia" began.

The two men, both of whom came to L.A. to become stand-up comics in the mid-'90s, met at a one-act play showcase that Fogel organized. They started writing together, concocting a scene introducing Adam and Chris that, in Fogel's words, "went over like crazy" in two showcases at the Stella Adler Theatre. Former Paramount Pictures President Frank Yablans saw a performance and encouraged the duo to develop it into a full-length play. (He is now the L.A. "executive producer" but not an investor.)

THEY worked on the script for seven months before an October 2002 reading at the Court Theatre encouraged them to launch a full production. They recruited "Reefer Madness" director Andy Fickman and a handful of L.A.'s best small-theater designers.

Before opening night, they had sold \$15,000 worth of tickets and advertising. "There is a Jewish singles group for every possible activity," Wolfson said, and they contacted many of them. They sold the central ad in their program to JDate.com, a Jewish singles website, whose founder Alon Carmel helped promote the show.

Since the opening, the audience has expanded far beyond young Jewish singles. Many elderly people and Russian immigrants have seen the play, and the latter sometimes audibly translate during the performance. A group of 15 Asian Americans showed up recently, and the reservations list now includes as many names that don't sound Jewish as those that do.

Not everyone has liked "Jewtopia." The strongest reactions have come in response to Adam's series of horrendous dates with Jewish women — especially a particularly kinky performance artist.

"If about four people don't walk out of a performance, something's wrong," Fogel said, recalling a pair who exited after only 30 seconds, in the wake of a line with

a graphic sexual reference. The writers received one vitriolic e-mail that, decrying the play's treatment of Judaism and Jewish women, expressed regret that the e-mailer hadn't brought machetes to the theater to use on the playwrights. Fogel has never seen any signs of Orthodox Jews at the play.

Neal Weinberg, a Conservative rabbi who directs a program for potential converts at the University of Judaism, said that some of Adam's dating scenes are uncomfortably "over the top — not many people have dates like that." But he also said that "satires have to be exaggerated, and it's very positive that Jews can see this and laugh at themselves." The show's funniest scenes "come from something very recognizable," he said. "It's a stereotype, but it's true that Jewish women are strong."

Twenty-nine-year-old Robyn Fryer, who expects to be a Conservative rabbi within two years, brought 50 graduate students and young professionals from UCLA's Hillel to see "Jewtopia." The play is "equally demeaning to men and women, but it's funny," she said. "My mouth hurt from laughing so much." Asked about the exaggerated dating scenes, she replied, "I've met some strange men on JDate."

The writers say their satire is grounded in an affection for Jewish culture. "It's the best feeling to see 20-year-olds and 80-year-olds side by side laughing," Fogel said. "We're just goofballs, taking every stereotype and flipping it on its head."

'Jewtopia'

Where: Coast Playhouse, 8325 Santa Monica Blvd., West Hollywood

When: Thursdays to Saturdays, 8 p.m.; Sundays, 3 p.m.

Price: \$25-\$30

Contact: (877) 849-4539

CALENDAR WEEKEND LOS ANGELES TIMES THURSDAY, MARCH 25, 2004