



NEWSDAY PHOTO / ARI MINTZ

The show's creators, who also act, Bryan Fogel, left, and Sam Wolfson, with actress Jackie Tohn, who plays multiple roles.

OFF-BROADWAY

Such a premise!

In 'Jewtopia,' a sketch grown into a play, a Catholic lad learns how to be Jewish

BY PETER GOODMAN
STAFF WRITER

Chris O'Connell wants to marry a Jewish girl. That way, he figures, he won't have to make another decision for the rest of his life. She'll pick his clothes, his house, his food, his friends — paradise!

Trouble is, he's Irish Catholic and he doesn't know *bupkis* from being Jewish.

Chris' buddy Adam Lipschitz has a problem, too. He also wants to find a nice Jewish girl, but he can't seem to make the right connection.

Chris and Adam run into one another at — where else? — a Jewish singles mixer. They make such a deal: Adam will teach Chris how to be Jewish, and Chris will lead Adam to a place where there are hundreds of thousands of girls to pick from: "Jewtopia!"

From such an off-balance beginning an Off-Broadway play has sprung. It's called, of course, "Jewtopia," fresh from a yearlong run in Los Angeles.

Three years ago, Sam Wolfson (from Jacksonville, Fla.) and Bryan Fogel (from Denver) were a couple of young comedians trying to make their way in Hollywood. Just fooling around, they put together a 15-minute sketch about Chris (Fogel) and Adam (Wolfson).

Everyone advised them to make it bigger.

Now the show, in previews since Sept. 28, is to open at the Westside Theatre today, while Fogel and Wolfson, both Jewish, plan to create additional companies in Chicago, Florida, Boston — sort of a "Jew Man Group."

"This is the last thing in the world I thought I'd be doing," Wolfson said, toying with a muffin at a restaurant near the theater. "I am a playwright. I wanted to be Joe Hollywood."

Fogel, who was nibbling on some calamari, said, "I'd been producing showcases in Los Angeles, so I knew we could get a theater, a set — it was something we could do."

But how did a 15-minute sketch turn into a two-act play, complete with Jewish mothers, fathers and siblings, a string of nightmarish dates, and directions on how and how not to be Jewish?

Building on experiences

Wolfson was brought up as a member of the Reform branch of Judaism, where he was relatively nonobservant. "I went to temple two times a year," he said. "I went late and I left early."

Fogel described himself as falling between the Conservative branch and the more traditional Modern Orthodox. "My mother kept kosher at home,"

he said. "I had never heard of the candle-lighting ceremony," an elaborate feature of contemporary American bar and bat mitzvahs.

And Jackie Tohn, the hyper-active actress who plays nearly all the women in the show, said she was "beyond Reform." Her bat mitzvah, in her hometown of Oceanside, was an elaborate attempt not to keep up with the Joneses, but "to exceed any Joneses' expectation," she said, as she dug into a big, mushroom-covered steak. (Tohn, who was chosen after the writers auditioned more than 200 women, turned out to be so exceptional, Fogel and Wolfson said, that they wrote her into more and more scenes.)

"We built it on all these experiences we had," Fogel said.

"We're all very culturally Jewish," Tohn added.

Still, the play appears to have appeal beyond a specific ethnic community, and it especially resonates with people in mixed marriages.

"Hundreds of couples come up to us after the show," Fogel said. "They'll say, 'I'm a Jew and he's a gentile,' or the other way around. One time there was a wife in a NASCAR jacket and wearing a huge crucifix."

As for audiences generally, "by the time we closed in Los Angeles, they were 50-50"

Jewish and gentile, Fogel said. Referring to the widespread popularity of performers who might be seen as ethnically oriented, such as John Leguizamo or Chris Rock, he said, "it's more a universal American thing."

In fact, they had been concerned that the audience that might be most unhappy would be Jews sensitive to anything seen as ridiculing or demeaning.

'Not good or bad'

"I defy anyone to point out anything in the play that is bad for the Jews," Wolfson said. "It's not good or bad; it's who we are, for the same reason that Mel Brooks, Jerry Seinfeld, Larry David or Woody Allen have been successful, because there is a truth in all of it."

They considered the possibility that there would be a generation gap in the audience, and that the show, with its edgy, late-night attitude, might drive away those unaccustomed to the style. "We thought it would be a hip, funny show for 20-, 30- or 40-year-old Jews," Fogel said. But then large numbers of older people, in their 60s and 70s, began showing up.

"Now," he said, "getting the younger generation is a bonus."

A show that appeals to all ages — what's not to like?