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So These Two Jewish Guys Walk Into A Theater . . .

By BERNARD WEINRAUB

LOS ANGELES, May 2 — Chris O'Connell is a self-loathing gentile who says he wants to marry a Jewish girl so that he will not have to make a decision for the rest of his life.

His childhood friend, Adam Lipschitz, offers to guide him into the world of — what else? — domineering mothers and subjects to avoid in front of potential Jewish in-laws, like power tools, Garth Brooks, Nascar races, Republican politics, Miracle Whip and “The Passion of the Christ.”

Out of this myriad of stereotypes, two 30-year-old comedians, Bryan Fogel and Sam Wolfson, have written a play with the unfortunate title of “Jewtopia” that has become one of the biggest and most improbable theatrical hits in Los Angeles.

The show, which also stars Mr. Fogel and Mr. Wolfson, opened last May at the 99-seat Coast Playhouse in West Hollywood, and has been sold out nearly every weekend. (Nineteen folding chairs are usually hauled in for each performance.) Tentatively set to close in late June, the play is scheduled to move to New York in late summer.

Although the reviews have been mixed — and the humor is often broad — each weekend the show attracts a blend of audiences unusual for Los Angeles theater.

There are bus loads of older people, cool Hollywood types, groups of high school students visiting Los Angeles and Russians from the nearby Fairfax area who loudly translate the jokes, some of them crude, for one another.

“Regardless of how bad or raunchy we are, let’s face it, we’re harmless,” Mr. Wolfson said with a laugh.

Mr. Fogel, who is from Denver, and Mr. Wolfson, from Jacksonville, Fla., met in the mid-1990’s in Los

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J. Emilio Flores for The New York Times

Bryan Fogel, left, and Sam Wolfson, authors and stars, outside the theater where their hit comedy is playing in West Hollywood. They have turned down television work in the hope that the show will move to New York.

Two comedians weave an improbable hit play out of stereotypes.

Angeles, where they were looking for work as stand-up comedians, and began writing at a showcase at the Stella Adler Theater. (They acknowledge the obvious: both are Jewish.)

A brief comedy scene set at a Jewish singles mixer, in which a gentile is told he will be disguised “like a Jewish Donnie Brasco” to slip into the world of Jews, was greeted with hilarity. “People went nuts,” said Mr. Fogel, who plays Chris. “They said we’ve got to turn this into something.”

Word of the scene spread, and Frank Yablans, former president of Paramount Pictures and now a film producer, urged them to expand it into a full-length play. That original scene now opens the play, of which Mr. Yablans is a producer.

Mr. Fogel and Mr. Wolfson, who were working at various jobs during the day, wrote at night for seven months, went through five more months of rewrites and then raised

\$80,000 to put on the show.

“We basically wrecked our credit cards, and our parents put up half the money,” Mr. Fogel said, adding that the show had turned a profit.

“Jewtopia,” directed by Andy Fickman, sometimes goes overboard on the stereotyping and cartoon characters. But the audience — at least on a recent Sunday afternoon — did not seem to care as it watched the Chris character learning how to become “more Jewish.”

He is taught to take at least an hour to say goodbye at family gatherings; always to complain in restaurants about the seating, the air-conditioning and the menu; and to order salmon with everything. He is also taught to talk to his parents eight or nine times a day on his cellphone and to say “I love you” to them like a child. And he is taught never to admit he is in perfect health.

Before the opening of the show, which has a seven-member cast, the writers, using aliases, spent several weeks on the phone selling \$15,000 in ads and tickets in blocks to Jewish singles groups and other organizations. “There are Jewish singles groups for just about everything: hiking, kayaking, baking chocolate chip cookies, you name it,” Mr. Wolfson said.

A generally positive review in The

Los Angeles Times called the show “a raucous, merciless skewering of contemporary Jewish foibles, neuroses and stereotypes.” Variety said it was “an uneven ride that lurches from hilarity to hectic excess.” But Backstage West called it a “tasteless romp” and “offensive.”

Mr. Fogel and Mr. Wolfson say they have been offered television work, but their immediate plan is to

‘Regardless of how bad or raunchy we are, let’s face it, we’re harmless.’

take the show to New York and possibly to Chicago. Mr. Fogel said a New York producing team was already in place, awaiting the availability of one of several Off Broadway theaters.

Mr. Fogel and Mr. Wolfson said numerous celebrities had already seen “Jewtopia.” But their idol has not yet appeared. “Do you think Mel Brooks will ever see it?” Mr. Fogel asked.