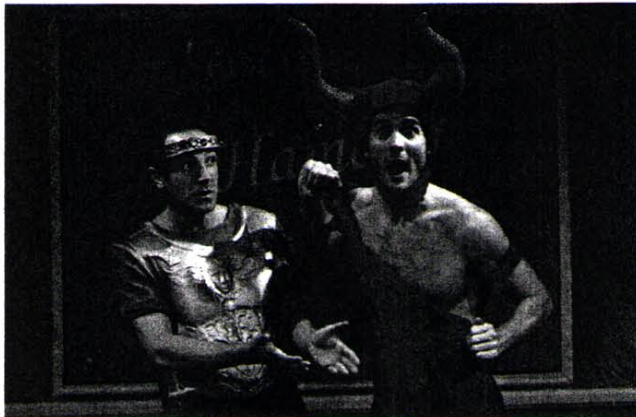


THEATER

Oy gestalt!

An L.A. farce reaffirms Jewishness as the chosen comedy subject

By Raven Snook



THIS GUY'S HORNY Fogel, left, hopes that Wolfson's bull wins him a Jewish wife.

Jewish culture is in—but if you read, watch TV or attend theater, you probably knew that already. From last year's "Jewsploitation" flick, *The Hebrew Hammer*, to the hipster clothing line known as Jew.Lo, Jews are simultaneously skewering and celebrating Semitic stereotypes. This isn't exactly new. Fifty years ago, borscht belt comics like Don Rickles and Buddy Hackett built entire acts around sending up the Tribe. But with a tip of the yarmulke to perennial yukster Jackie Mason, the current resurgence of irreverent Jewish humor in theater can be traced back to the night in 2001 when Mel Brooks won 12 Tonys for the stage musical of his 1968 film, *The Producers*. Although explicitly Jewish shows like *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Golda's Balcony* and *Modern Orthodox*—an upcoming Off Broadway comedy about lapsed faith starring Molly Ringwald and Jason Biggs—are not rare, during the past few years, productions showcasing potentially offensive Semitic shtick have been multiplying like Orthodox Jews. *Hairspray*'s tacky Turnblads have a kosher flavor, and *Avenue Q* reserves Jews for its edgiest ethnic punch lines.

This season, the trend reaches a climax of sorts with the raucous Los Angeles import *Jewtopia*, which opens Thursday 21. Written

by and starring two hitherto unknown (but nice) Jewish boys, Sam Wolfson and Bryan Fogel, *Jewtopia* tells the tale of Adam Lipschitz and Chris O'Connell, who conspire to help O'Connell "pass" so he can marry a Jewish girl and never make another decision for the rest of his life. Sounds sitcom? You bet. But that seemingly pat premise turned *Jewtopia* into the longest-running comedy of all time in L.A. (15 months) and convinced its creators that the show was ripe for a New York transfer.

Be warned: This isn't your grandmother's Jewish comedy (al-

"We decided to lose the play's philosophical crap," *Jewtopia* cocreator Bryan Fogel says.

though it won't shock the Howard Stern generation, either). No sentimental, Neil Simon-style family bonding here. No ruminations on Jewish continuity or the advent of renewed worldwide anti-Semitism. Instead, *Jewtopia*'s two protagonists spend most of their time talking about how and where to score with chicks—the Jewish personals website JDate gets a plug, as does Crown Heights, which, according to O'Connell, is "pussy central." In *Jewtopia*, being Jewish has little to do with reli-

gious identity and more to do with how you order food in a restaurant: Complain about your table, demand substitutions and ask for everything on the side. In fact, thanks to *Judaism for Dummies* (a real book, by the way), O'Connell knows more about the Jewish faith than Lipschitz, whose insight into the Tribe is strictly cultural.

This two-hour, intermittently uproarious riff on ethnic clichés was based on the creators' own lives as well as a love of Mel Brooks. "My parents are the parents in the show," Wolfson says. "I even use their names." And while Fogel portrays the goy boy-toy, he's mined his own upbringing as well. "When we were writing the play, we started talking, and we were like, 'Oh my God, do you remember Sukkoth? Do you remember Purim? Do you remember Passover seders?'"

Fogel and Wolfson have no problem with their production coming off as shallow. "Before all the cuts and edits, the show had all sorts of philosophical crap," Fogel says. "But we decided to lose it. That's just not what we're here to do." And while a glossary of Yiddish terms is provided in the program, the gags are easy to get. Just like Wolfson's real-life family, which he admits "only goes to synagogue three times a year," Jewish humor has been assimilated into the mainstream, and these days most theatergoing gentiles laugh at Hebrew humor with the same recognition as Jews.

And perhaps that's what's most shocking about *Jewtopia* and other entertainment of its ilk. While we Jews have always loved to laugh at ourselves, we now allow—even encourage—the gentiles to do it, too.

"You don't have to be Jewish to like this show," Fogel says. "It's that *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* thing. Anybody who comes from an ethnic background, whether it's Russian or Polish or Puerto Rican, can go and say, 'That's my family.' It's what America is." It's also what keeps shows like *The Producers*—and the New York incarnation of *Jewtopia*, its creators hope—turning a profit.

Jewtopia opens Thursday 21 at the Westside Theatre. See Off Broadway.

