

OFF BROADWAY REVIEW



Sam Wolfson and Bryan Fogel co-wrote and star in "Jewtopia."

Jewtopia

(West Side Theater;
250 seats; \$59.50 top)

A WEJ Prods. and Jenkay presentation of play in two acts by Bryan Fogel and Sam Wolfson. Directed by John Tillinger. Sets, Patrick Fahey; costumes, Cynthia Nordstrom; lighting, Mike Baldassari; sound, Kevin Lacy; production stage manager, Jeff Benish. Opened Oct. 21, 2004. Reviewed Oct. 16. Running time: 2 HOURS.

Chris O'Connell Bryan Fogel
Adam Lipschitz Sam Wolfson
Rabbi Schlomo,
Grandpa Irving Gerry Vichi
Bad dates, Jill, Nurse,
Allison Cohen Jackie Tohn
Marcy Cohen,
Arlene Lipschitz Cheryl David
Dennis Lipschitz Lorry Goldman
Rachel Irwina Pantaeva

By GABRIELLE
MITCHELL-MARELL

This raucous first-time effort for co-playwrights Bryan Fogel and Sam Wolfson has thus far met with unexpected success. Premiering at West Hollywood's Coast Playhouse in May 2003, "Jewtopia" ran for more than a year. Maintaining all but one of its original cast members en route to the New York stage, the production enlisted Broadway director John Tillinger ("Say Goodnight Gracie"), who helped reel in a plot steeped in nonstop Jewish cultural stereotypes that in nuance, specificity and outrageousness deserve to take center stage.

Adam Lipschitz (Wolfson) and Chris O'Connell (Fogel) run into each other at the Inter-Temple Rockin' Young Jewish Singles Mixer. As the childhood friends get to talking, Sam's memories of the O'Connell family having a father in the Marines and bacon frying in the kitchen lead him to suspect Chris is no Jew.

Chris admits that it's true, but he longs to marry a Jewish woman, whom he assumes will make all his decisions in life. Sam, on the other hand, is weighed down by the burden of his heritage and hopes to get his mother off his back by settling down with a member of his tribe.

The two strike up a deal: Chris will introduce Sam to Jewtopia, "the mythical land of 500,000 single Jewish girls," if Sam will help bring Chris into "the belly of the Jew" so he can pass for one.

Jewtopia, it turns out, refers to J-Date, the online personals site. Chris sets about creating various personae for Sam to maximize his appeal to different women.

Sam's caricature dates are enacted by Jackie Tohn — from a feral

club queen (screen-name Firetushy) to a Hasidic girl who prefers playing cards rather than the more X-rated "game" Sam proposes involving a sheet with a hole in it. If you weren't sure before, it is time to check all sense of propriety at the door.

The play is a series of skits, supplying enough laughs to make the increasingly madcap plot forgivable and forgettable.

As co-writers and co-stars, Fogel and Wolfson are very comfortable with the material and playing off each other.

One of the funniest scenes finds Sam rigorously prepping Chris for dinner with his g.f. and her mother. Sam also suggests how to avoid tipping them off that he's not really Jewish: discussing hunting and NASCAR or renting "The Passion of the Christ."

"Jewtopia" doesn't pretend to hold deeper meaning, instead spending its energy probing Jewish cultural stereotypes from an insider's p.o.v.

The closest the work gets to addressing a more complex issue is in its examination of "how Jewish" one person is compared with another. In an early scene the two men have a Jewish trivia fiasco. Chris runs circles around Sam and exclaims, "I'm more Jewish as a gentile than your truc-bluc-Jew ass is ever gonna be!" However convoluted the manner, the point is raised that although one person can be more or less observant of or identified with Jewish ethnicity, Jewishness can't be quantified.

In supporting roles, Cheryl David and Gerry Vichi go the distance in fleshing out the backdrop of Jewish clichés. David creates two separate and particular Jewish mothers; Vichi is droll as both the family rabbi and a pervy grandfather.

A true-to-life scene with the entire cast at the Passover Seder table displays the talents of Lorry Goldman as Adam's well-intentioned father. Meanwhile, Sam's younger sister Jill (the ubiquitous Tohn in her most hilarious scene) twitches with ripe teen angst at the kids table between verbal outbursts aimed at her impervious parents.

In the final scene, an unexpected musical number, Tohn riffs like a top-notch gospel choir soloist on the Seder's closing phrase, "Next Year in Jerusalem."

In a final lesson, Adam explains to Chris that it's only an expression: No one's actually going anywhere.

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