



The Clyde Fitch Report

Friday, November 20, 2009

Yisrael Campbell: A Jewish Comedian — and He's Not Yidding!

By Leonard Jacobs



Photos by Carol Rosegg

Picture a trade show or a convention for all the people on Earth who fit into Yisrael Campbell's peculiar demographic. His birth name back in Philadelphia, where he attended Catholic school, was Christopher. His mother had spent some time in a convent; his aunt was a nun.

As a preteen — starting at age 9, Campbell says — he developed an addiction to alcohol. Later, following the usual path for young, troubled, addictive personalities, he added hard drugs to his menu of ungodly habits. He trained for acting at the [Circle in the Square Theatre School](#). He detoured into standup comedy. He went on a “spiritual journey” unlike a typical spiritual journey, for it took him, over time, from Catholicism to reform Judaism to conservative Judaism to life as an Orthodox

Jew. To underscore all this, Campbell has been circumcized a total of three times — once at birth, once upon his first conversion, and finally upon turning Orthodox. He moved to Israel, where he is widely viewed as one of the country's premier Jewish comedians (and frequently headlines the [Palestinian-Israeli Comedy Tour](#)). And he legally changed his name from Christopher to Yisrael.

The guy, simply put, isn't just yidding.

Indeed, now Campbell is back in New York, performing his one-man show, *Circumsize Me*, at the Bleecker Street Theater (45 Bleecker St.), where it opened Nov. 11.

So, go ahead: picture that trade show, that convention. Would Campbell be very, very alone? Perhaps. But in truth, he is also pretty funny — and he's keenly, almost shockingly aware of what a long, strange, glimmeringly beautiful trip it has been. If it's true that out of great pain comes great comedy, one can only imagine Campbell's agony — as well as the ecstasy of discovering and celebrating his true spiritual dimension. How gratifying it must be for him to perform his show for New York audiences and to tell his story. And to make people laugh.

For tickets to *Circumsize Me*, let's cut to the chase: call 212-239-6200 or visit www.telecharge.com. And don't forget to visit Campbell's website, www.yisraelcampbell.com.



What's the most common question you're asked?

After shows, inevitably I get "What do your parents think of all this?" I always say, "Well, I didn't come home in black hat." It was a slow transition from the first conversation to the point where, five years later, I came home and said what I was doing. It wasn't switching religions, I think, that they found so troubling, because they're not troubled. It's more like "Where does this come from?" On a personal level, Jews can't believe that someone would take all this on if they didn't have to. There's always a little old lady who says, "Why would a guy want to become a Jew?"

What do you think of the most ultra-religious Jews? For example, how do you feel about Jewish men who won't touch another woman in any context — like even shaking hands?

I don't bring a lot of the baggage to religious observance that Jews do who grew up as Jews — I come to being Jewish from a spiritual search. The example you give — I do shake women's hands. I can't get my head around the idea that it would have some effect on me if I shook a woman's hand. Shaking a woman's hand, to me, isn't one of the values that I think would have an effect by doing it. And to pretend it does, I feel, takes the focus off of other values — for example, the fact that we're not supposed to embarrass people or make people feel uncomfortable. If you're ultra-Orthodox and you're in Jerusalem, I can respect that, yes. If we're in New York City in the 21st century, men and women shake hands — it's culturally acceptable. I guess most ultra-Orthodox men would explain it simply by saying, "This is what I do." But some of these things...my Western sensibility kind of outweighs it.



Have you made any cultural or religious faux pas ?

Yes, and they have varied. If I came to your house and you said, "Hi, I made this great ham stew," I'd know to avoid that up front. But there have been moments when it wasn't so clear-cut. At one of the first morning minyans I attended, these 85-year-old men gathered around and asked, "Is it true that lox tastes better than lobster?" I perpetuated the lie and said, "Lox tastes *much* better." I mean, a tofu hot dog does taste like a hot dog until you have a real hot dog. I miss cheeseburgers. Sometimes I see commercials and think, that must taste *so* good, because I know how good a cheeseburger can taste.

How do you develop your material — and how dicey can the process become?

Mostly I observe something or someone says something that I think is funny. Before my first circumcision, the nurse said, very seriously, "Wash your penis for three minutes." I didn't write the joke until it struck me that three minutes is a *very* long time to be washing your penis. I don't wash my *hands* for three minutes. So in a case like that, maybe I will tell that story to someone and they'll laugh and I'll develop the joke from there.

What are the differences between Israeli and American audiences?

Especially during the years of the [second Intifada](#), Israeli audiences were much more willing and able to look at some of the things going on in Israel and laugh at themselves. Whereas American audiences, particularly Jewish audiences in America, are very, very protective of Israel. Now, I don't want to fly here to slam Israel in front of U.S. audiences. I do think the Israeli maybe have

more latitude because we *live* there. I do a joke where I talk about the Jerusalem Post — they said 85 percent of the public believes the Israeli government is corrupt. That’s an incredibly high percentage, higher than those who thought the Bush Administration was corrupt. I say the other 15 percent of the public is out of touch with reality. People laugh. But Americans are less willing to make jokes like that. Also, though, I do poke fun at everyone. I say there’s what to criticize and what to commend in each group. No one feels like I’m attacking x or y or that they have to either with this one or stand against that one.



I’m also intrigued by the American Jews’ relationship to Israel. Here they are in the U.S., assimilated. Is there hypocrisy in American Jews’ pro-Israeli fervor?

Not hypocrisy. But it does seem there is — let me say a disconnect. Those tending to be more protective of Israel are protective in a right-wing, often overtly militaristic way. Except what they’re saying is that they’re insisting on the right of *my* son to go to war, not theirs. I mean, if they want to insist on *their* son to go to war, that’s fine. But not *my* son. It seems to me that Americans don’t always realize many groups aren’t fighting for what Americans would fight for: democracy, peace, quiet.

Groups are fighting so as long as something exists — Israel.

There are sensibilities Americans do not understand. In a way, Israel is more like Saudi Arabia, but with fewer Arabs. It’s a very Middle Eastern sensibility. If you stood not touching or not practically touching the person in front of you on a line, they’ll get right in front of you. At an ATM machine, the line is so tight a person certainly could not walk in a space behind you. There’s a different sensibility of space. I’m not a sociologist, but it seems to me that if that’s how you stand in line, that’s how you build your society. It’s not a culture tempered by a hundred or more years in America.

Your cultural adjustment must have been huge, then.

There were layers to it. I remember the first time I read an article talking about an imminent threat facing the Jews. I realized I was hunched over more, a little sweaty; I related to this from the inside, not the outside. Certainly moving to Israel is a great cultural shock. But also when I was getting to be Shabbat observant in a much more serious way, I remember the first time I was invited to a dinner. It was somehow at the home of someone important and I remember getting there and seeing the table set with a thin, plastic tablecloth over the tablecloth, paper plates, plastic cups and three-liter bottles of soda. Plastic is disposable; we know it’s kosher because it has never been used before. That’s not a dinner in America.

How do you reconcile your humor with your religion and faith? And how do you reconcile ancient traditions — like kosher — with modern world?

As far I know, I’m a comedian, not a rabbi. I was trying to find a relationship — a conscious relationship — with God. When we talk of the *Halacha*, we’re talking about a tremendous amount of literature. God has no need for kosher, for not to cook milk and meat together, for not to profit from milk and meat. This is true. But at the essence, for me, I see an attempt to figure out what God wants us to do, moment to moment. It seems picayune to tell people, “Put the right foot in the shoe first,” all right. But you try to discern what God wants.

