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By Daniel M. Gold

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## A True Repeat Customer: Becoming Jewish 3 Times

It would be easy to label “Circumcise Me,” at the Bleecker Street Theater, as merely the latest in the ever-stocked stream of Off Broadway solo acts that are heavy on jokes and seasoned lightly with social commentary.



Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

“Circumcise Me”: Yisrael Campbell in his one-man show about the trials and joys of conversion to Judaism, at the Bleecker Street Theater.

After all, Yisrael Campbell fits the bill comfortably. A comedian now based in Jerusalem, Mr. Campbell began life as Christopher Campbell, born in suburban Philadelphia and raised Roman Catholic. His story, of a misspent, alcoholic youth and eventual conversion to Judaism not once but three times, is the stuff of shtick. And in Mr. Campbell’s genial and polished recounting it’s a tale well told.

(For the record, he notes that while he had been circumcised at birth, conversions still required a ritual called hatafat dam brit, a symbolic taking of a drop of blood — “and not from your thumb.” And though he complied, he believes that “three circumcisions is not a religious covenant, it’s a fetish.”)

What elevates it beyond comedy routine is that, punch lines aside, this is Mr. Campbell’s life, and that his quest for a “relationship with God,” as he puts it, continues even after the house lights rise. That he pursued the relationship so relentlessly, first converting to Reform Judaism, then to Conservatism, then to the Orthodox movement — in Israel, no less — suggests a personal search of great commitment.

Even so, “Circumcise Me,” featuring slides, home movies and snapshots, contains no preaching, and there are plenty of laughs: this is Jewish theater of the ecumenical, no-gentile-left-behind sort. (A documentary of the same name about Mr. Campbell, crosscutting some of the same material with offstage interviews, has screened at several film festivals.)

The biggest source of humor is the rivalry Mr. Campbell encounters among the different streams of Judaism. Think of the old Jewish man on a desert island who shows his

rescuer the synagogues he built — the one he attends and “the one I wouldn’t go into” — and you get the idea.

Mr. Campbell nudges at the foibles of religion generally. After becoming Jewish and living in Los Angeles, he marries an Egyptian woman whose father insists that he convert to Islam. He declines: “If I belong to all three major religions in one calendar year, people are going to doubt my sincerity.”

“Circumcise Me” continues through Jan. 3 at the Bleecker Street Theater, 45 Bleecker Street, East Village; (212) 239-6200, [circumcisemetheplay.com](http://circumcisemetheplay.com).

