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Stage Door: *Circumcise Me*

By Fern Siegel

Circumcise Me is fun, but far more ephemeral. The outline is promising: A Catholic boy from suburban Philly wrestles with addiction and finds religion; in this case Judaism. That's the basis for Yisrael Campbell's one-man show, now at the Bleecker Street Theater. It offers genuinely comic moments and wacky observations about the nature of Jewish life. He's an equal-opportunity jokester.

Born Christopher, he had a mother who left the convent and an aunt who was a nun. He calls himself the son of a "manic depressive Italian woman and a pathologically silent Irishman." Teen alcoholism, coupled with a car accident, pushed him to the edge -- and helped sober him up. Intrigued by Judaism, his spiritual journey begins in earnest in Los Angeles, where he undergoes the first of his *three* conversions: Catholic to Reform, Reform to Conservative, Conservative to Orthodox -- "the only Jew who wore the same suit to his bris as his bar mitzvah." And he gets great mileage zinging the idiosyncrasies of various Jewish denominations. This is inside baseball, affectionately rendered.

Still, audiences are left wondering why he converted, since his love for Judaism is based less on its ethical teachings and more on its twisted interpretations about cleanliness and Chanukah candles. He says he was moved by Reform liturgy, but longed for daily ritual.

En route, he endures several circumcisions. Since he was circumcised at birth, he undergoes ritual bloodletting. Not pleasant, but once, you'd guess, would be enough. Campbell, however, is strangely passive in his religious approach, blindly doing whatever he's told: a distinctly un-Jewish trait. Is he tri-curious or religiously insatiable?

Oddly, he doesn't mention the years of study conversion demands, simplifying it to monosyllabic affirmations and a quick dip in the ritual bath. Campbell has created an entertaining and sincere monologue, but this bagel lacks bite. He needs to add lox and onions - a few tart critiques would give the surface humor more poignancy and depth.

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