

New York The Jewish Week

Tuesday, November 10, 2009 / 23 Heshvan 5770

The Third Cut Is The Deepest

by Ted Merwin
Special To The Jewish Week



A little off the top, please: Serial converter Yisrael Campbell. Carol Rosegg

Call him a one-man General Assembly, a living embodiment of the multifaceted, protean nature of modern Jewish identity.

Yisrael Campbell is a stand-up comedian with a mission. Campbell, born to Catholic parents in a Philadelphia suburb, is a former alcoholic and drug addict who converted three times — to Reform, Conservative and finally Orthodox Judaism. His new show, “Circumcise Me,” uses wry, warm-hearted religious satire to expose the contradictions within Jewish ritual even while celebrating the redemptive power of Judaism.

Campbell, whose first name was originally Christopher, takes a warm-hearted look at Jewish life in America, with much of the humor directed toward the comedian’s own stumbles on the path to Judaism. But “Circumcise Me” (its title a twist on Morgan Spurlock’s exposé of the fast food industry, “Supersize Me”) is not, like Matt Okin’s musical plays “Twist of Faith” and “Soul Searching,” intended to induce Jews to become more Orthodox. Campbell is emphatic that “this is not a kiruv [outreach] piece. It’s a piece about my own seeking and searching.”

In particular, Campbell mines great humor from his three circumcisions — he was circumcised

at birth in the hospital, so the later ones were merely symbolic — including his woeful lack of understanding of the Hebrew (Hatafat Dam Brit) for the act of taking a symbolic drop of blood from the penis. “Sure, I’ll do a Hacha Keechi Waa,” he jokes. “I’ll do two. Why not? It sounds like a drink that should come with an umbrella in it.” He gently mocks himself for undergoing so many circumcisions, which, he points out, is “not a religious covenant, but a fetish!”

Campbell, whose mother was an alcoholic, started drinking at the age of 9. He had a car accident with a priest at 16, whereupon he realized that he needed to put his life on track. While living in Los Angeles, he found a Reform rabbi who encouraged his spiritual search — he jokes that “The Jewish Catalog,” a ‘70s manual for do-it-yourself Judaism, was his first Bible, and he first encountered “Exodus” in the Leon Uris version — and he ended up converting to Reform Judaism.

While he was “blown away” by the power of the Reform liturgy, it was ritual that resonated most strongly with Campbell. This meant that he needed to find a community that offered daily practice, which he calls an “external form imposed on an inner reality” and a “way of being in conscious contact with God.” After undergoing a Conservative conversion, he moved to Israel to study at Pardes, an egalitarian, nondenominational yeshiva. But he found that his classmates did not completely accept him as a Conservative Jew, and he decided to convert once again, to Orthodoxy, a process that ended up causing him great frustration because of disagreements among the rabbis on the beit din and a 15-month delay in getting the paperwork approved. “It helped to have a sense of humor,” he said.

Campbell then started doing stand-up comedy in Jerusalem, mostly for groups of visiting Americans. His act, initially called, “It’s Not in Heaven,” after a well-known reference to the Torah in Deuteronomy, won him a reputation among Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews alike. “As far as we know,” wrote Tanya Gold in the London Guardian, “Lenny Bruce never had sex with an Orthodox Jew. But if he had, he would have produced Yisrael Campbell.” In addition to Israel and the United States, Campbell has performed in London and at Trinity College in Dublin, where he found “five Jews, five Muslims and 250 lapsed Catholics.”

Like Bob Alper, the Reform rabbi-turned-comedian, Campbell takes a quizzical, slightly bewildered approach to the paradoxes of Jewish identity. But unlike Rabbi Alper, who trades in zingy one-liners of the after-dinner-speaker variety, Campbell is much more intense, as well as much more philosophical. He works himself up into a mock frenzy as he growls his impatience with, for example, the idea that the candle on the second night of Chanukah needs to be lit first to save it embarrassment because of its newness as compared to the — as he points out — equally new first candle. And then comes the kicker: “If this is a religion that cares so much about the feelings of a candle, how must they treat people?”

Fervently Orthodox Jews rarely appear in American entertainment except as objects of ridicule. Think of Woody Allen’s appearance as a chasid in “Annie Hall” or Larry David’s mistakenly carrying around a sheet with a hole in it when he wants to bed an Orthodox Jewish woman. A comedian who deliberately dresses like a chasid might seem to be tapping into this vein of humor. Campbell, however, wears the accoutrements of fervent Orthodoxy as a way of simultaneously expressing his love for Orthodox Judaism and as an ironic commentary on those who insist on any exclusive or exclusionary religious truth.

Campbell, who says that he retains an “East Coast Democratic ethos,” remains perplexed by the prejudices that groups of Jews show toward each other. When he was on his way to Limmud, a pluralistic Jewish study conference in England, another Orthodox Jew said that it was “better to learn with goyim than learn with those Jews.” Campbell was shocked. “Torah Judaism does not

need to be so insular,” he believes. “Sometimes, the more religious a person is, the more nervous he becomes about interacting with both non-Jews and non-religious Jews.” He views Orthodox Judaism as stronger than even many of its adherents seem to believe. “It’s not bone china. It’s not going to crack.”

Eva Price is producing “Circumcise Me.” She first met Campbell when she was working on Cory Kahaney’s “The J.A.P. Show.” She immediately “fell in love with him and his story.” A veteran producer of one-person shows, she found in Campbell’s act a rare combination of “humor and heart.” She sees an important message in the show. “Most American Jews take their Judaism for granted,” she said. “But you can make your own brand of Judaism in this world.” She also finds great inspiration in Campbell’s story.

“People don’t always have strength to find inner strength and grow,” she said, “but he went toward the light.”

“Circumcise Me” runs at the Bleecker Street Theatre, 45 Bleecker St., through Jan. 6. Performances are Wednesdays at 3 p.m., Thursdays and Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 4 p.m. and 7 p.m. For tickets, call Telecharge at (212) 239-6200.

© 2000 - 2009 The Jewish Week, Inc.

