

W5: My Mother's Lesbian Jewish Wiccan Wedding Hits The Main Stage

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Imagine you're writing your first play. You want it to really stand out, garner attention and become a big hit. The first step – how about a catchy title? Try something that really tells the audience what to expect. How about: "My Mother's Lesbian Jewish Wiccan Wedding."

Now, that's a pretty catchy title, but who'd believe it? Well, if you're David Hein, an up and coming Toronto entertainer, and his wife, Irene Carl Sankoff, they'd better believe it – because all of that Wiccan, Jewish and Lesbian stuff is true. Not only that, their musical has theatre-goers buzzing.

Based on the true story of Hein's life with his mother, "My Mother's Lesbian Jewish Wiccan Wedding" – MMLJWW for short – is both a love story and a coming-out story. When David was a teen his mother left her husband, discovered she was a lesbian, rediscovered her Jewish roots and later married her Wiccan lesbian girlfriend.

"My Mother's Lesbian Jewish Wiccan Wedding" premiered during the 2009 Toronto Fringe Festival at the tiny 85-seat Bread and Circus Theatre. Tucked into the city's Kensington Market district this was about as fringe as an actor could get, performing a play in a converted storefront. But MMLJWW filled the seats, the aisles, the sidewalks outside. The play became one of the hottest tickets at the Fringe Festival. Theatre goers lined up for hours to see the little production with the eye-catching name.

And then one day, lined up amid those desperate ticket-seekers, was the big break. Not just any big break but the biggest break in Canadian theatre, the country's biggest impresario, David Mirvish. As in "David Mirvish presents Mamma Mia" or "David Mirvish presents The Lion King" or "David Mirvish presents The Sound of Music".

Mirvish liked MMLJWW so much he picked it up for a run at his 800-seat Panasonic theatre. He has high hopes for My Mother's Lesbian, Jewish, Wiccan Wedding. "It's a great title because it's very inclusive. I hope we get people from every one of those groups to want to come out and see this show," said Mirvish. All of which is a very good thing because one of the last fringe productions Mirvish brought to the main stage was The Drowsy Chaperone, which eventually became a Broadway blockbuster that went on to win five Tony awards.

It is one thing to mount a successful hour-long fringe play and quite another to produce a 90-minute musical that will sell 5,000 tickets a week. "I worry about people liking the show, I worry about reviews," said Irene. "I worry about people now feeling like I don't have enough time to spend with them."

With only a few months from announcement that the play-cum-musical would be in the Mirvish fall lineup to opening night, MMLJWW's intense rehearsal schedule gives the director, Andrew Lamb, plenty to worry about as well. But one thing he's not concerned about is the unique appeal of the story.

"We've heard a lot of coming-out stories from a child's point of view." But he says, "We've not really heard this story from a parent's point of view," said Lamb. "What if your mom came out to you? What if your dad came out?"

Finally, in early November, opening night finally arrived at The Panasonic Theatre. The show played to a full house and at the end the cast received a standing ovation. As the applause died down, David Mirvish, mused, "We may have a sleeper hit." A few days later his company announced that My Mother's Lesbian Jewish Wiccan Wedding was doing well enough for an extended run – two more weeks. Not enough to call it a runaway hit, but even The Drowsy Chaperone, the success story MMLJWW seeks to emulate, took years of openings and closings and rewrites and reopening before finding success on Broadway.

Regardless of whether it goes on to become a huge hit and make it to The Great White Way, David and Irene are already proud of what they've accomplished. Their play has shown audiences that love comes in many forms. And how many wedding presents manage to do that?

