

Daily Variety

LEGIT REVIEW

Evolution of a Homeboy/Locked Down or Jails, Hospitals & Hip-Hop

(Schoenberg Hall, UCLA: \$27 top)

UCLA Center for the Performing Arts presents a play in one act written and performed by Danny Hoch. Directed by Jo Bonney. Opened, reviewed Nov. 21, 1997. Running time: 1 hour, 40 min.

By CHARLES ISHERWOOD

Solo performer Danny Hoch, a self-described "young, uptight Brooklyn kid," does indeed appear to have a chip or two on his shoulder, and it's a good thing: His new show, despite its cumbersome title, is a sharp picture of urban malaise drawn to human scale, powered by a palpable but subtly disseminated sense of outrage at the inequities of American culture.

Inhabiting a series of characters united by disenfranchisement and brought to life with vivid color and deep sympathy, he's a performer whose style is as captivating as his message is provocative. With a few costume props as his only theatrical effect, Hoch becomes a prison inmate arrested for hawking O.J. T-shirts without a license, who amusingly compares his entrepreneurial spirit to that of a little girl on a TV commercial selling lemonade; a Puerto Rican crippled in a shooting trying to pick up a girl waiting to visit her grandmother at the hospital; a Cuban whose Spanish is occasion-

ally laced with the only English he knows, gleaned from rap songs for which he tries to solicit some translations from a New York tourist.

Although they're bitingly funny and written with a wit that is always born of character, these portraits aren't caricatures, but vividly felt snapshots of human beings coping with the pressure-cooker existence

of living on the urban fringes.

We may laugh at the smoldering bitterness of a prisoner with AIDS when he speaks of his admiration for the Skipper on "Gilligan's Island" ("I relate to his anger"), but Hoch knows that it's in these small nuggets of familiarity — who of a certain age can't claim a particular affection for one of that clan? — that we find connections with these characters.

Indeed although Hoch speaks with contempt of TV, he knows it's the country's great equalizer, feeding the dreams of a white boy in Montana posing as a fierce rapper in front of his bedroom mirror no less than the real item. That Montana teen dreaming up a chat with Jay Leno, one of Hoch's funniest and most pointed bits, is cleverly contrasted with a real rapper, MC Enuf, making his belated David Letterman debut ("It's easier for a rodent to get on your show than me," he jibes), and lamenting how the records that reflected his awak-



Hoch

ening to the destructive messages in his guns 'n' girls rap didn't sell nearly as well as the incendiary ones did.

Likewise the irony of a prison fight over Martin Lawrence or the Kerrigan-Harding affair, and not "something important, like shoes," points up Hoch's idea that the glare of the TV screen blinds the dispossessed to the real causes of their plight.

But the tube is most sharply taken to task when Hoch steps into his own shoes to deliver a monologue about a guest-starring gig that went awry when he objected to playing a pool-boy named Ramon with a stereotyped Spanish accent because, as Jerry Seinfeld suggested, it was "funnier" that way. ("You know you watch the shit," he admonishes the audience, before remembering the gig's location: "You probably make the shit...") His audaciousness, though it sometimes slides into self-righteousness, is salutary: Who would think to brand "Seinfeld," that most pointedly pointless of TV shows, as "the enemy"? Hoch does, and you might never watch Jerry's exploits with quite the same relish again.

It's probably not a coincidence that the weakest segments — about a rage-filled corrections officer's encounter with a therapist, and a former crack baby at age 19 — are those most loosely tied to the show's abiding theme, which Hoch reiterates in a rap finale: The trappings of the urban gangsta lifestyle, glorified in rap that reaches right around the world, only serve to distract their listeners from the grim truth that gave birth to the culture of hip-hop swagger — the "powerlessness" of the urban poor.