

The disposable hero of hip-hop  
Christopher Hawthorne reviews *Evolution of a Homeboy*  
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# EXPRESS

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## THEATER

### Please Danny Don't Hurt 'Em

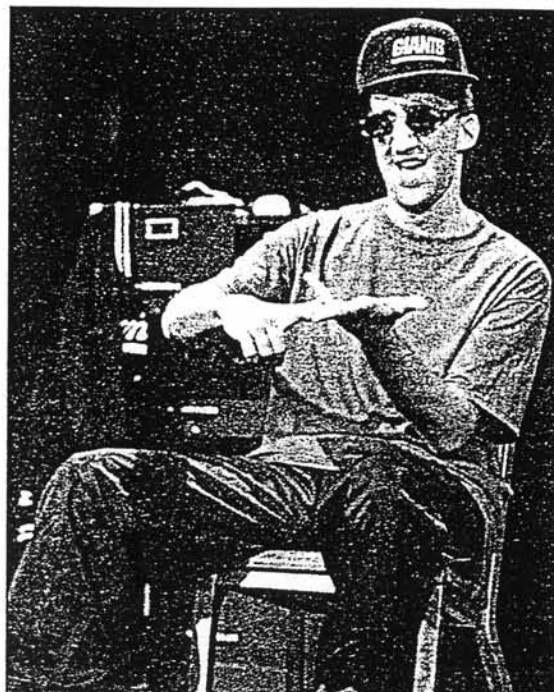
#### EVOLUTION OF A HOMEBOY: JAILS, HOSPITALS & HIP HOP

Written and performed by Danny Hoch. Directed by Jo Bonney. A production of Berkeley Repertory Theatre, at the Julia Morgan Theatre through November 16.

By Christopher Hawthorne

It's tough to say exactly how the transition happened, how rap music became hip hop and how hip hop music became hip hop culture. It began when MTV dropped the ghettoized, not-ready-for-primetime *Yo! MTV Raps* and played Dr. Dre videos while the kids of America were still awake; when Time Warner and Quincy Jones poured buckets of money into a mass culture magazine called *Vibe*; when consumers started to show enough savvy to reject the music industry's weaker rap efforts—think MC Hammer's "hard" period—no matter how broadly they were promoted. These days, the maturation is complete: *Vibe* is not only a magazine but a TV show, San Francisco's KMEF radio markets itself as "the station for the hip hop generation," and nobody thinks twice about the fact that Jim Carrey got his big break as the only white performer on *In Living Color*. Perhaps Will Smith, who has surfed hip hop's rising crest as expertly as anybody, charts the progression best: a dozen years after starting his career as a bubble-gum rapper known as the Fresh Prince, he is now a full-blown movie star, pulling down \$15 million per picture.

But hip hop hasn't been just a marketer's dream, helping to make middle America comfortable with smug and nonthreatening black men like the costar of *Men in Black*. The culture itself, at a grass-roots level, has continued to develop and gain complexity. Hip hop may be spreading over the culture in a thin, sweet glaze, but underneath it all, rap music itself—shorn of marketing schemes and demographics—is still compelling, and teenage hopefuls still sell homemade tapes of their rhymes on street corners. And those rhymes keep getting



By Ken Friedman

better, if only at the underground level: it may be hard to believe, but there are probably twenty rappers out there you've never heard of who could give hip hop's hall of famers a run for their money and then some.

In his astonishing new one-man show, *Evolution of a Homeboy*, the monologist Danny Hoch distills the seventeen-year history of hip hop (in the rap world, the landmark Sugarhill

Gang song "Rapper's Delight," from 1980, is akin to the birth of Christ, with the Bronx standing in for Bethlehem) into ninety intermission-free minutes of relentlessly dramatic, relentlessly funny material. Prowling a set at the Julia Morgan Theatre so basic that no scenic designer is credited in the program—it includes only a couple of battered filing cabinets and a bench, with a black velvet curtain hanging at the

back of the stage—Hoch plays ten characters, from a New York street vendor to a white wannabe rap star from Montana to an aging rap star called MC Enuf. (He never spells out that last one, but I'm pretty sure no self-respecting MC would spell it any other way.)

Only a couple of the characters are actually rappers, but most everyone on stage, even the Cuban street vendor, owes something to hip hop's forefathers. That something is what sociologists call a worldview—or, as people used to say, the difference between rap and hip hop is that rap is music and hip hop is attitude. It's the attitude that says that wearing your pants slung low and digging Alan Iverson and drinking forties and laughing at Chris Rock are all somehow connected, even if you're white and you live in Arizona. Most important, Hoch argues, is that all those things were connected even before corporations and test marketers got involved. Hip hop may now be essentially a form of consumerism, but that wasn't always the case, and luckily Hoch isn't going to throw out the baby with the over-packaged bathwater.

There are some characters who seem out of place here—the prisoner with AIDS, the prison guard in a court-mandated therapy session—but they're presented so strongly that you get the feeling Hoch and director Jo Bonney were simply reluctant to get rid of such entertaining scenes. And then there's the sketch where Hoch plays himself. It, too, lacks a direct connection to hip hop, but Hoch has grounded himself to such a degree in this world that any personal story he tells seems to grow, organically, from that culture. He knows its cadences well, and not as he might learn to cop a British or Jamaican accent. That Brooklyn b-boy diction is, generally speaking, his own. It's how he speaks to his friends, to himself, and to us in this one scene.

Reading lines he has yet to memorize from pages on a music stand, Hoch tells the story of his scheduled appearance on *Seinfeld* that fizzled out when he refused to play his part (a high-strung health club employee) with a Spanish accent. It's a tale of cultural stereotyping and an actor battling his own gut feeling that "TV is fucking evil." It's full of unexplored irony, since Hoch seems to have no trouble impersonating people of other ethnicities throughout his own show. And it's easily the evening's shakiest sketch: Hoch lost his way more than once in its overlapping sentences on

opening night, and he's clearly still trying to make sure the piece doesn't come off sounding too self-righteous. The scene demonstrates more clearly than any other that Hoch is using his tour, which begins in Berkeley, to fine-tune the show before he takes it to New York next spring.

Danny Hoch and I are the same age. Though we grew up on different coasts, the material on which he bases his show is so familiar to me that I almost feel I've got an obligation to excuse myself from this review and let somebody with a little more distance write it up. After all, *Evolution of a Homeboy* is about how sympathetic New York white kids, like Hoch, immersed themselves in hip hop culture in the mid-'80s and made it at least partly their own. We did the same thing around here: we bought records by Guy and Too Short and NWA, watched *Soul Train*, and rooted for Gary Payton. Get one of us drunk enough today and we'll spill the lyrics to some ancient Young MC or Big Daddy Kane record; get us really drunk and we'll try to make up our own rhymes.

And so it's difficult, for me at least, to figure out what makes his show so successful—is it Hoch's enormous talent, or my own nostalgic connection to the material? Or is it, more grandly, an early sign of the ascension of our generation to the top of the cultural heap? It's one thing to hear your language and read your own cultural signs on TV and in products aimed squarely at the 14-to-34 demographic; but to see one of the best-regarded theater companies in the country stage that same material, affixing to it the establishment's seal of approval, is another thing entirely.

Mostly, though, *Evolution of a Homeboy* is a magnetic show because Hoch's talent is magnetic, because he makes you want to bust out every praiseful hip hop cliché in the book: he's got mad skills, mad flavor. There are all kinds of questions lurking beneath the surface of his performance—most obviously, what does it mean for a white actor to incorporate almost exclusively minority idioms of speech, dress, and movement into his work? But if you buy Hoch's implied argument that hip hop, though it undoubtedly rose from minority communities, is now more a cultural than a racial construct—an argument already made successfully by the Beastie Boys and abysmally by Vanilla Ice—then such questions fall away, losing their persistence. What remains on stage is, surprisingly enough, wholly authentic.