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'Jails, Hospitals' Gives Humanity to Society's Outcasts

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“When I was outside, I was eatin' all organic food, everything organic,” says Andy, who is HIV-positive and works sweeping the floors in an upstate New York prison. “I was shootin' heroin, but I was eatin' organic.”

The humor and the horror entangled in that remark lies at the heart of Danny Hoch's breathtaking, nearly two-hour “Jails, Hospitals & Hip-Hop,” which opened a monthlong run Wednesday night at the Actors' Gang in Hollywood.

“Jails” is the 27-year-old New York solo artist's latest multi-character one-man show, the same work Hoch was developing when he was in Los Angeles a year ago and performed at UCLA's Schoenberg Hall. Then, as now, Hoch dazzles with characters who, for most of us, come from unseen worlds—an alcoholic prison guard forced to

see a therapist after beating up an inmate, a young Cuban selling trinkets to tourists, a white Montana teenager who spends the dead hours between his shifts at Hardee's pretending he's the hip-hop star Flip. Flip stands in front of a mirror at home, imagining he's being interviewed by Jay Leno on “The Tonight Show” (“If I had a choice between bein' like you—Jay Leno—or Tupac Shakur . . . who you think I'ma choose? Tupac!”).

Such brazen acts of fantasy and self-denial run through the show and provide much of “Jails'” wit. But Hoch, an unapologetic activist who has taken his theater training into jails to run conflict-resolution workshops and has eschewed movie and TV offers to stay grounded in grass-roots theater, isn't using his considerable talent as a mimic and hip-hop linguist simply to make us laugh or expose artifice. He means to enlighten too, to cut through cultural and class divisions and humanize society's supposed outcasts.

In the hands of a less-engaging performer, this conceit would come off as trite or preachy, but Hoch is so good at channeling his streetwise characters—he can morph from one to the next by accentuating a facial tic or nervous laugh or adjusting a baseball cap by a slight degree—that he repeatedly beats back your cynicism. Carried along by the inventive way his characters argue and rationalize with themselves, you sometimes don't even notice that a scene isn't really moving forward.

In fact, the only sanctimonious moment comes when Hoch plays himself, telling the story of how he was fired from a guest spot on “Seinfeld.” Apparently, he didn't want to play a pool guy as a stereotypical Latino named Ramon. The story did have some resonance on an opening night packed with entertainment industry types (including Brooke Shields), but the piece underlines too heavily Hoch's message—his distaste for the way mass entertainment coopts ethnic cultures and feeds

them back in one-dimensional, distorted bites. He's right, of course, but he's much more effective when he's showing us this, not telling.

• “Jails, Hospitals & Hip-Hop,” produced by Center Theater Group/Mark Taper Forum and Caseroc Productions in association with the Actors' Gang, at the Actors' Gang, 6209 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood. Wednesdays-Sundays through Dec. 13. 8 p.m. No performance Nov. 26. Tickets: \$25. Students: \$10. (213) 628-2772.