

# Los Angeles Times

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 16, 1997

COPYRIGHT 1997/THE TIMES MIRROR COMPANY / ★ / 702 PAGES



RON RIESTERER — Staff

Danny Hoch performs in Berkeley Repertory Theatre's "Evolution of a Homeboy" at Julia Morgan Theatre.

## Gritty 'Homeboy' gets boost from Hoch's integrity

By Chad Jones

STAFF WRITER

Danny Hoch is someone to look out for. As a writer/performer, we'll be hearing much more from him in years to come. But he's also someone to look out for in real life. If you see him around, you should know that he's watching you with a keen eye, and whatever you do or say may end up in one of his shows.

Hoch's latest one-man opus, "Evolution of a Homeboy: Jails, Hospitals & Hip Hop," opened Wednesday night at the Julia Morgan Theatre as part of Berkeley Repertory Theatre's new season.

### REVIEW

The show is Berkeley Rep's bold attempt to appeal to a younger audience, one that isn't used to theater having anything to say to them. Well, Hoch has plenty to say to just about everyone, and he says it beautifully.

Hoch's language is mostly the language of the streets, which means it can get rough. If "Homeboy" were a movie, it would receive a hard R rating, but that shouldn't deter anyone who wants to experience a slice of America not normally seen on the regional-theater stage.

At 26, Hoch seems wise beyond his years. The stories he chooses to tell are graced with subtlety amid the bombast, telling details among the broad comic and dramatic strokes. His style of

# Homeboy: Hoch's spellbinding show

Continued from CUE-1

performance — a variety of characters depicted with a minimum of costumes and props — comes out of a tradition that includes Lily Tomlin, Whoopi Goldberg and Eric Bogosian. In fact, it is Bogosian's wife, Jo Bonney, who has directed "Homeboy" with such a deft touch. She wisely keeps the show hovering in that tricky but exhilarating gray area between entertainment and diatribe.

The subtitle of Hoch's show, "Jails, Hospitals & Hip Hop," serves as a description of how its characters are confined. Some are physically impaired. Some, like the guy nabbed for selling Bart Simpson and O.J. Simpson T-shirts without a license, are doing time, while others, like Caucasian rapper M.C. Enough, are imprisoned in the music, violence and drug culture of the hip-hop world.

A Brooklyn native, Hoch has spent time teaching conflict resolution through drama to young people in New York City jails. It's clear Hoch not only knows the people he represents on stage but also feels for them and their plight. This fiercely talented writer and performer is so assured and so confident in the stories he's telling that he appears not to feel the need to

## REVIEW

- Danny Hoch's "Evolution of a Homeboy: Jails, Hospitals & Hip Hop"
- Presented by Berkeley Repertory Theatre
- Through Nov. 16
- Julia Morgan Theater, 2640 College Ave., Berkeley
- 8 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays, 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays, 2 o'clock Saturday matinees Nov. 1, 8 and 15
- \$34.50-\$45 (half-price discounts for people under 30)
- (510) 845-4700
- ★★★½ stars (Gritty and gripping)

show off. For someone standing alone on a stage for 90 minutes, that's really saying something.

What registers most strongly in Hoch's performance is his honesty and his respect for his multiracial characters. Even his most comic creation, a white Montana teen-ager alone in his bedroom practicing to be a "gangsta" rapper in front of his mirror, isn't a buffoon. The kid, who calls himself Flip Dog, is so lacking in a culture of his own that he turns to hip-hop to provide one for him. While his par-

ents yell at him from downstairs, he pretends he's on "The Tonight Show" and tells Jay Leno, "I have the ghetto in my heart, man."

Hoch's maturity as both writer and actor comes through most powerfully in his depiction of a character living with AIDS in prison. The potent mixture of crippling rage, of painful self-awareness and of unflagging, addictive weakness creates a startling portrait of a man who encompasses parts of everyone. There's humor in the man's story — he has many unkind things to say about the people he served while working at McDonald's — but the power of the character lies in his ability to maintain a sense of hope. Even if that hope is represented by something as simple as fresh carrots being served in the mess hall.

Perhaps Hoch's crowning moment comes when he's playing himself, telling the story of how he was fired from a guest-starring role on "Seinfeld" when he refused to play his character as "ethnic." Hoch knows this story will hit his audience, both young and old, where they live. It's an incredible story made all the more so because it, like "Evolution of a Homeboy" itself, is a testament to Hoch's greatest asset: his integrity.