

Los Angeles Times

LOS ANGELES TIMES / CALENDAR SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 16, 1997

He'd Like to See You Squirm

Danny Hoch, the man behind 'Homeboy,' aims to create a 'discomfort zone.' The monologist says theater's not just about entertainment.

By Elaine Dutka

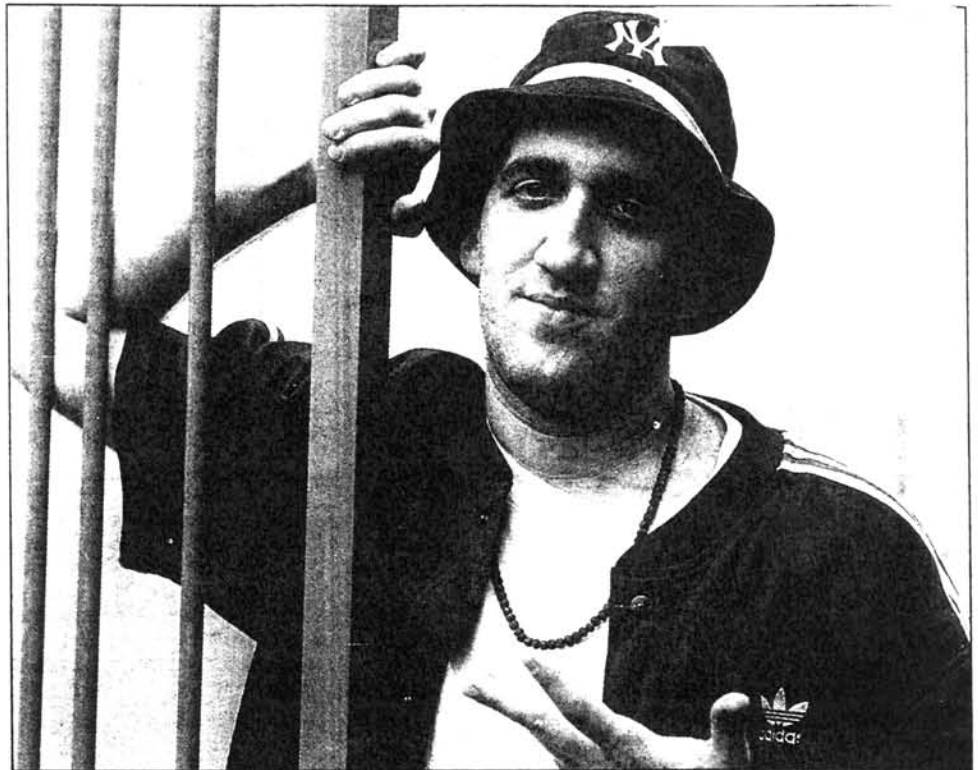
He's been called "Eric Bogosian's younger brother"—a 26-year-old solo theatrical performer whose keen ear and sense of social outrage have landed him a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, off-Broadway's Obie, an HBO special—and, by his estimate, \$4 million worth of rejected film and TV offers.

Danny Hoch turned down a Quentin Tarantino movie. He nixed a role in "Money Train." He refused to appear in an episode of "Seinfeld" because of perceived negative stereotypes—an incident recounted in his latest show, "Evolution of a Homeboy/Jails, Hospitals, and Hip Hop," playing at UCLA's Schoenberg Hall next weekend prior to opening in New York in March.

"Money is about separation," says the rubbery featured Brooklynite, sitting at a Westside hotel pool in an Adidas warm-up jacket, jeans and a fisherman's hat with a New York Yankees logo. "I'm about community."

And Hoch's community, without question, is a far remove from Hollywood. His mission: to bring the ethnic fringe—what he calls society's "day players . . . five lines or less"—center stage. Among them this time: a former crack baby bidding farewell to his longtime speech therapist; a Puerto Rican who has been shot by the police; a Vietnam vet who prefers prison to minimum wage at McDonald's; and Hoch's first non-New York character—a 17-year-old white gangsta-rapper wannabe from Montana.

"This show is about language," says Hoch, digging into a plate of spaghetti marinara. "People whose native language isn't English trying to communicate with each other in the context of



LUIS SINCO / For The Times

NO THANKS, JERRY: Hoch says turning down a "Seinfeld" role was a "soul-building experience."

violence, poverty, rejection, love. And it's about changing the language of the theater from a literary, written tradition to the stuff I spew out—purely oral. In a multicultural society, thoughts and dreams can't be expressed in standard English."

"Homeboy," the monologist says, is darker, more confrontational, than "Some People"—Hoch's highly acclaimed 1994 stage-show-turned-HBO-special that put him on the map.

"I'm interested in creating a 'discomfort zone,'" Hoch says. "While I respect Anna Deavere Smith's tremendous talent, it wasn't cool to do a show about the L.A. uprisings ["Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992"] and have everyone leave feeling good about themselves. People naturally want to be entertained, but in the end, theater is also an educational tool."

Hoch's path is a risky one, his colleagues agree. "Danny could easily be accused of being racist,

mimicking ethnic stereotypes," says Philip Bither, curator of performing arts at Minneapolis' Walker Arts Center. "But his empathy for his characters shines through. His approach is less aggressive than Bogosian's—there's the notion of a shared humanity, the image of a 'better place.'"

Mark Russell, artistic director of Performing Space 122—an East Village cultural center that became Hoch's home base, has his own take on the artist: "I call Danny the Diane Arbus of solo performance," he says. Like the photographer, "he brings out the characters in such great detail—without a lot of commentary."

Hoch's speech pathologist mother must be proud—and relieved. Hoch himself teetered close to the brink. A child of divorce reared Jewish in an ethnically diverse middle-class Queens housing project, he was locked up repeatedly for graffiti

writing and minor drug dealing. ("I never did serious time because I was so young . . . and so white"). The money from drug sales supported his passions: equipment for a magic act and white-face makeup for mime. Marcel Marceau was a great influence, as were Shields and Yarnell. As a teen, Hoch would perform at parties and bar mitzvahs and do break-dancing in the street.

Hip-hop, which hit New York hard in the late '70s and early '80s, basically saved his life, he says. "It's a culture that came out of resistance—a kind of music, a style of dressing and talking, a way of viewing the world," Hoch explains. "Hip-hop has made tons of mistakes in the form of violence and negative imagery. But for people born after 1970, it's the most articulate means of release we have."

At his mother's insistence, Hoch applied to Manhattan's

Please see Page 52

▶ "EVOLUTION OF A HOMEBOY / JAILS, HOSPITALS AND HIP HOP," Schoenberg Hall, UCLA. Dates: Friday to next Sunday, 8 p.m. Tickets: \$27. Phone: (310) 825-2101.