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Hoch Gives Voice to Array of Concerns

THEATER REVIEW

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TIMES THEATER CRITIC

Danny Hoch, the master of young, urban male-speak, came to UCLA's Schoenberg Hall over the weekend. Still in his mid-20s, Hoch is a long-faced man with soulful eyes and a keen ear for how speech patterns reveal the mores of a subculture. Most of his characters dwell on the more difficult rungs of society—men or boys in prison, born to cocaine-addicted mothers or shut up in rooms, trying to avoid their parents and pretending they're famous rappers being interviewed by Jay Leno. He understands how language betrays

much more—the squashed hope, the ruthless bias—than the speaker wants to impart.

Unlike fellow one-man wonder Eric Bogosian, with whom he shares gifted director Jo Bonney, Hoch connects with the dreams driving the men he chronicles. He does not satirize. His portraits are funny, usually uncomfortably so, and laced with compassion.

He gives us a forgotten philosopher—a kid in jail for selling O.J. and Bart Simpson T-shirts without a license. The kid compares himself to a hypothetical little white girl from whom the police buy lemonade just before they arrest him. "What are you, Puerto Rican?" the cop asks him, and the fact that the cop can't tell makes the kid feel powerful (a parallel to Hoch, the ethnic chameleon). The kid imagines that the

cop—"a servant"—feels threatened by him, and so "he's gonna decide that day to make capitalism illegal." In this, as in all of his best bits, Hoch's character has valid insights, which Hoch presents in a context larger than the character himself can perceive.

Like his title, "Evolution of a Homeboy/Locked Down or Jails, Hospitals & Hip-Hop," Hoch's pieces could use some pruning. As great as his powers of observations and empathy are, he too often fails to focus on a single, dramatic point that would give shape to a piece. His best characters are the ones who obviously tear a hole in his heart—the disabled boy who tries to make time with an uninterested girl or the young Cuban man desperately wanting to connect with an American tourist. Espe-

cially wrenching is a speech-impaired adolescent who struggles to hide his sense of loss as he makes a jaunty farewell toast to a longtime speech therapist.

Characters Hoch connects to less viscerally can be preachy. His prison warden—a wound-up white guy forced to talk with a female therapist because he beat up a black prisoner—is too obvious.

Hoch repeats a story—the only piece in which he plays himself—that he told here last year in an evening called "Field Trips." In this true-life tale, he details how he walked away from a role on "Seinfeld" because he perceived a snottiness and an ethnic insensitivity on the part of Jerry Seinfeld, the producer, the director and even Kramer. The story has grown a little more self-righteous, and he should stop telling it. Like most people, artists or otherwise, Hoch is at his best when his own superiority is not the point of his story.