



STORYTELLERS OF THE STREETS: Danny Hoch, above, takes 'Jails, Hospitals and Hip-Hop' to the Broward Center for the Performing Arts, where, Sarah Jones, below, presented her own 'Surface Transit.'

NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK

Performers like
Danny Hoch and
Sarah Jones are using
hip-hop to blast into
the world of fine arts

BY AUDRA D.S. BURCH
aburch@herald.com

When Danny Hoch, urban theatrical schizophrenic, brings his one-man show, *Jails, Hospitals and Hip-Hop*, to the Broward Center for the Performing Arts Saturday, he becomes a cultural phenomenon personified, his act the latest in a series of performances framed by the hip-hop aesthetic.

Over the past several years, the traditional arts community — that last bastion of high culture — is evolving to include hip-hop. Graduates from performing arts schools across the country, as literate in MTV as in *Macbeth*, are interpreting the classics and plowing new ground in the arts. In essence, they are members of a new generation, who roared and resisted largely through rap and break dancing, and are taking the stage as their own, bent on telling their story their way.

"We are talking about the emergence of hip-hop in the traditional arts. We are talking about the cultural presence of hip-hop in conventional storytelling. We are talking about telling our stories on stage in a way that is relevant to us," says Hoch.

"What we are talking about is a generation that



▶ PLEASE SEE HOCH, 2E

Dramatist turns his back on Shakespeare and embraces hip-hop

► HOCH, FROM 1E
has graduated from the nation's art schools that are no longer satisfied with just Shakespeare or Tennessee Williams. They want more. That we, of the hip-hop generation, are not on the stage more is a cultural crime."

So what you see on stages across the country are the cumulative dramatic presentation of the kaleidoscopic hip-hop experience; inspired, excited, enlightened by the beats and senses of a three-dimensional urban world.

Such a movement could do more for the largely monolithic theater-going crowd than *The Nutcracker*: build a young diverse audience.

"We have an obligation to serve as large a segment as possible and to represent as many cultural forms as possible," says Mark Nerenhausen, president of the Broward Center. "We are also trying to become a forum, a catalyst for discussion, a town hall for the community to reflect on social issues."

DYNAMIC CULTURE

That's the foundation for the Center's *Rant and Rave*

series, launched this year. The series includes Hoch and three other acts, though not all hip-hop influenced.

"Culture, in general, is dynamic, always changing and finding new ways to express themselves. Hip-hop is one of the latest incarnations of the basic human desire to express ourselves and we should showcase that," Nerenhausen says.

Among other stages and sets that have embraced hip-hop:

► Later this year, Robert DeNiro's TriBeCa Films, is scheduled to release *Prison Song*, a hip-hopera featuring Hoch, Q-Tip, Mary J Blige and Elvis Costello.

► Last weekend in San Francisco, Hoch and three other artists performed at the Hip-Hop Nation Festival. Those four acts were part of the 15 at the second annual Hip-Hop Festival in New York, which is likely to tour next year with a stop in Miami.

► In May, MTV presented *Carnet*, a hip-hopera directed by Robert Townsend. In April, the Miami Light Project presented *Romes and Jewels*, a hip-hop musical loosely based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* but with break dancing, rap, DJs and a narrator who

artfully seamed Elizabethan verse with street verse, played the Colony Theatre in Miami Beach. And before that, Sarah Jones brought her one-woman show, *Surface Transit*, to the Broward Center. The ice-breaker at her show: Rashida, a local spoken word artist. "I am a product of the hip-hop generation. When I began to develop my stories, I picked the people around me and the stories that were compelling. I was trying to depict images and characters that I thought were interesting," says Jones, whose show includes a recovering rap addict in a "12-step program."

► And, two years ago, producer Prince Paul released *A Prince Among Thieves*, a groundbreaking hip-hopera CD in the tradition of *The Who's Tommy*.

HOCH'S WORLD

Jails is the second (the first was the virtuosic *Some People*) of Hoch's deftly drawn studies of the world, informed by his New York experiences, then extrapolated for mass consumption. Ten characters in all, portraits of experiences ranging from funny to disturbing, they are the vehicles to talk about the prison industrial complex, police brutality and

the hip-hop world at large.

Hoch is a ringmaster of sorts, leading the audience on an unexpected, even troubling, tour de force of the American id. He is teaching, without preaching. You are laughing and listening. And it's funny. But it's not. Therein lies Hoch's genius, his theatrical dexterity.

Among his most powerful personalities is Flip Dog, who, being a def rapper and all, has sold something like 275 million albums, or so he tells Jay Leno in an imagined interview. He is also a Wilt Chamberlaineque lover, who almost always is met by more than 100 groupies looking for love, or more probably, lust. Another fascinating bit about Flip Dog: He is black. Despite his milky hue, his Montana accent, his birth certificate, his mother's claims. He is black. No, really. His proof, his peculiar reasoning: his entire body is a birthmark, and the tiny dark spot of color is his "true race." Or, so he tells Leno.

Hoch, who trained at the North Carolina School of The Arts, then dropped out and returned to New York, says his inspiration to do theater came in everyday experiences. Routines like riding the subway.

IF YOU GO

"Jails, Hospitals and Hip-Hop," written and performed by Danny Hoch, Saturday at the Broward Center for the Performing Arts, 201 SW Fifth Ave., Fort Lauderdale.
Performances are 7 and 10 p.m. Tickets are \$25. For more information, call 954-462-0222.

But there was no relevant way to tell about the idiosyncrasies of the Queens subway in 19th-Century *chanson*.

"I studied Shakespeare and all that, and I excelled at it, but I became really impatient with it and dissatisfied," says Hoch in a phone interview from San Francisco. "I just felt like it was unjust for my community and unjust for me to tell stories that don't have anything to do with us."

Hoch, born in 1970, grew up in Lefrak City, a cavernous melting pot Queens apartment complex. His parents divorced when he was young, and he was reared by his mother, a Jewish speech pathologist. He

grew up, fully a part of hip-hop, spending his time writing graffiti on trains, break dancing and rapping.

Hoch dabbled in drugs (though he never did time), performed in the streets and at bar mitzvahs. He eventually attended the High School for Performing Arts, the school depicted in the movie *Fame*.

He spent much of the first half of the 1990s teaching conflict resolution via drama in New York's jails and alternative high schools. In 1994, he penned *Some People*. The solo theater show nabbed an Obie Award and was made into an HBO special in 1995.

That same year, when Hoch was just 24, Newsweek named him Performance Artist for 1995 and described his work as, "hilarious, poignant poetry." Two years later, he finished *Jails*. And in 1999, he released the film *White Boys*, based on the character Flip Dog.

Ultimately, all his forays on stage and in film are about giving voice to hip-hop, a culture that, though mainstream, still doesn't quite fit in.

"These are our stories, issues and characters in three dimensions on stage, Hoch said. "This is the way to connect with people."