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Hoch's a Man Of All the People

SOME PEOPLE. Written and performed by Danny Hoch. Lighting design by David Castaneda. At Performance Space 122, First Avenue at 10th Street, Thursday to Sunday, through Oct. 17. Seen at Saturday evening's performance.

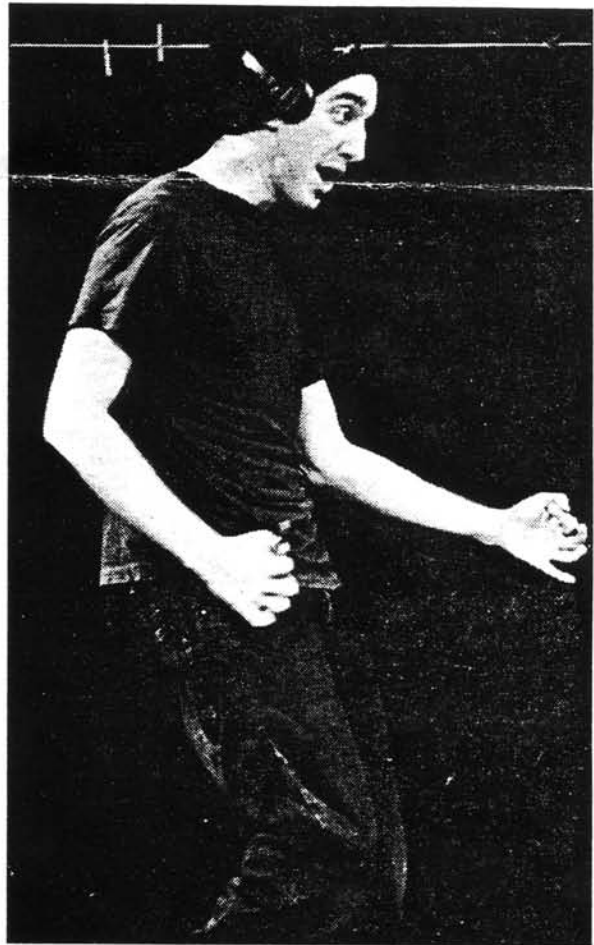
By Jan Stuart

STAFF WRITER

DANNY HOCH IS a young white Jewish guy from somewhere in New York City who does one really ballsy thing and one really exhilarating thing. The ballsy thing is that he trafficks in mimicking people outside his immediate ethnic reach: Latinos, African-Americans, Haitians. The exhilarating thing is that he gets them dead right.

Watching Hoch's solo piece "Some People" is a little like tracking Spike Lee's camera around the streets in "Do the Right Thing" and discovering that every last walk-on is played by the same actor. Hoch (rhymes with rock) combines Lee's omniscient urban gaze with a Streep-like ability to assimilate the minutest gradations of accent and tone. That, plus an uncommon measure of empathy, makes Hoch a major new player in the mini-monodramas of New York's outer boroughs.

Where fellow practitioner Anna Deavere Smith relies upon interview transcripts and Eric Bogosian only dabbles in ethnography, Hoch throws himself out on a multi-cultural limb with a gallery of invented



Danny Hoch's mimicry captures a rainbow of ethnic groups.

His Wide World of Mimicry

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others. He shares Bogosian's fondness for in-your-face personalities, and "Some People" kicks off with a double-forte blast from a roaring West Indies DJ and a fierce Jamaican rocker who cajoles the audience into stamping out the rhythm for his rap improvs.

There are no moral lessons in these openers: Hoch just wants us to shut up and listen. He's lubricating our ears to voices we might otherwise close out, so that we can then absorb the insensitivities of a black homeboy type bearing down on a Chinese short-order cook, or a white yuppie type who thinks that all foreign-speaking immigrants should go through an assimilation process to make them "normal."

This latter character, Bill, is overly derivative of Bogosian's garrulous curbside philosophers, down to the Bogosian black attire. Hoch is more affectingly his own man when he hooks into a wild, wordless meringue or steps into the shoes of those Bill is criticizing: A Polish emigré plumber groping through English with a client, or, in the evening's heart-rending closer, a Puerto Rican father ("Cesar") meekly bearing his soul to a psychiatrist. These last two characters most subtly achieve Hoch's strategy of setting up a stereotype, then toppling our assumptions.

With "Some People," Hoch establishes himself as a superb and compassionate technician. He needs to challenge himself still further by braving the less flamboyant or obvious routes. Instead of the dishy Hispanic woman, how about the macho gay boyfriend of her queeny roommate? Or deep-six the sensitive rapper and try instead his collegiate girlfriend. As Hoch's Cesar so eloquently proves, subversion needn't shake us by the collar till we cry uncle.