

Minority of One

Performance artist Danny Hoch is a one-man melting pot

By Corey Takahashi
STAFF WRITER

SUCH IS his grasp of New York esoterica that Danny Hoch insists if you played him a tape of random hip-hop beats, he'd peg each one to its borough of origin. He's equally adept when it comes to deciphering driving styles: Whereas Brooklynites will see a slow-moving car and proceed to plow it out of the way, Queens drivers don't bother noticing other vehicles at all — they just hit anything in their path. This, he notes, makes the Brooklyn method slightly more logical, but the Queens approach more admirable for its nerve.

"I'm like one of those New York interborough connoisseurs," says Hoch, 30, who grew up in Queens and now lives in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

Truth be told, it's hard to imagine him anywhere else.

He may be cursed by the aforementioned driving patterns on a recent afternoon, weaving a beaten, beige Subaru along Queens Boulevard, but he's also enjoying the ride. The award-winning theater artist has traveled the world, but it's really his old neighborhood — an unnamed, multi-ethnic, middle-class section bordered by Rego Park, Lefrak City, South Corona and Forest Hills — that informs the actor-writer-activist's mutable style.

"Queens is the best," Hoch says, pointing out a Bollywood video shop and Italian shoe bazaar, a smile cracking his typically steely grill. Minutes later, on 108th Street near the LIE, he passes a black man in a white beard and Hasidic attire. It's the linchpin that drives home his point. "See, you can't find that in Williamsburg or Crown Heights," he cheers, referring to neighborhoods that are home bases, respectively, of the Satmar and Lubavitcher Jewish sects. "That you can only find in Queens."

In Danny Hoch's Queens — as in his stage works — culture is diffuse, ever-changing and unwieldy. But you might expect that from a former graffiti writer and break-dancer.

"Everyone was a minority," he says, pointing to the tidy brick apartments where he and his peers wrought mischief in the '80s. "There was no majority on any floor, in any one of these buildings."

"Jails, Hospitals & Hip-Hop: The Film," an adaptation of Hoch's award-winning solo stage show, which ran at Performance Space 122 in 1998 and has toured internationally, is a work similarly lacking a fixed language or identity. It opens Friday at Village East Cinemas in Manhattan. "Look at New York: 95 percent of us don't speak standard American 'Dan Rather' English," explains this byproduct of the new urban mosaic. "My work is about the struggle to communicate orally."

But if language is the focus, culture and identity are the undercurrents. Hoch recalls his own jarring experience as a student at the North Carolina School of the Arts, the actor's first extended foray outside the city, bringing home the meaning of being both an insider and outsider, i.e. white and Jewish, in ways unfathomable to a public school kid from New York.

"They all seemed to have something in common, and when I would go home and look in my mirror in my dorm room, that's when I was like, 'Oh, —. I look like these people, and if I wanted to, I could just pretend like I'm them.'" On the flip side, "I was scared for my life. I mean, you're talking about rednecks," Hoch says, getting chills before he goes on to invoke hip-hop slang one minute and a Southern drawl the next. "So you better believe I became 'white' with the quick-fast. I was like, 'Can I have another bowl of grits?' Of course, they thought I was crazy 'cause I ordered it with honey, and they don't do that in the South."

He left after 1½ years, studied theater in London on a scholarship, then launched his first stage show, "Pot Melting." The production ran through the early '90s, but his break came with the follow-up, 1994's Oscar-winning

"Some People," which later aired on HBO, bringing his socio-linguistic skills to a national audience.

"Jails, Hospitals & Hip-Hop" employs a similar structure, with Hoch embodying 10 characters, from a wannabe hard-core rapper in Montana (fans of his uneven 1999 feature "Whiteboys" will recognize the footage) to hard-knock kids from the Bronx to an upstate corrections officer and an AIDS-stricken inmate, both of whom are on the edge of emotional implosion. The kicker often comes when an unknown detail reveals how these personalities arrived at their present state.

"A lot of the stuff that the characters address in the film is unbelievable, but they are real," says Hoch, noting that the work is informed by observations from performing in lockups like Rikers Island as well as from watching his mother, a speech pathologist, rehabilitate patients when she worked at a hospital in the Bronx.



Photo by Leo Sorel

You can take Danny Hoch out of New York, but you can't take New York . . .

Hoch's worldview, it's safe to say, is slightly ahead of pop culture's. (He's challenged roles that commit what he terms "cultural crimes," including a high-profile guest spot on "Seinfeld," which he ultimately abandoned and discusses in the film as a stereotype.)

And while Queens-centered sitcoms such as "The King of Queens" and "The Fighting Fitzgeralds" present the borough's demographic reality circa 1950, Hoch's engaging portraits remind one of rush hour on the No. 7 line today.

He claims no knowledge of Israel Zangwill, but his vision of hip-hop isn't far off the playwright's 1908 concept of the "melting pot." "This whole idea of appropriation in a multicultural society," says Hoch, "the movie industry hasn't figured that out yet."

But others have taken note. "I was impressed with the type of issues he was dealing with," said Sondra Farganis, director of the Vera List Center for Art and Politics at The New School, where Hoch is the youngest