John Heilpern

One Man, Four Shows, Three and a Half Raves

A while ago, I was in a pub in Dublin and a local guy, making conversation, turned to me and said, "What do you do for a living?"

Treplied that I was a journalist, for anyone can be a critic, "I'm a journalist, sir!"
"Maybe so, sir!" he said, "But are you any

It was modesty, of course, that prevented me from responding to his question as forthrightly as honesty requires. But it seems to me that in the current mini-invasion of those wixards known as the new firsh dramatists, to one big question not being asked is, "Are they

If you're Irish, you are therefore seen to be not only a born storyteller,

not only a born storyteller, but a great one? You will be acclaimed everywhere, except possibly in discerning Ireland. Even so, I've expressed more than a few reservations about Martin McDonagh's acclaimed Beauty Queen of Leenane, with its gothic blood and hunder andereaky plotdevices. ("Don't forget to deliver the letter to Maureen. If there's one thing you must do, don't forget to give the letter to Maureen. Don't you be forgetting now...")

any good?

Conor McPherson's St. Nicholas at Primary Stages, with that wonderful Scottish actor Brian Cox, could, perhaps, have been conjured up only by an Irishman, Mr. McPher-

an Institution. Mr. Nictitudes son, a 26-year-old Dubliner, relishes the telling of stories. His current London hit, The Weir, is about gloss stories (which has been extended through April 25) is about—of all people! a burnt-out critic and vampires.

All storytellers are happy con men and monologists. "St. Nicholass is a play performed by one actor." Mr. McPherson has written. "He only plays one character and he doesn't act anything out. He just tells us a story. And for me, that's full of mischief." Too much mischief! You have the impression that this talented young dramatist is throwing us teasing cur behalfs to keep our interest from flagging round the warm glow of the fireside, or stage. Put it this way: Mr. McPherson is good. But do we believe his story?

I was with him all the way until the vampines. St. Nicholas is a tall tale about a cynical, self-hating drama critic who samitten by a young actress in a bad production of Salami. That's agreat start! And every drama critic watching the drama critic on stage is surely thinking. "I know that man But he is at 1 me." Mr. McPherson's desperate critic follows the actress to London on a drunken odyssey in search of a story of his own for some inner creative life of his own). He finds himself procuring victims for a house full of vampines—and that's an unbelievably grand lie dever there was one. The theater critic and fallen hero of the story diesen't believe in anything, including theater. Why does he suddenly believe in vampines—and coxily suburban vampines at that? Why should we?

It's a stretch. Brian Cox—who I last saw howling into the wind as King Lear in Deborah Warner's production at the National Theater—is so commandingly good, he almost has us believing it. As the empty vessel of a critic, he has the gift of seeming to be both emotionally dead and uterly alive simultaneously. Contempt is his character's oxygen. (Salvation his last hope.) Actors rarely look you in the eye. They pretend to, peering instead at your forehead. It's more comfortable that way. Mr. Cox is one of the very few active, who dares to look you squarely and nakedly in the eye—daring you to disbelieve his story. This assured virtuoso British actor possesses he heft and voice—the Vice—that can swoop gleefully on a morsel of spooky nama-



Danny Hoch, an urban griot, picks his stories from the margins of melting-pot America in his latest piece, Jails, Hospitals and Hip-Hop, at P.S. 122 through April 18.

tive and give the impression it's a five-course banquet. He plays with us masterfully for 90 intermissionless minutes on a bare stage, as if he arrived there by coincidence. Mr. Cov compels our attention—more, ultimately, than the mischievous story of St. Nicholas, the first

shaggy vampire story I ever heard.
Conor McPherson, and particularly Martin
McDonagh (who amounced after five minutes
in New York that he had nothing to beat here),
should see Danny Hoch's brilliant and troubling stories from another planet, Jails, Hospitals and Hip-Hop. Mr. Hoch is such an honjudge and the story teller, the Irish dramatists
seem self-consciously literary in comparison.
His people from the margins of the American
melting pot are the ones we usually ignore.
He is saying tous: "Listen to these people you
avoid." And once heard, via Mr. Hoch's alchemy, we do not forget them,

Danny Hoch, the urban griot, is more a social commentator than an entertainer, though often he's both. There's no one like him. He makes the award-winning stage docudramas of Anna Deveare Smith look arch, the versatie autobiographical static of Olon Leguizamo seem show-bizzy. His talent is unique and full of compassion. Simply put, the 29-year-old Mr. Hoch is the finest solo artist in America.

His previous 1993 solo, Some People, was essentially about language—the English language as spoken by Jamaicans, Jews, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, African-Americans, in the fractured and blurred ethnic world according to Darmy Hech, What's the identity behind the urban barricades and fear? Then, and now, he's asking: "What are you?" With a neat subquestion: "What are you?" Jails, Hospitals and Hij-Hop, developed by

Jails Hospitals and Hip-Hop, developed by director Jo Bonney at downtown's Performance Space 122, creates a mesmerizing world of culture clashes and styles—from the earnest Cuban student speaking gangstarap in Spanish with an American tourist, to the young crippled Puerto Rican insisting he's acool dancer, to the heroin addict with AIDS consumed by rage in a New York prison, to the gold-tooth sell-out rap star on Lute Show With David Letterman, to other fantasists from the gletto underclass, or survivors from the king-

dom of the lost

Mr. Hoch performs as himself only once and, endearingly, he isn't as good as himself. Who, we worker then, is Damy Hoch? Buthis story about how he was fired as a guest performer on Seigfeld tells us a great deal absorblim (and about that dope Jerry Seinfeld). He was supposed to play a "typical" swimming pool attendant with a Spanish accent named Ramon, but found he couldn't face it. When the moment came, he just couldn't face selling out. The offended Jerry Seinfeld didn't get it at all. "They didn't want the real thing." Mr. Hoch explained to us. "They wanted somebody who could do the real thing and still be one

of them."
Irmight not be too good for his bank balance, but we're avefully glad he isn't one of them. Mr. Hoch's show is about young people. He makes 50 seats available each night to youngsters at \$10 a ticket. The might 1 attended the show, the studies space was packed with young people who in turn represented a very welcome cross-section of New York. At grass-roots level. Mr. Hoch, the white boy from Queens, is taking theater in exactly the multiothin cincuit that is its future. His brilliant work has little or nothing in common with that other storyteller from the melting pot. John Leguizamo. The hyper

Mr. Leguizamo's tribal autobiography in the hit Broadway one-man show. Pread, includes jokes, for one thing. He telfs the tale of his dad reading him the bedfitne story of "Red Riding Hood": "And she lived happily ever after. Now go the fuck asleep?"

Now go the tack assect:

But, again, there's been a remarkable transformation in the audience. The producer of Freak, Gregory Mosher (formerly boss of Lincoln Center Theater), has insisted that one-third of the Cort Theater—some 300 seats—be put on sale cach rught for \$17.50 and less. That's a great bargain, which has brought the average age of this audience down of 31 years old, from a Broadway average of 102. And Mr. Leguizamo is playing to capacity.

Messrs. Hoch, Leguizamo and Cox are all good deals and good guys. But I can't

Messrs. Hoch, Leguizamo and Cox are all good deals and good guys. But I can't close without mentioning my favorite transvestice onearth, the one and only Eddle Izzard. His solo performance, Dross to Kill, at the Westbeth Theater Center in the West Village, is the hilariously surreal tonic we've come to expect from the cherub in the charming chinois tunic. There's no one like him, either, (And his show is also a virtual sellout.) The story that had me on the floor with laughter was his in sname riff on how Engelbert Humperdinck got his name.

Did they originally think of Bingelbert Hempledonk? Or was it Geldebert Himpledonk? Or was it Geldebert Himpledonk? Then, for some reason. Eddie decided to gravely inform us that he nadjust learned that very evening that Engelbert Humperdinck was dead. Well, naturally, there was a bit of a hush. But then he smiled, and said, "Nah Ik's a jobe, It isn't true." And then he said. "Actually, it's true. He's dead? "And then he said. "I'm kickling!" And then he said. "Tim kickling!" And then he said. "Tim not really..."

For some mysterious reason, the routine tickled us all. He had us laughing so hard that lwas just about able to court the number of times he repeated the "He's dead/alive" story. It was 26. Conor McPherson of Sr. Nicholas likes to say that a good lie makes a good story. But I can say that I've seen Eddie Izzardtell the same lie 26 times in about three minutes and have us believe it every time. That's some achievement, and that's no lie.