

On the streets where he lived

An artist inspired by Queens

By ERIKA MILVY

THE wilds of those other boroughs come to Manhattan's Public Theater as vanguard performance artist Danny Hoch channels the sounds of his streets and his youth.

A 24-year-old Jewish guy from Queens, Hoch constructs a mosaic of multi-ethnic types in his Obie Award-winning one-man show, "Some People." It opened Sunday.

Trained at the High School of the Performing Arts and North Carolina School of the Arts, Hoch serves on the faculty at New York University's Creative Arts Team, where he brings his shows to jails and high schools.

Compared to Anna Devere Smith, John Leguizamo, Whoopi Goldberg and Eric Bogosian, Hoch says, "I'm influenced and driven by many of the same forces, by my childhood, my politics and by my frustration with this country. But the driving factor in my work is always language."

Here's more of Hoch's interview with The Post:

Q. When did you begin creating these characters?

A. I've been doing these voices since I was born. But when I frustratingly dropped out of college in my sophomore year, that was about the time that Eric Bogosian's stuff was being validated by mainstream America, or at least main-



DANNY HOCH
Taps into ethnic mix.

stream left America. He was doing a lot of New York characters and I thought, "My goodness, he's not even from New York."

Q. What inspired your work?

A. I grew up in the middle of Queens in probably what is the most multi-ethnic neighborhood in the city, on the border of Rego Park, Forest Hills, Corona, and Lefrak City. I was always hearing different voices and different stories and different accents and different languages. My mother is a speech pathologist and her understanding and respect for language helped give me an ear for language.

Where I grew up, there was no standardized language, no standard accent. My two next-door neighbors were African-American, down the hall were Odessans, from Russia. Across the hall from them were the Panjabi family.

Two floors down were a couple who were Israeli and Puerto Rican and their son was my best friend.

Q. How much of your work is improvised?

A. At this point very little is improvised now but I didn't write anything down 'til about 40 or 50 shows.

Q. Do you think that you have gotten a lot of attention because you are doing other races?

A. Absolutely. It's something very hot now. "The other" is a very hot item in America now. I think a lot of people are seeing me as the white spokesperson for the other.

Q. How does that make you feel?

A. Very anxious because I'm not. You know, I don't even think I'm the white spokesperson for white people. I can't be. So how am I going to be the white spokesperson for people of color? I'm only portraying a slice of "the other," not even all of "the other," but I think America is always looking for that white black guy, or that white soul guy. That white, cool, young, hip guy. And they think they see that person in me and I'm not him. I've said no to a lot of offers because they've seen me as that. It keeps me more in check.

Q. Why should people pay to see in the theater what they could see for free, and probably ignore, on the streets?

A. Because they probably feel they have pretty good reason to ignore it on the streets and what the theater does is it provides them with a safe place to listen and to experience without being physically attacked or without having to be the focus of attention.

Q. People have written



THERE'S A WORD FOR IT: Performance artist Danny Hoch says his Obie-winning show, "Some People," is about language.

that you "get away with" playing other cultures. What does that mean to you?

A. To say that I'm "getting away with" playing these characters is already approaching what I'm doing with the notion that it's wrong to portray anybody except yourself and the reason for that is this country's history of the minstrel show, whites in black face where portrayals of the other were always heavy, heavy negative stereotypes.

Q. Has anybody objected to your work on the grounds of racism?

A. It's funny. Everybody asks me that question but nobody has asked me "who are you to be doing this?" And I find that very revealing of where people's heads are at, and I think they're on the border of guilt and revolution and it's a strange place to be. Nobody has ever said you're making fun of people of color. I think we're seeing white guilt and white fear.