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A Multicultural Chameleon

Actor's Experience Spawns Polyglot Cast of Characters

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

This is how Danny Hoch, actor, comic, emerging avatar of New York City multiculturalism, remembers where he is from:

Home is a forest of high-rise apartments in a no-name neighborhood on the edge of the Long Island Expressway in Queens. Afternoons are spent watching the neighborhood boys — an Indian, a Puerto Rican and a Jew — polishing their break-dancing skills on the local school playground, the same spot where a Latino friend would be killed in a police choke hold.

For a keen-eyed, sharp-tongued Jewish boy growing up in such a place, certain questions necessarily emerged: What community am I a part of? What does it mean to be white?

"I come from a place where nobody dominates," Mr. Hoch says of his childhood. "My generation, the predominant culture was hip-hop. No matter where your parents came from, no matter where your grandparents came from. It

was a common language that people could relate to."

The questions are not unfamiliar to any child growing up in the city today, when how to fit in and whom to fit in with have changed considerably since the turn of the last century.

The questions Mr. Hoch grew up asking himself inevitably colored his work as a performer on the stage and the screen, where he has made it his specialty to get inside other people's skin. If his name is not familiar yet, it probably will be. At 28, he has earned critical acclaim for his one-man shows, "Jails, Hospitals and Hip-Hop" last year and "Some People" in 1993.

Both shows are peopled by a decidedly un-Seinfeldian range of New York characters culled from his childhood turf in Queens or the boho-chic byways of Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where he now lives. There's

the light-skinned Harlem street vendor who infuriates a policeman who cannot figure out his race; there's the Puerto Rican youth crippled in a police shootout.

Now, with a pair of films, Mr. Hoch (pronounced HOCK) is going for his biggest audience yet. The movie version of "Jails" is scheduled for release early next year. And last night, Fox Searchlight Pictures released his first feature, "Whiteboys," the story of one from Iowa, named Flip Dog, striving to be a gangster rapper in his own glamorously imagined Chicago ghetto.

Flip, whom he plays, is close to Mr. Hoch's own heart. "He could have been me when I was 12," he says one afternoon over a plate of fish at one of his Dominican haunts in Williamsburg. "He was struggling with his identity, looking in the mirror and saying, 'What the hell is this?'"

The evolution of Danny Hoch can be glimpsed in two stories from his youth. The first comes from an old friend, Garth

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Mr. Hoch last year in his one-man show "Jails, Hospitals and Hip-Hop." He assumes an un-Seinfeldian range of roles.

Paula Court



Actor's Life Spawns a Polyglot Cast

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Belcon. "He used to tell me, 'I'm blacker than you,'" recalled Mr. Belcon, who is black. "One of his favorite lines was, 'I'm a black man trapped in a white man's body. I'm not Doug E. Fresh, and I don't la-dee-da-dee.'"

The second comes from Mr. Hoch who, for the record, has always admired the work of the rapper Doug E. Fresh. He tells of one day years ago when he dragged Mr. Belcon along to buy a \$10 bag of marijuana. Mr. Belcon never smoked, but when the boys were stopped by the police, he was the one to be questioned and searched; Mr. Hoch was left alone.

The two tales go to the heart of Mr. Hoch's message about whiteness today. Hip-hop may bring together young people of different circumstances, but it does not necessarily erase the differences. "Hip-hop is a cultural unifier, not a social unifier" says Mr. Hoch, who has established a foundation to support youth activism nationwide.

Among Mr. Hoch's peers in Queens, hip-hop was the cultural glue. After school, there were rhymes to conjure, walls to tag with their graffiti monikers. Two weeks after his bar mitzvah, there was an arrest, for weapons possession. "That," he often says with certain aplomb, "was when I became a man."

His mother, Lynn Hoch, says she sometimes wonders why he makes such a big deal about the trouble he got into. She knows of only one arrest, for graffiti, and she remembers how frightened he was by the undercover officers who picked him up on the subway; he thought the police were trying to kidnap him, she recalls.

Really, she insists, Danny was always a good boy. In the fourth grade, he turned the children's book "The Phantom Tollbooth" into a play. He seems to have developed an early yen for disguises: as a child, he

dabbled in mime and magic, sometimes playing for money at Washington Square Park.

Ms. Hoch, a speech pathologist who raised him alone, points out too that although it has sometimes been reported in the press that her son grew up in Lefrak City — an apartment complex with a tougher reputation than their own on the other side of the expressway — in fact, they lived in Forest Hills. "But Danny would never say that," Ms. Hoch whispers knowingly. She has since moved to Oceanside on Long Island.

Strangely enough, questions of community gelled when Mr. Hoch left his native habitat. In 1988, after graduating from Fiorella H. La

Questions of racial and ethnic identity inform a performer's work.

Guardia High School, he enrolled in the North Carolina School of the Arts, a place he remembers as a largely white college in Winston-Salem.

"Everyone — what's the word, cosmetically? — looked like me," he recalls. "But I didn't understand them; they didn't understand me."

They listened to Nirvana and Lynyrd Skynyrd. They went to the mall. They couldn't tell an Italian from a Puerto Rican. "Here I was in North Carolina, and I couldn't even pass for white!" said Mr. Hoch, who dropped out of college in less than two years, returned to New York and began writing his own material.

It is worth noting that the people at Stratosphere Entertainment, the distributor for "Jails," the movie, describes Mr. Hoch's roots as in "the projects in Brooklyn," which is the

kind of market it is seeking for the film.

Issues of authenticity are well understood by Mr. Hoch. "It's not cool to live in the suburbs, ride your skateboard," Mr. Hoch says with equal parts irony and empathy. "It's cool to be poor; it's cool to be in jail."

It is hard not to notice white children today — or the children of Pakistani immigrants, or Colombians — mimicking black language and style, buying millions of dollars in rap music, lionizing the black ghetto, as they imagine it.

Of course, that sort of impulse is not altogether new. Which is why when Norman Mailer saw "Whiteboys" recently, he wondered whether Mr. Hoch had read "The White Negro," his own 1957 treatise about white hipsters schooled in black style. Mr. Hoch had not. But in "Whiteboys," Mr. Mailer, now 76, recognized himself, a young man going to rent parties in Harlem. "I'm not surprised it's happening again," he said.

In the improbable latter-day attempts at passing, Mr. Belcon, who wrote the "Whiteboys" screenplay with Mr. Hoch, says he sees a glimmer of hope. "I think it's about not being complacent, not accepting what people tell you you're supposed to be," Mr. Belcon, now 29, said. "It's a cross between rebellion and admiration."

Mr. Hoch has turned those everyday acts of passing into his métier, literally trading caps, accents, gestures to conjure a gestalt of New York personalities of all shades. But it is precisely his yen to play characters who are not white that has opened him to scrutiny; is his performance, critics ask, a kind of minstrelsy?

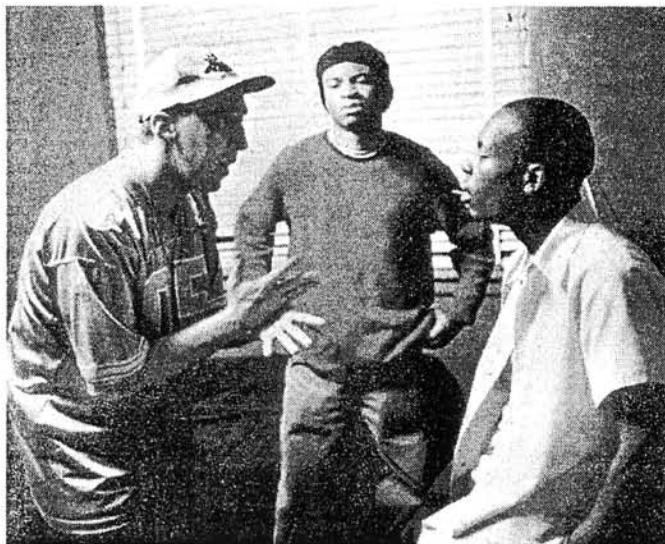
Dael Orlandersmith, an actress who does one-woman shows, says although she knows that Mr. Hoch mines his characters from the world he grew up in, she is still troubled by the way white audiences react to his performances: "Here's this white cat hanging out with black and Hispanic cats. Isn't that cool?" Ms. Orlandersmith, who is black, says.

"I think his intention is good, but I think people aren't listening to his intention," she says.

Mr. Hoch insists that his characters are the New Yorkers most familiar to him. The teen-ager who is shot and crippled by the police in "Jails" is based on a youth in Williamsburg. The distressed Jewish mother whose prejudices are challenged by her bohemian son in "Some People" is a mélange, according to his mother, of herself and her Aunt Ida.

"These ARE my people," Mr. Hoch says. "Your people are a combination of ancestry and where you live — your geography."

"That community," he adds, "is not the white community, it's not the Jamaican community, it's not the Puerto Rican community, it's not the black community. It's the community of all of us. I'll be the last one to say my community is the black community. I'll also be the last one to say Abner Louima and Anthony Baez are not my people."



Fox Searchlight Pictures

From left, Danny Hoch, Eugene Byrd and Bonz Malone in the film "Whiteboys." Mr. Hoch's character aspires to be a gangster rapper.