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One-man show blends humor, compassion

Jails, Hospitals & Hip-Hop

Where: P.S. 122, 150 First Ave. at 9th St., Manhattan

When: Wed. and Thurs. at 8:30 p.m.; Fri. and Sat. at 8:30 and 11 p.m.

Tickets: \$25, \$10. Call (212) 477-5288.

By Michael Sommers

STAR-LEDGER STAFF

NEW YORK — Actor-writer Danny Hoch is a marvel, as anyone who's seen the 1996 HBO version of his "Some People" already know. This 27-year-old Brooklyn guy gets himself deeply under the skin of dispossessed people from different cultures and shows you their souls with compassion and edgy humor.

Simply, he talks their talk. He walks their walk. With unpretentious artistry, he compels you to listen to the music of their heartbeats.

Hoch's newest solo show, "Jails, Hospitals & Hip-Hop," presents eight individuals who can be found in prisons, doctors' waiting rooms, and on the "Tonight" show.

This last character is a Montana teenager up in his bedroom pretending to hold forth with Jay Leno. He's a white kid who has dreams of being a millionaire black rapper named Flip Dogg. As he gets ready to work his shift at Hardee's, he tries to rap cool — with hilarious results.

It's a nice bit, but several characters later in his 90-minute show, Hoch turns himself into a real millionaire black rapper, M.C. Enuff, who's reviewing the highlights of his career with Letterman. The kid's dream and the superstar's reality make for a fascinating comparison, even as both speak to the power of pure hip-hop culture to bring together people of different cultures.

A simple change of shirt or shades is accompanied by Hoch's remarkable transformation into other souls. Most touching among them is Victor, a cheerful Puerto Rican dude still recovering from terrible gunshot wounds suffered a few years earlier. You'll hear his story as the obviously disabled Victor tries to chat up a pretty girl ("I could swear you was Dominican.") as he lopes off for another physical therapy session.

There's Yankees fan Gabriel, casually shrugging off his enormous physical challenges from being born a crack baby. And there's an angry ex-Vietnam vet whose drug addiction led him to jail and HIV-positive status, much as he took precautions: "I was shooting heroin, but I was eating organic!"

Hoch even offers a wicked bit from personal experience as he humorously relates how his guest stint on "Seinfeld" was aborted when they expected him to portray a stereotypi-

cal Hispanic character. "Accents aren't funny, people are funny," Hoch futilely protested before he was packed off to the airport.

His new show bears out that statement. Hoch's people can often be very funny in "Jails, Hospitals & Hip-Hop," but they're always extremely real to life. And they're offered to viewers without any condescension or judgment, either. This Off Broadway gallery of hip-hopped individuals makes for a more serious-themed show than John Leguizamo's high-flying "Freak," as Hoch tends to delve much deeper into his characters' souls than Leguizamo does, but that makes his show no less funnier for its harder realities.

Jo Bonney's sharp direction keeps Hoch right on target, and Stan Pressner's lighting changes mood with ease. The spare circumstances of Hoch's presentation in the 200-seat loft theater at P.S. 122 makes his genuine artistry all the more striking to experience. Nothing gets in the way of Hoch's unique ability to voice other people's truths with such loving authority.