

True Grit

Performer Danny Hoch is a linguistic chameleon. On the telephone, discussing his appeal with young audiences, he sounds like a Madison Avenue marketing director.

But on the streets of the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, N.Y., where he lives, Mr. Hoch speaks Spanish daily, with an accent so authentic that native Spanish speakers often mistake him for a fellow countryman. He also dabbles in Jamaican patois.

Yiddish, which he also hears spoken in the streets near his home, is one language he has not conquered — yet. "It's a goal of mine," he said during a recent telephone interview.

Mr. Hoch (it rhymes with rock) will likely master the *mamaloshen*, too. At 27, he already has met many of his goals head-on. Mr. Hoch's gritty, in-your-face solo show titled "Evolution of a Homeboy: Jails, Hospitals & Hip Hop" represents his vision for theater for his generation. The show addresses issues that young adults face daily, and offering it to them in a relevant and affordable package.

Mr. Hoch's newest work, which recently had its world premiere at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre in California, is part of Center Stage's Off-Center Festival, a 10-day celebration of the music, monologues, storytelling and truth-speaking by some of the country's leading performance artists. The festival begins on Thursday, Jan. 15, and Mr. Hoch will appear on Jan. 20-22.

The Oakland Tribune praised Mr. Hoch's new work, calling him a "fiercely talented writer and performer (who) is so assured and so confident in the stories he's telling that he appears not to feel the need to show off."

Mr. Hoch's new piece follows "Some People," an anthology of inner-city characters, which he brought to Baltimore's Theatre Project three years ago. The show, he said, more clearly addresses themes that he believes speak to the young, urban population — hip hop and the prison industrial complex.

"I consciously approached these themes in this work," said Mr. Hoch, who has taught conflict resolution through drama to young people incarcerated in New York jails and at alternative high schools in the city. "It's more fanatic than the last piece."

Both works have their roots in Mr. Hoch's childhood, in Lefrak City, a huge, multi-ethnic apart-

"Two weeks [after my bar mitzvah] I was arrested for graffiti and drug possession," he said. "That's when I became a man."

He said he never served jail time, and the money he made from the drug sales supported his performing habit. As a teen-ager, he was performing in the streets and eventually at parties and *b'nai mitzvah*. His mother encouraged him to attend the High School for Performing Arts, the school depicted in the film "Fame."

Mr. Hoch will bring "Evolution" to New York in March, and he hopes it will speak to the young audiences he believes are being alienated by Broadway's lavish themes and overpriced tickets. Tickets to most new Broadway shows range from \$50 to \$75.

When a team of producers with \$300,000 to invest in "Evolution" wanted to charge \$35 for tickets, Mr. Hoch balked.

"They said, 'Oh don't worry, we'll advertise in the New York Times and people will pay \$35 for the tickets,'" he recalled. "I said, 'You can't do that to my people. I'm undertaking the project myself now. The flavor of the audience is very important to me.'"

Mr. Hoch also is deeply concerned about maintaining integrity as a performer. He said he turned down a role on a "Seinfeld" episode because it presented a stereotyped Spanish-speaking character. He said he also declined a \$1 million dollar Sprite commercial.

In a June 1, 1997, interview in "Revolutionary Worker," the weekly newspaper of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA, Mr. Hoch explained his decision.

"I did not have the experience that I had — doing work with young people, my young people from my city, from my borough — I did not do everything I did, politically and socially and emotionally, as a solo performer, to go be in 10 Sprite commercials," he said.

"I didn't do it to be the guy that blows up token booths in 'Money Train.' Even though it paid \$250,000 — I didn't do it. I'd

Danny Hoch brings his in-your-face, hip hop vision of theatrical performance to Center Stage's Off-Center Festival.

MELINDA GREENBERG
LIFESTYLES EDITOR

ment complex in Queens, N.Y. His parents divorced when he was very young and he was raised by his mother, a Jewish speech pathologist who worked in a Bronx hospital, primarily with Spanish-speaking clients.

Mr. Hoch's godmother was a Cuban resident of the building who also spoke Spanish to him. He credits his mother with training him to listen, a skill that has proven invaluable for him to pick up a number of accents.

"There wasn't a real majority there, racially or culturally," he said. "Everyone was a minority, and together we made a majority. If there was any culture that prevailed, it was hip hop. Everyone — the Jewish kids, Pakistanis, African-Americans, Hispanics — was wearing their hats backward, fat laces and spinning on their backs. Now it's all across America."

Mr. Hoch became a bar mitzvah at a Reform congregation in Queens, and experienced another rite of passage shortly after his bar mitzvah.



Performer Danny Hoch, 27, says the Broadway establishment fails to offer interesting theater opportunities to young audiences. "All they offer us," he gripes, "is a rap version of opera or some super, high abstract Beckett play."

rather have a kid come up to me on the street and say, 'Yo — you were that kid, you was at Rikers, right?' I was in there. Yeah, I saw your workshop, yo that [stuff] was good. It was so funny, you made me think."

Mr. Hoch credits cutting-edge solo performers like Eric Bogosian, whose wife, Jo Binney, directed "Evolution," and John Leguizamo, with opening the theater world to shows like his. There is great need for this type of theater, he said.

"This show comes out of my own dissatisfaction," said Mr. Hoch, who studied acting at the North Carolina School of the Arts and London's British American Drama Academy. "I worked in my community theater — prisons and

alternative high schools. It clicked for me, This is it.' This is theater, not Broadway shows that have nothing to do with the people who live in New York, and whose audiences are filled with people from all over the country.

"For the last 10 years, all you hear is about bringing young people to the theater," he said. "But all they offer us is a rap version of opera or some super, high abstract Beckett play. Then, they wonder why we don't appreciate it and come back more." □

The Off-Center Festival runs Jan. 15-25 at Center Stage, 700 N. Calvert St. Tickets range from \$15 to \$22, and packages are available for multiple performances. For information, call 410-332-0033.