

April 14, 1998

BY RICHARD GOLDSTEIN

Is he a model?" the pert young mami wants to know. Her friends are giggling at the *blanco* in the cap and shades posing against a chain-link fence. "Is he a factor? Is he... famous?" A wince breaks through the young man's roughneck scowl. "I'm not famous," he blurts. "I just used to live here."

Danny Hoch, the 27-year-old performance artist—whose current show, *Jails, Hospitals & Hip-Hop*, is bringing the b-boys to P.S. 122—has come to Lefrak City so the *Voice* can take his picture on the block where he grew up. Except for the occasional Russian accent, not much has changed here since Danny was a kid: The streets still smell of Creole food and car fumes from the Long Island Expressway. There's a softness in the hedges and trees that allows you to imagine you're in some anteroom to New Rochelle. But Danny can remember shootings and stabbings—the time a bigger kid (now a cop) slashed his throat, or the day his homey was choked to death in the playground by the police.

"I come from a Jewish household," he says, "but not a Jewish neighborhood." In fact, this interzone between Corona and Flushing doesn't even have a name. "We called it Left Back City," Danny recalls. In this ethnic no-man's-land, the typical adult affect was disdain for anyone who formed vowels differently, but the kids communicated in hip-hop. "I used to break-dance with this Indian kid named Prashant and this Puerto Rican kid named Jesus and this black kid named Kenny," Danny explains. "I didn't know I was white until I went away to college."

As a graf warrior (his crew was Savage Writers Attacking Trains, or SWAT), Danny got busted six times for tagging and toking. But there was another side to this wannabe G. With his petty drug profits, he bought whiteface and trekked into Manhattan—Washington Square to be precise—to do magic and mime. His mother leapt at the chance to get him off the streets, and took him to audition for the High School of Performing Arts. Here, Danny first made the connection between acting and storytelling. He began to construct the persona he would call "the urban griot."

He went on to study ancient drama, earning his tuition by running workshops in prisons, hospitals, and social-service centers. Then Danny entered the Downtown performance scene, where, amid the reigning ironies and raging ids, he found a form for the cacophony running through his head. He soon became known for "doing accents" when in fact he was doing his peoples—aunts and uncles from the old country of Jewish Queens, and kids from the new global diaspora. These folks are so far below the radar of the entertainment-

industrial complex that they've yet to be discovered by Hollywood, or even (*pace* Paul Simon) Broadway. As his bit about refusing to do Spanglish shtick on *Seinfeld* makes clear, Danny Hoch does not want to be the ethnic elucidator.

In fact, he's haunted by the specter of stylization, and perhaps by the memory of all those Jewish entertainers who put on blackface or put their names on other people's doo-wop songs. It's hard to be a *representing* Jew, and harder still to probe the absurdities of race without coming up against the ineffable reality of one's own white face.

"ARE YOU WHITE?" Harry Allen, the critic and hip-hop nationalist, demanded. This was a familiar moment for Danny—being harangued on "one of those angry panels about racial opprobrium." He's been denounced by his own as well, booted at a Jewish teach-in for doing his act. "I couldn't identify with this group at all, which really bothered me, since my mother's been yelling at me for years to get into my Jewishness. But when I got onstage, I thought, here's a whole crowd of Jews and they can't stand that I'm playing complex black characters, because, like Harry Allen, they can only reference minstrelsy."

Most progressive whites and many militant blacks will rail at any whiteboy who dares to play a person of color, which is why it so rarely occurs, though the opposite—blacks playing whites—is a staple of comedy. Yet watching Danny Hoch perform before a very mixed and enthusiastic audience, you realize how he gets across. He empties his whiteness. This is not just a political stance; it's autobiography.

"People think I'm doing a sort of anthropology," he says. "But I don't tape-record people, and I don't do research. This is my inner monologue. It has always been in Cuban Spanish and Trinidadian and rap." That's because, in addition to the soldiers of SWAT, Danny had a second family. From the age of seven, while his mother crossed the city to work as a speech therapist in the Bronx, he hung out at the home of Eudelia Reyes and her two children. She taught him Spanish and gave him his Cuban accent. He calls Eudelia his godmother.

Still, being a whiteboy playing a brown boy has its limits. One notices a certain earnestness in Danny when he becomes the *raper* from Havana badgering an American tourist to explain the meaning of the phrase *hey, mother-fucker*. ("Ah, es idiomático!") For all their energy, his Latinos lack the wildness John Leguizamo vents so freely, if only because he's on the inside. Danny's perspective is more complicated: He's an outcast from the outside, on the inside looking out. No wonder he slings his sharpest barbs at whites who hang on to their skin privilege for dear life.

Take the bit from his previous

show, *Some People*, about the guy who never comes to the city without keeping an eye peeled on his car. ("They see the Jeep, they see the Jersey plates, automatically they assume I'm white. I am, but that's not the point.") Or the one about the Jewish mother who *bochs* her son for failing to empathize with his people ("What is there to empathize? David, 6 million! Did you see *Schindler's List*?"). This sketch is based on an actual argument with a real Jew-

able. Still, none of this would work without the writing, which, at its best, propels the audience from comedy to empathy without the phony "universalism" that often passes for politics.

In Danny's theater, the point is not that race and class are meaningless, but rather that identity is inherently fragile, and always on the verge of mutating into something more intricate. What keeps the racial categories together is a social system, and holding it



Hoch at home: "I didn't know I was white until I went away to college."

ish mother—Danny's own. But every time he plays white, you can glimpse the identity he didn't want to claim. As in the wigger from Montana who claims his birthmark is his real skin color, while the rest of him is just a birthmark. "Take my whiteness," Danny seems to be saying. "Please."

Though he's often compared to Eric Bogosian, with whom he shares a street intensity, Danny has more in common with Richard Price, another outer-borough naturalist. Of course, unlike the author of *Clockers*, Danny is a performer, which means he works with his body. It can convey the whole package of ethnicity in a gesture, and his voice can make English sound like a chunk of melted plastic that retains its beauty though its shape is unrecogniz-

able. Yet in the end, his politics, like his art, come from the bonds he forged in Left Back City.

BACK HOME, DANNY is calling his godmother on the cell phone. A few minutes later, Eudelia bursts out of the building, a tiny whirlwind in a T-shirt and sandals. "*Acción! Acción!*" she yells, at the photographer, and then to Danny: "Smile. You look like a dead man." Now she summons an old woman from the next building, who emerges in a robe and fuzzy green slippers to receive a flyer for Danny's show. "This is my man," Eudelia announces, and soon he's being eyed by boys on bikes and teenage girls. No one asks, "Are you white?" They just wanna know is he famous. **V**