

# Yo, Represent!

*Jails, Hospitals & Hip-Hop*

By Danny Hoch  
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Dancing on the tightrope of race and class: Danny Hoch

**D**anny Hoch, as the ultimate grayish solo performer, a one-man diaspora who often performs in “black” idioms for mostly “white” audiences, disappears into his characters, but he can never let his guard down. He knows that his brilliant characterizations are the sort that can get you into big trouble with touchy Nubians, Nuyoricans, and Nuboricans—a couple of years ago, they booed him off the stage in Central Park. Clearly his points are too subtle for those whose racism detectors are constantly in the red. His strength, like Anna Deavere Smith’s, lies in his ability to represent people as they are rather than as political discourse would dictate. But other people are a snap to Hoch, as he proved in 1994’s Obie-winning *Some People*. His own identity is what makes things complicated for him, since it places him on both sides of that political discourse at once.

For his new show, *Jails, Hospitals & Hip-Hop*, he takes extra precautions in his program notes to explain what gives him the right to walk so freely through Co-opt City. “I grew up writing Graffiti on trains, B-boying and

Rapping. . . Hip Hop formed my language and my entire world view,” he writes. *Jails* is a jaw-dropping tour de force that displays Hoch’s formidable writing and acting talent. His timing is flawless. His are characters beautifully developed in an honest and virtuosic if at times quaint style, informed by his very earnest desire to pledge allegiance to all things othered and colored. Hence the title, I suspect.

That Hoch manages to walk the tightrope of race and class so deftly is almost proof enough that he’s spent some time on the black-hand side. That he can dance on it makes him an artist. It’s a shame that his stance has to have such an undercurrent of “hey-I-can-hang” apology, but if the alternative is inciting a race riot, I guess I’ll endure disclaimers like, “It’s just cooler to be the oppressed than the oppressor.” (I’d venture that no one really has the choice, but I suppose that’s one of the fundamental ironies of human nature. Everyone wants to

be/fuck/kill what they aren’t.)

But after all his retractions, Hoch never plays a black character in this series of life-sliced monologues anyway. There’s a disabled Puerto Rican guy who tries to pick up a Czechoslovakian girl on his way to physical therapy, a hilarious Cuban clave salesman rendered half in Spanish, and a wheelchair-bound kid deformed because his mother smoked crack while she was pregnant, among others.

Most tellingly, there’s Gabriel Messinger, a white teenager from

Montana who has adopted the signifiers and heroes of hip-hop, posturing in front of his mirror as the leader of the “Montana Gangsta Blood Thugs.” From his name you might infer that he represents an apocalyptic angel for Hoch, a symbol for the point at which hip-hop becomes most diluted. Gabriel reads as both a dis of rap’s commercialization and a cunning bit of Hoch self-deprecation. “I’m trying to get a Pathfinder and a Range . . . rover,” Gabriel lamely tries to rhyme.

Hoch knows we’re wondering where the real Danny Hoch—who only obliquely refers to his born cultural identity—lies in relationship to the characters he plays. So mid-show, he plays himself in a vignette where he tells a brush-with-Hollywood story, describing how he was fired for refusing to play a stereotypical Latino pool guy on *Seinfeld*. “Even my black separatist friends loved *Seinfeld*,” he says, explaining his reasons for even considering the part. It’s the maverick tale in the series, and it doesn’t fit into the evening’s themes other than to underscore that Danny’s down. Chances are, you gave him props if you stayed that long, watching him live other people’s lives. **V**