

Broward Center actor Danny Hoch visits Juvenile Detention Center

By Savannah Whaley

Wearing a faded t-shirt bearing the hip-hop clothing line name Triple Five Soul over his baggy jogging pants, Danny Hoch clears away the tables from the front of the classroom that are the only things between him and the 40 or more bored young men who sit in county-issued jumpsuits under the steady gaze of security guards at the Broward Regional Juvenile Detention Center.

Then the 31-year-old actor begins to rap about the early days of hip-hop, which he was part of while growing up in Queens, New York, and his audience sits up. Initial comments of disbelief at the rapping "white boy" quickly change to real interest and one of the boys reacts to Hoch's comments with a murmured, "That's true."

After his initial rap suggesting that hip-hop has been stolen from its young fans and changed from vehicle of social and political expression into a powerless commodity that is marketed back to kids, Hoch launches into one of his many characters.

When he finishes acting out the story of a prison inmate who feels he was the victim of racial profiling, he turns and asks if he should continue. After enthusiastic cries of "Yeah, Yeah," Hoch transforms himself into a street vendor in Cuba who questions an American tourist about the meanings behind the words in gunstarap songs that have made their way to the island.

Most of Hoch's characters are

based on people he has known. He spent five years working in New York City's jails and alternative high schools teaching conflict resolution through drama.

Now a successful actor in films like Whiteboys and The Thin Red Line, Hoch doesn't get to do many of these kinds of appearances anymore.

"This serves to remind me," Hoch said before entering the classroom, "that the issues are still there. The more jails we build, the more we prove the issues that fill them don't go away."

The special appearance on July 6 at the detention center was made possible by Superintendent Enoc Esteves and the Broward Center for the Performing Arts where Hoch performed his provocative one-man show Jails, Hospitals And Hip Hop the next evening.

With two stages of his own to fill, the fact that Mark Nerenhausen, president and CEO of the Broward Center, also would send his star out to perform into the community seems curious, but that is not how he views it.

"The Broward Center for the Performing Arts," he explains, "isn't a building, it's part of the community. Social dialogue flows both ways and issues make their way onto our stage in shows like Danny's. In turn, we serve as a forum to raise awareness and

open debate as our audiences reflect on what they've seen and experienced.

"We arrange for many Broward Center performers to go out to schools and other meeting places in the area," said Nerenhausen. "Art doesn't recognize borders and neither do we? It is important that all segments of our community feel comfortable coming to the Broward Center because they know they are welcome and they will see something that's relevant to them. Whether ticket-buyers to Danny Hoch come for hip-hop or theater is irrelevant, everyone will see the same show: one in which Danny portrays some of the voiceless members of our society and articulates their concerns so eloquently that you have no choice but to listen and think."

"The audience at the detention center gets an added bonus the Broward Center audience doesn't when Hoch begins a talkback session. When Hoch asks them to define hip-hop, hands shoot up and voices shout out answers ranging from images of sharply dressed guys with guns, girls, and fancy cars to a lifestyle in which someone is free to be him or herself.

"You are hip-hop just by your age," Hoch says to the crowd as he prepares to leave. "But being locked up isn't hip-hop. Hip-hop means flipping it, taking something and turning it, but the image of hip-hop has gotten twisted. The people building prisons and running jails are making money off of you. How do you flip it and do something where you are the one making money off of you and

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Danny Hoch (r) and Mark Nerenhausen

benefiting from your actions?"

The next evening Danny Hoch is back in front of a well-dressed audience at the Broward Center.

Although there were no armed guards this time, his audience is spellbound as Hoch plays a prison inmate with AIDS, a Puerto Rican teenager crippled by a policeman's bullet, and a

host of other characters. Hoch may be talking to different people, but his questions are the same.

Danny Hoch's performance was part of the Kant & Rave Series at the Broward Center Performing Arts. Look for more of the same during the 2001-2001 Kant & Rave Series beginning in November.