

Funny 'Dialogues': He Says, He Says

The scene: a cheap hotel room. The characters: a black guy and a Jewish guy holed up to write a play about their ethnic experiences.

The reality: Larry Jay Tish and D.C. native Ron Jones.

The result is "The Black Jew Dialogues," a two-man, multimedia production coming to the Washington area this weekend. Tish and Jones wrote and perform this humorous take on the weighty issues of racial and ethnic stereotyping.

In an interview with *The Post's* Margaret Roth, they talk about how they manage to make it funny.

What inspired this play, especially its comedic approach?

Tish: The state of the world and my wanting to contribute as an artist to try and bring people together. . . . I had this title, "The Black Jew Dialogues," and in my reading and talking to people,



BY ERIC WELLS

Ron Jones, left, and Larry Jay Tish engage in "The Black Jew Dialogues," exploring stereotypes.

I know that those two peoples have slowly diverged.

During the civil rights movement, of course, they were very tight. . . . And then it kind of

moved apart. And I really wanted to use humor to show the absurdity of prejudice, racism, hate, and use the black and Jewish experience in a two-man show with multiple characters and costume changes to really express that. . . .

Jones: In September of 2005, we went to a hotel called the Plantation Inn; the irony was not lost on us. And we sat there for a whole weekend. . . . That went so well that we did it once a month for the next few months. And at that point we just said, "Okay, we're taking this thing to Scotland for the 2006 Fringe Festival." . . .

We started doing a lot of research, and we both sort of settled on the Cornel West and Michael Lerner book "Jews & Blacks." What we started to find, once we were writing, is that there were just a lot of issues that just sort of rose up.

In the play, what do you think black people and Jewish people identify with most strongly, sep-

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arately and together?

Tish: When we play synagogues, when I mention whitefish or sable or gefilte fish, that really resonates. And then it becomes an educational thing for the people who aren't that familiar with it. . . .

Jones: If it were a little yellow book with a black cover, it would be "Jews for Dummies" and "Blacks for Dummies." . . . We did a show in Florida a couple of weeks ago, and one of the comments a student made afterward was, "I didn't know any of that stuff about Jews." . . .

Tish: We can't speak for the whole culture, but we do, being part of that culture. As a Reform Jew, I was bar mitzvahed, and we celebrate the High Holidays, but my experience as a Jew is very similar to Conservative Jews I've met and even Orthodox Jews in a way. We don't share the same rigor of practice, but we share the culture of being Jewish, and that is universal in a lot of ways.

Jones: The idea here is that blacks and Jews, because we're minority status, there are the jokes and the stereotypes that exist about us. And we really just take some time to really beat them with a big rubber mallet for a while.

What are some of your favorite scenes or lines from the play?

Tish: The set of the show is the hotel room where we're working on the show. So Ron says, "Okay, you ready for a moment of truth?" And I say yeah. And he says, "Did you know that the Jews were involved in the African slave trade?" And my reply is, "Oh, yeah, what did they do, cater it?" . . .

Jones: There are a couple of things that tickle me. We do one scene, we're playing a couple of boys. I'm at Larry's bar mitzvah, and he's basically explaining the whole process of the bar mitzvah being his rite of passage into manhood, and then he asks me, "What does it take to be a man in your culture?" And I say, "I gotta move out of my house, get a job and never come back." It's

one of those ideas everybody can relate to. That's not even a black or Jewish thing, that's a parents thing.

We also do a skit where I play a very, very white-leaning black man. . . . I'm part of a program that's designed to help white people feel more comfortable with black people. At one point I say to him, "Here's the way that we see things: Every white person wants to say that they have a black friend, but essentially you're all talking about the same few guys. There's a few guys working hard to make all white people feel more comfortable with all black people."

These are the discussions that people either have in tiny little pockets, like one friend to another or one person to another, when they've found a bit of a comfort zone and say, "Can I ask you about this black thing or can I ask you about this Jewish thing?" I'm getting this a lot now: "Can I ask you about Barack Obama?" And I say sure, of course. Now that Barack's in charge, you know, at the last black people's meeting we gave out dossiers to everyone so they can all answer questions.

Tish: We have a few moments that there's some tension between us, and I actually raise my voice, I get

angry. Those are parts of the show I really enjoy, too. There's some real drama built into the show that kind of picks the audience up a bit.

On a serious note, then, what do you want people to take from the play?

Tish: We did a show in East Hampton. Afterward I got an e-mail from a gentleman who said he brought his 17-year-old son to see the show with him. And then they went out afterward and sat somewhere for three hours and ate and talked about the show. . . . He said it's the only time he could remember in recent years that he's actually sat and talked with his son for that long a time, heart to heart.

That's what I want people to take away, that they can connect with people and it gives them some ideas on top of the ideas that we present. . . .

Jones: T-shirts.

THE BLACK JEW DIALOGUES Saturday at 8 and Sunday at 3 at Indian Head Center for the Arts Black Box Theatre, 4185 Indian Head Hwy., Indian Head; 800-494-8497 or 301-743-3040, www.indianheadblackbox.org, \$15-\$18. Also Monday at 7 at Catholic University's Prybyla Center, 520 Michigan Ave. NE, Washington, 202-319-5291, www.theblackjewdialogues.com. Free. The show returns this summer for the Capital Fringe Festival.