

Jokes aside, a serious point on black, Jewish dialogue

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Ron Jones (left) and Larry Tish play stereotypical characters Mabel and Ester during a skit in "The Black Jew Dialogues."

By Steve Maas

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Besides making US history, Barack Obama has given a pair of local playwrights a bit of a headache: What to do with a routine skit imagining the first black president?

When Larry Tish and Ron Jones wrote "The Black Jew Dialogues" three years and 100 performances ago, the idea of an African-American in the White House still seemed far-fetched.

Perhaps, they'll sub in a skit about the first Jewish president. In any case, as you'll see, they've already got Obama covered.

The president bit is part of a 90-minute comedy show that explores and explodes stereotypes. "The only way we're going to have a truly substantive conversation about anything in this country is if we're willing to have an honest conversation," says Jones, who is the black half of the duo and lives with friends in Groveland when he's not performing on the road.

The pair perform at synagogues, colleges, high schools, and theaters around the country. The name of the show is a bit misleading, Jones says. "We're not just talking about blacks and Jews. It's about everybody . . . the excuses and rationales we use for why one group isn't as good as another."

In one skit, Tish presents a primer on how it feels to be a Jew: "Be prepared to answer a question with a question. Feel guilty about everything in your life, everything you did, should have done, your mother said you should have done."

Jones responds by telling how white perceptions have shaped the way blacks feel about themselves: "Imagine that the very sight of you draws up negative images of who you are and what you're capable of." To make his point, he has a trunk of props built on the stereotypes facing African-Americans.

Growing up in a black neighborhood of Washington, D.C., Jones didn't get to know any Jews until he started work at a deli. "Jews were just a different branch of white people," he says.

Jones, 46, knows what it's like to be picked on. Back in the early 1980s as a freshman at Boston College, he said, he shared an apartment with white roommates who subjected him to a barrage of "backhanded ugly comments."

Within a month, a brawl was broken up by campus police. Although he was haunted for years by the experience, Jones holds BC in high esteem. It's where he got his start in theater and where, decades later, "Dialogues" was performed to a rousing reception.

Tish, 48, and a Cambridge resident, came up with the name "Black Jew Dialogues" about 10 years ago, but didn't have a clue what to do with it. "The initial idea was, why have these two groups drifted apart and what can we do to bring us together?"

Around that time he met Jones, when both were playing pirates to entertain customers at Jordan's Furniture in Natick. Tish also was working as a travel writer and Jones as a founding member of Urban Improv. Both have extensive experience in acting and comedy.

After battling Tish's idea around for several years, they decided to get serious and prepare a show for the 2006 Fringe Festival in Edinburgh. "Dialogues" turned out to be one of the most popular acts.

While they've taken the show on the road to rave reviews, including at predominantly black high schools, they've yet to persuade a black church to sponsor it. What the show needs, Jones says, is the endorsement of a prominent black figure such as Tom Joyner or Oprah Winfrey.

As "Dialogues" brings often-unspoken attitudes to the surface, Tish and Jones bat them back and forth to get to the heart of what divides people.

As for Obama, at a recent show Tish ad-libbed, "Barack's in the program?" Jones didn't miss a beat. "Barack Obama was genetically engineered by the program. He was our effort to make the least scary black man ever. If he were any less scary, he'd be Canadian."

And Obama has been part of the show ever since.

The "Black Jew Dialogues" at 8 p.m. Feb. 13 at the Calderwood Pavilion at the Boston Center for the Arts. Tickets at www.bostontheatrescene.com or 617-933-8600. More on the show at www.theblackjewdialogues.com. ■