



The question of how to handle sensitive topics in a live presentation must surely leave any performer contemplating the step, cautiously cognizant of how their message will be perceived.

Certainly when it comes to a topic like race, there are sensitive aspects to any conversation, especially in a market like campuses, where audiences are sure to constitute broad bases.

There is little doubt that humor is one of the best ways to broach any sensitive subject; Larry Jay Tish and Ron Jones of the Black/Jew Dialogues tend to agree.

The show is an all-out comedy blast, framed around a series of characters that allow Ron and Larry to expose and exploit stereotypes, but in a good way. "The show consists of a progression of characters, firing comedy at the audience at a machine gun rate," Larry says.

This progression starts with Larry at his Bar Mitzvah (which in this reality Ron attends). "That scene takes place with us as 13 year-old boys," Ron comments, "which our wives may claim isn't far from the truth," he says laughing. The cast of charac-

ters goes from this extreme to the portrayal of Larry and Ron as octogenarian grandmothers. "In between we also have a couple of good ole' country boys, some vacationing middle class average Americans, a slave with his Jewish owner and many more."

"There are many characters which come in and out of the show based on how much time we have and the specific audience we are addressing," Larry says.

When you cut it to the quick, the entire ensemble is phrased around one fairly straightforward concept. "At it's core, the show is about two guys of different races who lock themselves in a hotel room to figure out why we can't all just get along, to coin a phrase. This begins with the Black and Jewish American experience and then really branches out to everyone else from there."

To illustrate the points our duo intends to the audience, the skits come out in a series of "what if" day dream scenarios. Rather than sit up on stage and speak at the students about issue after issue until they were blue in the face (complexion dictating this effect being somewhat more no-

ticeable in Larry than Ron). This program tears the topics out of the realm of dry lecture and catapults them into the world of sketch comedy. "The characters really drive the point home and by the end of it. You've laughed a lot and learned a lot," Ron says. "These two guys have come to understand each other much better through the power of dialogue and imagination, which is really the overarching theme here. Dialogue is the road to resolution and understanding. Race, prejudice, intolerance and diversity issues included."

Along with the sketches, there is also a multimedia component added into the show, which Ron and Larry continue to evolve and develop. "We have Power Point slides and video clips that go a long way in helping students to visualize and retain some of the things we go over. We continue to strive increasingly toward audience interaction as well, trying to get feedback, opinions and questions from what we consider not to be just spectators, but actual participants," Larry finishes.

"The interactive element with the audience is paramount to us," Ron says. "There is a game show we play throughout the performance



*So Different. So Alike. So Who Knew?*

during which the audience can win prizes for participation. I literally go out into the audience and start talking to everybody." Certainly this activation of the crowd suits this performance to the college market extremely well, a group of young people who love to get involved. It removes the wall of separation between performer and the students and challenges them to become a part of the process (and solution!) and shoves them out of the role of casual bystander.

Improvisation is an overwhelming theme in the show and runs hand in hand with the level of audience interaction involved. Since obviously no two audiences are the same, neither are the reactions they get from Larry and Ron and vice versa. "There is a lot of improvisation in the show," Ron says. "So, we play with the audience. We really have fun with them based on the responses we are getting, even as we are moving through the piece. The idea that we would stop and acknowledge someone in the audience is completely in our scope. Our overall intention is to bring as much fun as possible to this experience for the crowd, which makes it much easier for them to jump into the serious part of the discussion." This is a part the advisors and administration can view as a truly constructive social good, while the students get to enjoy the entertaining portion. Either way, everyone gets engaged and learns something during and after the show.

The after-show portion tends to be one of the most highly participated events as students get to interject their personal opinions and questions into the mix. "We have a discussion after every show," Ron says. Sometimes this can be a double-edged sword however, as Ron and Larry can be thrown questions they don't have an easy answer for. "That's kind of the point," Larry says. "It's true tough topics come up and what happens in these discussions is not just us talking to them, but it is really like a roundtable. The students, staff, faculty and community all have an opportunity to get involved. It is a cross-

sectional audience and a perfect example of the power of this show and what it can accomplish. There are dialogues opened up in every community we perform in."

Race is a touchy subject in most communities, some more so than others and neither Ron nor Larry claim to be experts in race relations or certified sociologists. However, based on their insight and experience, they do feel ready to handle just about any topic that is thrown their way.

"I would say there has never been a question that has completely knocked us for a loop," Ron surmises. "There have been incredible, deep, insightful, provocative and honest questions. There have been questions asked in the audience and you can hear the sort of collective 'Oh no you didn't!' That has happened on a number of occasions and when you think about it, that's sort of the point. That is why we do this. We want to put these things out in the open and discuss them. Far before any resolution of understanding, there is going to be some discomfort."

Ron and Larry have amassed a considerable amount of experience in dealing with and discussing these issues, yet they both remain humble and always willing to learn more.

"I don't consider myself an 'expert' on race or culture or any of the other issues we bring up," Ron says. "But, I think what Larry and I bring to the table which a lot of other people don't is the depth to which we've plumbed this topic. Because of our talking this out, building a show like this piece by piece, analyzing it's structure time and again... because of the number of times we have had these discussions, we are far more experienced and skilled at facilitating these talks than I think where a lot of people stand right now."

"We definitely do give advice in terms of personal issues when folks come to us for help," Larry says. "We had a couple of young women come up to us after one show who had some racist incidents perpetrated against them and were having a very hard time coming forward to the campus and expressing their dismay with how it was handled. After the show, they told us about this situation and we sat with them for over two hours talking and encouraging them."

"Whenever we land on a campus, we basically have the attitude that 'We are here for you.' We will stay up and work as hard as we can with you and your students to make sure that any questions are answered to the best of our ability and we have helped in any way that we can. That is why we really do

this and hope to continue to make a change in some larger way through our consistently working on these smaller pieces."

The Black/Jew Dialogues is an original, thought-provoking and interest-spiking show. The title will have your students' curiosity piqued and the content will deliver them a world of racial introspection they probably have not yet considered.

**BOOK IT!** For more information on bringing the Black/Jew Dialogues to your campus, contact Bass/Schuler Entertainment at (773) 481-2600. For virtual links, head over to [www.campusactivities-magazine.com](http://www.campusactivities-magazine.com)

