

Campus play funny, yet thought provoking

Sara Harowitz, Special to The CJN, Thursday, February 2, 2012

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Ron Jones, left and Larry Jay Tish

University of Toronto.

"The title just flew into my head," says Tish, who came up with the initial idea that he then proposed to Jones.

"I always was curious about the relationship between the African-American community and the Jewish community here in the States. I knew it had been estranged for a while. I wanted to explore it through comedy and through going over my story."

Comedy is an important tool used in the show, which was performed for the first time at a Canadian university last week.

It is through comedy that some of the difficulties of being a cultural minority in a melting pot like the United States or Canada can be overcome. Tish and Jones are, essentially, laughing through the pain.

For example, in one of the skits, Jones and Tish dressed up as old ladies who are meeting with their families for a picnic.

At first they seem to be wary of each other – the Jewish grandma even complains that a young black kid robbed her grandson.

But the more the two women talk, the more they discover they have in common – their dedication to their families, their issues that come with aging. The skit ends with the women swapping picnic baskets, and, in doing so, embracing the food, and complexities, of each other's cultures.

"The way I like to say it is we deal with serious things in a funny way," says Jones. "The issues we talk about are definitely serious. But the relationship we portray on stage is irreverent and it's fun. We hope that by showing our relationship – two guys on stage talking about tough things – we can show people that these are not taboo conversations, that you can talk to people about race and ethnicity and culture without feeling like you're automatically going to move to being offensive or becoming defensive."

Tish agrees.

"To me, racism and prejudice and some of the intense hatred that we have for one another is so absurd that it's funny," he says. "Comedy has always been the best vehicle for me to express the truth about life in a way that I think really gets across to people."

The Black-Jew Dialogues is somehow lighthearted and heavy all at once. Part sketch comedy and part social analysis, it is able to bring to the table serious issues surrounding race, religion and ethnicity without making the audience feel uncomfortable as part of the conversation.

"This performance presents the dialogue in a really creative and funny way," says Tamar Berger, the project's co-ordinator at Hillel GTA who oversaw the performances at Ryerson and U of T.

The Black Students Association, the West Indies Association and OACT (Oakham Amateur Campus Theatre), Ryerson's theatre group, also helped organize the Ryerson event.

"Sometimes it can be hard to talk about racism and prejudice. The show does it in such a light way that it really opens up the discussion."

And though the title of the show lends itself specifically to blacks and Jews, the conversation that spurs from it goes beyond those two cultural groups.

After the performance, Jones and Tish opened up the floor and led the audience in a participatory and insightful discussion.

Through an exploration of the most common racial stereotypes toward blacks and Jews, the audience was encouraged to address the issues some might be too scared to bring up.

"It would be my hope that people leave with a little more courage and take a little more action towards injustice and racism," says Tish.

"And, hopefully, they've laughed a little, too."