

The Black Jew Dialogues



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Ron Jones (left) talks with Larry Jay Tish during the Black Jew Dialogues. 11/16/10 (Photo: Andrew Weber/Sentinel-Tribune)

At the start of "The Black Jew Dialogues," performer Ron Jones made the customary request for audience members to turn off their cell phones, adding he would charge after them if indeed their phone went off during the show.

Then he added he wanted those in the audience at Owens Community College to turn off their hate, prejudices and biases as well.

Jones and Larry Jay Tish were at Owens in Perrysburg Township Tuesday afternoon, following a morning show on the Findlay campus, to try to spark a new kind of dialogue about race.

This is a serious topic that they could best address with humor, off-color at times, crude at others. In the video they played to introduce their presentation they asked people interviewed on the street if they knew any jokes about blacks and Jews.

Up front they warned the audience of some rough language. And everyone seemed a prime target. In one skit, they posited that a special system existed to strategically place one African-American everywhere in America - the actual name of the fictional group used a racial epithet. The group's crowning achievement was having Barack Obama elected president. He was actually genetically engineered to be "the least scary black man in America," Jones said. "If he was any less scary, he'd be a Canadian."

The script for the show was written by the friends, who now live in Boston.

Race is so hard to talk about it, most people just opt out of the dialogue, letting the prejudice exist without questioning.

Dressed as two family matriarchs, one black and one white, Jones and Tish confronted the fears each side has about the other, before finding common ground in the role food plays in each of their cultures to nurture families.

Though relations between Jews and African-Americans has been tense since the heyday of the civil rights movement, before then they had been traditional allies.

Jews were involved in the creation of the NAACP and other civil rights groups. Traditionally black colleges took the lead in hiring Jewish intellectuals fleeing the Nazis. Jews marched arm-in-arm with blacks in the civil rights movement.

They both faced discrimination. But when Tish noted both lived in ghettos, Jones objected. "We still live in ghettos. You invented them; we inherited them."

Blacks he said live with the awareness that whites often look at them and project a variety of preconceived notions on them. That they are violent, highly sexual, dangerous.

Will Evans, an African-American student from Toledo, who the comics noted was dressed in a sweater vest and Dockers and looked inoffensive as possible, said he'd had the experience of an older white woman crossing a four-lane street in order to avoid him.



Larry Jay Tish plays with a puppet during the Black Jew Dialogues. 11/16/10 (Photo: Andrew Weber/Sentinel-Tribune)

For Jews, though they seem to have melded into mainstream American culture, fear remains. They fear that when there's a crisis, "sooner or later someone will decide it's the Jews' fault." They showed scenes of mobs and lynchings. The only way to prevent this, Jones said is: "You have to believe I'm not going to let it happen to you, and you won't let it happen to me."

Tish concluded that people must confront their prejudices by reaching out, having lunch with someone they'd normally not sit with, converse with someone they might otherwise avoid. It's not just about Jews and blacks, or even whites and blacks, but also about homophobia and sexism. And "it's about the vilification of our Muslim brothers," Tish said.

Reaching out, Tish said, may mean saying the wrong thing sometimes, it may mean hearing those uncomfortable statements. But that's the only way progress will be made.

It's a valuable message, Evans said, one he was glad to hear, and one others should hear.

"We're not all that different," he said. "It's not all black and white. We have to find the area of gray."

Online:

www.theblackjewdialogues.com