

Comedy as catalyst: Award-winning duo brings "absurdity of prejudice" to the stage

By Cindy Mindell

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If humor is the best way to address difficult topics, "The Black Jew Dialogues" might just be a key to helping the two peoples understand one another.

The play was written in 2006 by Emmy award-winner Ron Jones, an African American, and Larry Jay Tish, a Jewish American, who also perform the play. The work, which deals with the history and nature of prejudice and racism, was praised by The Boston Globe for its ability "to get to the heart of what divides people." Jones recently explained during an interview with CNN's Don Lemon that he and Tish were inspired to write the play because of the complex role that race and culture continue to play in American society and politics.



The play will be performed on Saturday, Nov. 6 at 8 p.m. at Temple Beth Torah in Wethersfield.

Combining fast-paced sketches, improvisation, puppetry, multimedia, audience interaction, and post-show discussion, the play presents what the actors describe as "a new and vital conversation about race and culture."

The show premiered at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in Scotland in August 2006. In September 2007, it was the only American play invited to perform at the Leeds Jewish Performing Arts Festival in England. Since then, the duo has brought "The Black Jew Dialogues" to universities, high schools, synagogues, and theatres throughout the U.S. The duo was recognized in 2010 by "Campus Activities Magazine" as one of the country's best diversity artists. As a result of their success, the actors have created a lesson plan that addresses issues of bigotry and prejudice, and promotes understanding through the shared experience of immigration to the Americas.

"I decided to have Beyond The Pale Jewish Theater Experiment present 'The Black Jew Dialogues' because I admire the duo's creatively comical spirit and willingness to poke fun, with moral passion and good heart, at the foibles of human beings," says Rabbi Seth Riemer, spiritual leader of Temple Beth Torah and producer of Beyond the Pale Theater Experiment. "Larry and Ron's joyful enthusiasm about the subject of religion and race - and in particular, Black-Jewish relations, as a window into the larger multicultural conversation - is refreshing in today's overly politically correct culture. As I sought to do in putting on my play, "Converted Imperfect," this past March, I am again interested in opening up lines of communication, within and among our various religious, racial, and ethnic communities, about politically charged and spiritually challenging subjects that 'polite' society hesitates to address."

In the play, Tish and Jones take the audience on a funny and poignant ride through three days they spent together in a cheap hotel room discussing their own experiences, the history of their respective peoples, and reasons for the growing rift between the two groups since the early '70s. "Through our dialogue, the audience gains insight into the true nature of prejudice and how our inability to face our own biases separates us in ways we may not even think about," Tish says. The comic journey begins in the Egypt of the Pharaohs and travels through Africa and Colonial times to present-day America.

Riemer says that Tish contacted him after reading an article in the Jewish Ledger about Beyond the Pale's

opening production several months ago, and the two discussed ways to work together.

"This is the first of what I hope will be many such collaborative efforts between us," Riemer says.

"There is never a good time to have a difficult conversation, but there is a good way to have it," says Jones. "We use humor to loosen people up and get them talking."

"In bringing Ron and Larry to greater Hartford, *Beyond the Pale* seeks to point out Jewish American-African American dialogue as a window into the larger multicultural conversation," says Riemer.

"The Black Jew Dialogues" will be performed on Saturday, Nov. 6 at 8 p.m. at Temple Beth Torah, 130 Main St., Wethersfield. Tickets: \$20/general admission; \$15/senior, student, unemployed. For information call (860) 918-0213.
