

Did ya hear the one about the black guy and the Jew?

By Chris Bergeron/DAILY NEWS STAFF

GHS

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SUDBURY What happens when a Jewish salesman from Brooklyn shares a cheap hotel room with a street-smart black guy from Washington, D.C.?

They fight about why blacks and Jews drifted apart after fighting for each other throughout the Civil Rights movement.

Dressing in drag like their grandmothers for laughs, they argue which tastes better gefilte fish or collard greens.

They bring out a noose and swap racially charged epithets.

That's when they make you think.

So where's this improbable encounter take place?

In the sanctuary of Congregation Beth El Saturday in Sudbury!

Don't worry! Al Sharpton and Sarah Silverman aren't invading this temple in the leafy 'burbs.

Get ready for "The Black Jew Dialogues," a funny, provocative two-man show that aims to outrage and enlighten audiences by exploring changing relations between once-supportive minority groups that seem to have lost their common ground.

Saturday's performance starts at 7:30 p.m. in the 300-seat sanctuary. Tickets are still available.

Created and written by Boston performers Larry Jay Tish and Ron Jones, the 80-minute performance mixes humor and some offensive language, anger and glimmers of understanding. Directed by Margaret Ann Brady, it aims to entertain audiences but also remind them of the possibility of reconciliation.

Describing himself "as Jewish as bagels and cream cheese," Tish said, "Humor is a way to survive."

"We're not trying to offend anybody," he said. "But when you're showing the truth, people can get offended."

Organized as a multimedia show, "Dialogues" includes videos to accompany the performers as they trace their intersecting ancestries from ancient Egypt to the Dutch slave trade, from a scary "joyride" with two Klansmen to present-day America.

Throughout the show, Tish and Jones play variations of themselves, slipping in and out of multiple roles often requiring costume changes.

Following the performance, there will be a silent auction. Prizes include Red Sox tickets, spa treatments, resort getaways and fine wine. There will be music and a cash bar.

Since premiering in August 2006 at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in Scotland, the show has played in synagogues, high schools, colleges and theaters across the United States. Last September it was the only American play included at the Leeds Jewish Performing Arts Festival in England.

Jones described the show as "very irreverent, very tongue-in-cheek, very strongly written."

"We run in circles through minefields (of misunderstanding). That's our job to talk about things that are stereotypes...of our culture," he said. "We believe it's important to do this. If we're going to have discussions about real issues, we have to all realize somebody is going to be offended."

For the temple's first annual fundraiser, Rabbi David Thomas said he wanted to "create an event that was fun and that would also build community."

"The show is not only entertaining but engaging and thought-provoking. The best humor is always provocative," he said. "The 'Black Jew Dialogues' not only examines and explores the black/Jewish experience but Jay and Ron put on a show that celebrates our history and the long-standing bond between Jews and blacks."

Though Tish and Jones pursued separate careers as performers, they met eight years ago in Natick when they auditioned and won parts as pirates in the Jordan furniture store's theater group.

They became friends. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, they decided to use their acting and writing experience to explore why Jews and blacks, who'd found common cause throughout the first half of the 20th century, now seem trapped in mutual suspicion and misunderstanding.

"When Larry first proposed writing this for us, I thought it was a good excuse to drink beer and have some laughs," said Jones.

Both Tish and Jones had taken long circuitous paths before coming together on stage.

Born in Brooklyn near Brighton Beach, Tish was always "the funny one" in school or family gatherings. After attending three different colleges, he earned a degree in creative writing and eventually started his own small ad agency in Philadelphia. After going out of business, he spent eight years selling clothes and cars, which he described as "a great lesson in humanity." Since joining Jones as a pirate, he's concentrated on his writing and acting.

Born in Washington, D.C., Jones came to Boston to study English at Boston College. But during his freshmen year, what he described as a "violent, racially motivated attack" in his dormitory left him disenchanted. As a way to escape the "trauma," Jones auditioned for the college's improvisational troupe, won a place and later joined Improv Boston.

He spent several years acting, writing and later founded Urban Improv to help inner-city children "use theater as a expressive arts tool to get a deeper

understanding of the issues facing them."

Since working together, Tish and Jones feel "Dialogues" generally strikes the right balance between biting humor and cathartic drama to move audiences to a new understanding. But not always.

"I kind of come to the conclusion that every bad thing that happened to Jews happened to blacks," Tish said. "We wrote the show to encourage dialogue. It's wonderful and cathartic to have blacks and Jews laughing together at their history."

But that catharsis might not be shared equally.

Both agree black audiences seem less likely to attend this sort of performance and Jewish organizations are more likely to hire them. But they try not to soften or dilute their message for either audience.

While Jews and blacks bring different emotional baggage to the show, Jones said most are moved by "its very powerful ending."

"The last few lines resonate with blacks and Jews. I think it gets to the very core of their common pain. If there's any great message, it's that everybody's dirty," he said. "Everybody gets dumped on. If you're going to be honest about who your people are in America, you've got to look at all your history the good, the bad and the ugly."

THE ESSENTIALS:

Congregation Beth El is located at 105 Hudson Road, Sudbury.

"The Black Jew Dialogues" will play Saturday, June 14, at 7:30 p.m. Doors open at 7. Advance tickets are \$25 and \$30 at the door.

The temple is wheelchair accessible and provides free parking.

To order tickets, call 978-443-9622 or visit <http://www.bethelsudbury.org/>.

To learn more about the show by Ron Jones and Larry Jay Tish, visit <http://www.theblackjewdialogues.com/>.

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