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Posted on Sun, Nov. 06, 2005

PAT CRAIG: THEATER

Next sensation/Theater: Brian Copeland, 'Not a Genuine Black Man'

Anyone who has lived in the Bay Area any length of time knows Brian Copeland.

He's been on TV and radio for years, and his stand-up comedy act has given him an easy sort of fame that has kept him working steadily, but still able to enjoy life with his family in the East Bay.

You get the distinct impression Copeland could be a pal -- somebody you might cast as the wisecracking next-door neighbor in the sitcom of your life. And the fact is, Copeland did spend his childhood in various cities on this side of the Bay.

So when he opened his show about growing up black in San Leandro, "Not a Genuine Black Man," you figured it would be a sharp and funny sociological look at the 'burbs from a black perspective. It told the story of '70s life in that city which, at the time, was considered one of the most racist suburbs in the country.

I saw the show in April of last year, during its opening week. I'd known Brian since he was a 13- or 14-year-old kid in Hayward, promoting a comic book show. I'd followed his career from the start, so naturally I was rooting for him to do well. But I was stunned by just how well he did, and how much I didn't know about him.

As the show began, the hairs on the back of my neck began to bristle to attention almost immediately, as Copeland explained that the piece got its title from a letter he received from a radio fan. The man had complained that Copeland was "not a genuine black man" because of the way he spoke.

Ten minutes into the performance, I was hooked. Not only was this wonderfully written and performed solo theater, it was a captivating and frightening tale of territory you thought you knew so well. Within 15 minutes, I was convinced I was witnessing something very big happening.

Looking back from the perspective of more than a year, I was. Copeland's show became the longest-running solo performance in San Francisco (he continues to perform the piece Thursdays-Saturdays at the Marsh, 1082 Valencia St.). He is in discussions with HBO over turning "Not a Genuine Black Man" into a TV series, and is preparing a book based on the material.

-- Pat Craig, Theater critic

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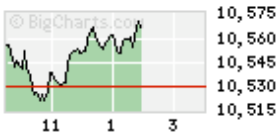
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