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Good things in small packages

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Welcome to the dog days of summer. If you're feeling like you need a break, you're not alone. And we're not just talking about the heat.

After a month or two of big-budget movie blockbusters, glitzy musicals and overpriced rock concerts, some of us are ready to take a deep breath and try something ... small.

Maybe it's a film that got great reviews but slipped under the radar; a rock band that's still on the way up (and still charging less than \$50 for seats). A theater show that's simple, entertaining and intimate. A museum that's fun and interesting for the whole family.

So read on. Here are recommendations from Times arts and entertainment writers for works or venues worth a look, even if they aren't grabbing headlines.

Theater

Brian Copeland has a 'Genuine' hit.

The places are tiny -- way fewer than 100 seats -- and don't have the velvet and thick-carpet amenities of larger, mainstream theaters. There's an insurance office within a vintage Walnut Creek strip that becomes a theater at night. In North Beach, a garage opening onto an alley has been hosting plays for years.

These and many other similar venues are the Bay Area theater scene's diamonds in the rough, home to what writers, actors and producers hope will be the Next Big Thing. At their best, these venues offer a rollicking evening's entertainment; at their worst, a unique experience.

One of the Bay Area's best big-things-in-small-houses stories can be found at the Marsh, a converted storefront that opens into a beehive sort of arrangement of theater spaces, including the main stage, where seats are arranged in an L shape on two sides of a long, narrow stage.

This is where one of the most successful tiny theater ventures of recent years unfolds three nights a week. It's Brian Copeland's "Not a Genuine Black Man," a solo show about his growing up black in the nearly-all-white suburb of San Leandro.

The show is in its 17th month, which makes it the longest-running solo play in San Francisco theater history. And Copeland, a standup comic and KGO radio host, is thrilled, and a bit surprised, at the response.

"It's therapy for a lot of people," says Copeland, noting that the show attracts a lot of social science teachers and therapists. "A lot of black men tell me this is their story, too. The same kind of grief I got about not really being black because they do this or sound like that. Other people have remarked on it, too. Like being the first Jewish person in a neighborhood, or the first Asian family or gay people."

Copeland will continue performing the show through the fall, when work begins on an HBO show based on the material.

"Everything I've heard over the last 17 months," says Copeland, "it's been a mind-expanding experience.

("Not a Genuine Black Man" plays Thursdays-Saturdays in the theater at 1062 Valencia St., S.F. Tickets are \$15-\$22. For reservations or information, contact 415-826-5750 or www.themarsh.org.)

-- Pat Craig,

Times theater critic