

'Not a Genuine Black Man' Has Many Themes

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NEW YORK — When Brian Copeland, at age 8, moved to San Leandro, Calif., in the early 1970s, the town, which borders Oakland, was 99.99 percent white.

Whiter than Ivory soap, Copeland says in his affecting one-man memoir, "Not a Genuine Black Man," which opened Wednesday at off-Broadway's DR2 Theatre. It's not surprising that Copeland, who's black, was noticed. In fact, on his first Saturday in the new neighborhood, he was chased by a group of white teens.

Remembrances like it thread their way through Copeland's tale of growing up in a town where people were judged first by the color of their skin. But "Not a Genuine Black Man" has more on its mind than the persistent racism that dogged Copeland's childhood.

It's a story of family. Affectionate portraits of his mother and grandmother. A not-so-happy picture of his rarely seen father, a brute of a man who abused his wife and terrorized his children.

That Copeland, now a radio talk-show host in San Francisco, seems to have turned out so well-adjusted is a marvel. He is a genial, accomplished raconteur, able to switch back and forth between the characters in his show.

The catalyst for "Not a Genuine Black Man" is the man's determined mother. A woman with style and class, she did have her quirks. Always claiming to be from Providence, R.I., and not Alabama because it sounded better, for example. And one thing her son never figured out was why she remained so loyal to his father, who eventually disappeared from their lives.

What his mother wanted was respect, Copeland says. And it was her determination to have that respect which brought the woman and her children to San Leandro and later to initiate a lawsuit after being threatened with eviction.

She brought her children up to succeed — and Copeland did. And his success becomes one of the show's themes, particularly in the way other blacks have responded to his having made it. Some made the accusation that became the title of his show — "Not a Genuine Black Man."

"If you're talking about pigment, then, yes, clearly I am black," Copeland says at one point. "If you're talking about some cultural delineation, I don't know."

The man refuses to be categorized. And it is that refusal to be stereotyped that makes "Not a Genuine Black Man" such an intriguing and entertaining evening.