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JOAN RYAN

Bearing life in all-white San Leandro

Joan Ryan

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The Marsh Theater on Valencia Street in San Francisco has the feel of a speakeasy, the kind of place you might need a special knock and a password to enter. The 110 seats face a plain patch of floor. The only props are a stool, an end table and a bottle of water.

It is a place that seems built for telling secrets, about ourselves and the places we call home.

A 40-year-old stand-up comedian comes out. You know him. He's been the weatherman on KTVU. He has a talk show on KGO.

Brian Copeland has always been the sort of affable guy who seemed to have it all figured out. He studied hard in Catholic school, wrote little columns for the local weekly when he was just 12 years old, kept his head down, worked like a dog, made sure everybody liked him. He got married, had three kids and bought a house in a leafy neighborhood in San Leandro, the same town where he grew up.

Then one day, at the age of 35, the age his mother died, he walked into his two-car garage and slid into the driver's seat of his convertible. He held a martini in one hand, a cigar in the other. He started the engine, drained the martini and closed his eyes. He woke up on a gurney on his way to the hospital.

The despair and subsequent revelations from what he calls his suicide "gesture" eventually led him to this little stage in the Mission to perform a one-man show that, in ways both funny

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and poignant, peels away the layers of a time and a place in the Bay Area you aren't likely to find in the history books.

In 1972, when Copeland's African American family moved into town, San Leandro was 99.4 percent white. (By contrast, Oakland, the city next door, was 44 percent black.) Both Newsweek and CBS included San Leandro in stories on white-only enclaves in the early '70s. This came on the heels of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights holding hearings in San Francisco to determine why there was such a racial disparity in the East Bay town.

Behind the white-picket fences was a community as quietly racist as any in Alabama, the state Copeland's grandmother fled years earlier. Copeland spent days at the San Leandro library unearthing civil rights reports and newspaper articles, all of which confirmed what he knew from personal experience. As the only black children in the Washington Manor neighborhood, where the Copelands rented an apartment, they were beaten and taunted. They were told they would never amount to anything. They watched their prim and proper mother -- who punished them for such sins as using the word "ain't" -- weather harassment and racial epithets to fend off eviction by a hateful apartment manager.

"When you hear about racist people, you think of Bull Connor and fire hoses and police dogs," Copeland says over eggs at Francisco's, a Mexican restaurant in San Leandro. The town is now one of the most diverse in Northern California. Copeland still lives there and loves it, despite the memories. His four sisters all left for the Sacramento area.

"When I first saw the show, I had to leave several times I was sobbing so hard," says Copeland's sister Tracy Stafford, who is two years younger than Brian. Their mother was so determined to be middle class that she told everyone she was from Rhode Island, and she never spoke of the beatings she endured from the husband who popped in and out of their lives.

"These were things we had never talked about," Stafford says by phone. "And even now when we do talk about it, it's as though it's a movie and happened to somebody else. It feels safer that way."

The show is called "Not a Genuine Black Man," a reference to a criticism Copeland once received from an African American KGO listener. Apparently because he spoke standard English and played golf, among other things, he was not "a genuine black man." The show examines what "being black" means. Does it mean abandoning one's children, as Copeland's father did? Does it mean dropping out of school, selling crack? Copeland wonders in the show why no one criticizes those men for not being genuine black men.

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These are not easy things to say, as Bill Cosby found out when he took black families to task for not holding their children to higher standards. "You're talking about family business outside the family," Copeland says.

The irony is that this show, in which Copeland finally abandons the facade he so carefully constructed to be a success in life, is launching him toward more success than he's ever known. The show, which opened in April, routinely sells out and has been extended at the Marsh through Nov. 27.

Producer-director Rob Reiner was so taken with the show that he is hammering out a deal to turn it into a half-hour dramedy, mostly likely on HBO. A literary agent is weighing offers from New York publishers for the book version.

Every night he performs the show, folks from San Leandro show up telling him how proud they are of him. The mayor presented proclamations in the names of Copeland's grandmother and mother for their courage in fighting racism. Sometimes, one of Copeland's childhood tormentors will show up with his wife, bragging about how they all grew up together.

"I try to be gracious," Copeland says.

So far, his father hasn't surfaced. Copeland saw him two months before his 16th birthday, not long after his mother had died. Copeland's father said he would pick him up on his birthday and take him to buy a car. Copeland stayed home from school that day, April 21, 1980.

"I never heard from him," he says, "and haven't heard anything since."

Copeland shrugs and takes a bite of his toast, as if he no longer cares. It's freeing to reveal our secrets, no matter how dark, as Copeland does so powerfully in his show. But sometimes the only way to get through the day, as we learn during the worst times in our lives, is to put up a good front.

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