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San Francisco Chronicle

Copeland shows himself to be a genuine funny man

[Robert Hurwitt, Chronicle Theater Critic](#)

Saturday, April 24, 2004



Not a Genuine Black Man: Monologue. Written and performed by Brian Copeland. Directed by David Ford. (Through May 15. The Marsh, 1062 Valencia St., San Francisco. One hour, 55 minutes. Tickets 15-\$22. Call (415) 826-5750, www.themarsh.org.)

Brian Copeland is smart. He's quick, personable and very funny. He's also enough of a local celebrity (KGO radio's "The Brian Copeland Show") that one of the cops dealing with his possible suicide attempt stops to ask for an autograph ("for my wife"). So why, with all he's got going for him, would Copeland be worried about whether he might be -- as the title of his new solo show puts it -- "Not a Genuine Black Man"?

He isn't really worried. The title, drawn from a crank letter from a radio listener accusing him of racial betrayal, is Copeland's somewhat disingenuous way of getting into a host of issues about growing up African American in the Bay Area in the '70s. To some degree, his very comic, painfully thoughtful monologue at the Marsh could just as well be titled "Not a Genuinely Liberal Community."

A seasoned standup comic as well as a talk-show host, Copeland is making his first venture into the world of



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autobiographical monologues with "Genuine." He developed the piece with solo-show expert director David Ford (shaper of works by Charlie Varon, Marga Gomez, Josh Kornbluth and many others), and some "script assistance" by Carolyn Zola. "Genuine" opened for its premiere run at the Marsh a week ago and plays through May 15.

It's a good story. Copeland has a compelling tale to tell and so much more material he wants to squeeze into it that the two-hour monologue gets a bit overcrowded at times. There are some quick cross-cut transitions that don't work very well and elements -- especially in the second act -- that seem to cry out for further development in a show of their own. The central narrative, told with terrific wit and searing honesty, deserves to stand on its own.

Part essential (and disturbingly recent) local history, part tribute to the courage and resilience of his mother and grandmother, "Genuine" is principally the story of the first black family to move into a neighborhood of a then militantly whites-only San Leandro -- way back in 1972. Copeland's mother moved there from Oakland to provide her children with what she hoped would be a safer environment and more access to middle-class opportunities, and to get them away from their wayward and abusive father.

It's a tale of grit, determination and sharply etched incidents of racism and kindness. Copeland seasons it with some revelatory passages from a '67 federal civil rights investigation of San Leandro and other archival material, but the primary matter comes from his own experiences. His depictions of his mother and grandmother are beautifully detailed and richly loving and funny, complex characterizations of quietly heroic women leavened with compensating idiosyncratic quirks and pretensions.

Some of his characters are less well portrayed than others, but Copeland laces his humor with bracingly sober passages that deepen the story's impact. His wide-eyed innocent child persona is affectingly drawn, which makes the scenes of his father's abuse all the more heart-wrenching. He tells the sad, puzzling story (which some will remember from press accounts) of the faked biography of a crusading Oakland civil rights attorney with astonishing freshness, immediacy and impact.

Ford helps Copeland keep the piece beautifully varied and compelling for most of the evening. Topical jokes (there's a particularly trenchant one about Condoleezza

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Rice) and the running gag about what is and isn't really black are deftly interwoven with the main story with impeccable comic timing. Where the momentum stalls a bit is in the second act, as Copeland alternates between his mother's battle against eviction and his much later suicide attempt and struggle with depression -- a brutally honest story that seems underdeveloped and tangential in this context.

It's a story that could well become its own piece. Copeland is a winning, magnetic performer who knows how to work an audience. More than that, he's got an important tale to tell in this piece and, it appears, no lack of material for monologues yet to come. Just how black he is or by what standards is up to him to decide, but there's no question about the power of his narrative or the pleasure it affords. It's "Genuine."

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