



San Francisco Chronicle

TV sniffing around solo show that just won't quit

Sam Hurwitt, Special to The Chronicle

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In April of last year, standup comic Brian Copeland opened his solo theater piece "Not a Genuine Black Man" at the Marsh. Nothing unusual there: One-man shows like his are the Mission District theater's bread and butter, and Copeland points out that after Rick Reynolds' "Only the Truth Is Funny" hit in 1990, it seemed as if every comic in town was slapping together a solo evening -- or as Copeland likes to put it, "my act, with pathos."

One year later, Copeland's still at the Marsh, and that's not usual at all.

His two-act monologue was scheduled to close last May, but it has been extended one month at a time as it's sold out the intimate 110-seat theater night after night. His show's success in part enabled the Marsh to open an additional stage last year to get on with its other shows, such as Charlie Varon's 10th-anniversary revival of "Rush Limbaugh in Night School," through May 29 (they have to close a show sometime). Tricia Roush of the San Francisco Performing Arts Library looked into the matter and confirmed that Copeland's is the longest-running solo show in San Francisco in at least 30 years.

"I'm surprised we even sold out a house," says Copeland, who when not performing onstage is a KGO radio host and local TV commentator. "The way the Marsh used to be is, if you had



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25 people it was a good night. If you had 50 people you got extended. I thought I'd do my little six weeks and that would be the end of it. I'd get that out of my system and go back to Cobb's. But it just kind of snowballed."

Copeland's conversation is peppered with references to "comedy heroes" such as Jack Benny and Steve Allen, so it's only a little surprising when he credits comedy legend Carl Reiner with getting him started on telling his own story.

"Carl had been a guest on my program on KGO a number of times, and I asked him for advice because he's one of my comedy-writing heroes," Copeland says. "And he said, 'What you have to do is find the piece of ground that you alone stand on and nobody else in the world does, and write from there.' "

Reiner, 83, described being at a crossroads after the TV show "Caesar's Hour" ended in 1957, when he had to figure out what his own piece of ground was. "So what Carl did was he thought, well, I'm a married comedy writer, I live in New Rochelle with my wife and my kids, and I write for a variety show in New York," Copeland says. "And that became 'The Dick Van Dyke Show.' "

Copeland's piece of ground was one for which his family had fought hard. They were one of the first black families in San Leandro, which was 99.4 percent white and named one of the most racist suburbs in America by the National Committee Against Discrimination in Housing in 1971, one year before 8-year-old Brian's mother moved them there from Hayward. It was only when he started doing research for "Not a Genuine Black Man" that he discovered that the racism he encountered every day as a child was anything but casual and that city officials and real estate agents were doing everything they could to keep "the Friendly City" white.

When an anonymous letter sent to KGO complained that Copeland was "not a genuine black man" -- for "genuine" read "stereotypical" -- it all came together for him, and each day while his three kids were at school, he'd hole up in a San Leandro coffee shop and write. Now 41, he still lives in San Leandro, which has become one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the state.

"A friend of mine said to me, 'Racial attitudes of this city have changed coffin by coffin,' " he says, sitting at his table in that same cafe.

Once he'd filled a half-dozen composition notebooks with raw material, he e-mailed Chronicle writer Steven Winn a couple of years ago after reading his review of Robert Dubac's "The Male Intellect: An Oxymoron?" Copeland was looking for tips on what makes a good one-man show. Winn said to find a good director and referred him to the Marsh's David Ford,

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whose expertise working with such exemplars of the form as Josh Kornbluth, Charlie Varon and Marga Gomez helped Copeland hone his piece.

"There's a rhythm with this thing. It's like a roller-coaster ride," Copeland says. "I designed this deliberately using the rhythms of 'All in the Family' and other Norman Lear shows of the '70s, where it would be real funny, and then Edith got raped, and then it was real funny again, and then Edith found a lump in her breast. That's the rhythm I wanted."

Even with this tragicomic blend in mind, the seasoned standup says the space between the laughs took a lot of getting used to.

"In comedy you're so dependent on the immediate gratification of the audience," he says. "So when I first opened this show, I was very uncomfortable with silence. The way that I was trained is called LPMs, laughs per minute. If they're quiet, you're dying. Here we get some audiences that are very, very quiet and are really into the story, and the first couple times they were not laughing at the comedy, I would go back at intermission and say, 'I'm dying, I'm dying,' and then I'd come out and get a standing ovation. And I'd go, 'What show did you see?' "

What they saw is a beautiful mix of wry humor and heartbreak, indignation and inspiration, a singular story of extreme isolation that speaks to anyone who's ever felt out of place. And what they saw, people are still seeing. Copeland is now writing an expanded version of his story as a book for Hyperion, and a series is in development for HBO using a fictionalized version of his story as a jumping-off point.

Reiner was on Copeland's program again last year plugging a forthcoming "Dick Van Dyke" special, and during a break Copeland thanked him for his advice and told him that the Marsh show was really taking off. Reiner asked him for a videotape of the show, and a week later Copeland got a phone call. " 'This is amazing, this is incredible,' " he quotes Reiner as saying. " 'You know who should see this? Robbie should see this.' "

It turned out the William Morris Agency, who handles Copeland and Reiner, had recently signed Reiner's son, Rob Reiner, and had just sent him the tape. Within a week, Copeland was heading down to Castle Rock for a meeting with Rob Reiner, who in turn sent the tape off to HBO. In trying to figure out where to go with his story as a TV series, Copeland again takes "All in the Family" as his model for pacing and social commentary, only this time with former "Family" cast member Rob Reiner as an executive producer.

If the series gets final go-ahead, Copeland will have to give it full attention. And if San Francisco audiences keep responding

the way they have for the past year, it looks as if that's what it's going to take to get him out of the Marsh.

Not a Genuine Black Man plays at 8:30 p.m. Thursday-Friday, 5 p.m. Saturday through May 28 (and almost certainly longer) at the Marsh, 1062 Valencia St., San Francisco. Tickets \$15-\$22. Call (415) 826-5750 or visit www.themarsh.org. Copeland also will be featured on "Spark!" at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday on KQED.

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