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THEATER

Sure, now it's funny

Comic Brian Copeland's years in a segregated suburb finally have an upside — material.

By Diane Haithman, Times Staff Writer

- Times Review: His voice rings true in moving, funny 'Genuine'
Reader Reviews: 'Not a Genuine Black Man'

ALMOST everything in this quiet Bay Area suburb reminds Brian Copeland of a story. Just drive around town with him for an hour or so: Story time is approximately once every 10 minutes.

Some are tales from his own life: the 41-year-old stand-up comedian, former TV weatherman, writer and San Francisco radio host has lived here for more than 30 years. Others are the stories that people have been telling him ever since he made San Leandro the centerpiece of his autobiographical one-man show, "Not a Genuine Black Man."

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Copeland performs at San Francisco's the Marsh theater, where the show has played for more than 22 months, a record for the theater. He also performs at the Hayworth in Los Angeles through April 1 — making Copeland as much of a fixture on Burbank-Oakland commuter flights as those little bags of peanuts.

And although the show is relatively new to L.A., Copeland says that in San Francisco, "Not a Genuine Black Man" has been bringing storytellers out of the woodwork, many who come up to him after the show with confessions as humorous, angry or heartbreaking as his own.

These days, San Leandro Mayor Shelia Young can boast that San Leandro is "the fourth-most-neighborhood-diverse city in the whole state," counting among its residents Koreans, Mexicans, Filipinos, whites and blacks. But such was not the case when the African American Copeland family came to San Leandro in 1972. Copeland was 8. At that time, San Leandro was 99.9% white; adjacent Oakland was 44% black.

"In 1972, the National Committee against Discrimination in Housing called San Leandro, Calif., 'a racist bastion of white supremacy.'" Copeland says near the beginning of his show. "CBS News and Newsweek magazine covered the story. The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights conducted hearings. And then we moved to town."

He acknowledges that the San Leandro story mirrors the institutionalized segregation of hundreds of towns across the nation during that period of American history, but he says audiences are surprised to find that type of prejudice in the liberal Bay Area, five years after the Summer of Love.

Copeland is full of San Leandro factoids: It is this city, not San Francisco, that is actually the home of Rice-A-Roni, he points out while traveling past the factory that cranks out the baffling pasta-rice combo advertised as "the San Francisco treat."

It's also the place where, as children, Copeland and his sister Tracie would walk down the street while adults in automobiles cruised alongside them, leaning out of windows, chanting the N-word. Just like his stage show, the Brian Copeland San Leandro Tour ricochets between the humorous and the horrifying.

The title of the show is borrowed from an irate African American radio listener who charged that Copeland's manner of speaking, as well as his taste for golf, made him something less than a "genuine" black American. This leads Copeland to a tongue-in-cheek self-examination: "I can't swim — that's black ... I don't believe blacks should be paid reparations for slavery, but if they send me the check, I'll cash it. I'm confused, but I'm not crazy." But what is basically a stand-up routine is juxtaposed with the story of a journey into the depths

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Brian Copeland (Genaro Molina / LAT)

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Critics' Picks - Stage

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Theater

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of depression that led him to a suicide attempt at age 35.

"This is something that Brian and I worked really hard on, putting comedy next to really scary stuff," says David Ford, the show's director. "It was trying to find out how to let people have the experience of what is sort of terrifying in life, whatever that emotion of injustice is that just makes you feel like this is *wrong* — then give them a way out in the next breath."

*

He walked the line

"KEEP going, we're almost at the border," Copeland says excitedly as the car approaches the monument that separates Oakland and San Leandro. Today the street is lined with banners that read "Welcome" in half a dozen languages, but in 1972, the message was anything but that for blacks from Oakland.

"If you crossed over that line, you were asking for trouble," Copeland says. "It was nicknamed 'the Invisible Wall.'" The phrase became the title of a 1981 television documentary on San Leandro, which at that point was still, according to Copeland, predominantly white. The city's racial bias had already been the subject of a 1971 documentary, "The Suburban Wall," filmed shortly before the Copelands moved to town. Copeland provides links to view both documentaries on his website, www.briancopeland.com.

The tour stop takes Copeland back to the K-8 St. Felicitas Catholic School, from which Copeland graduated in 1978. He was the second black student and the first black male to graduate from the institution. "I haven't been here in 20 years; everything looks so small," he observes. His memories of this place are mostly warm, especially those of a teacher who fostered his interest in performing or a supportive family friend. But he laughs wryly as he points to his class picture on the wall — his is the only black face. It was the same situation when he attended Moreau Catholic High School in nearby Hayward: "I was the only black kid in a class of 350. Then I go to my class reunion, and they give me a *name tag*," Copeland exclaims.

"People tell me stories now about the town — I'll tell you another," Copeland says, back out on the streets. "There is a restaurant in the area — and I won't name it because I can't prove it — but anecdotally, the deal was, they would serve black people, but the cooks would over-salt the food. So what would happen is, they would say, 'This restaurant is terrible,' and not come back. There were all of these tricks that people used."

Copeland, who grew up watching Norman Lear's groundbreaking TV comedies, including "All In the Family," "Maude" and "The Jeffersons," says he patterned the rhythm of his show after those programs, which blended satire and sadness. "I dig a hole and, right before I hit China, I say something funny and dig myself out," Copeland says.

But listening offstage to Copeland as first he jokes, then rages about his former life in San Leandro, one gets the feeling that the pattern of his performance is personal — reflecting the highs and lows of a childhood complicated by family strife and racial politics as much as anything borrowed from Lear's fictional families.

It was another of his comic idols, Carl Reiner, who inspired him to create the show. Reiner, whom he had interviewed for his radio show, told Copeland to write from "his own piece of ground"; that piece of ground was growing up black in a white community. As the title of the show suggests, his observations can be disturbing to blacks as well as whites.

Copeland admits that even his wife, Susan Taylor Copeland, who is white, is a little uncomfortable when he observes: "I like white women. That's black." "She hates that line; she thinks it's a slap in the face of black women," Copeland says. "It's not — it's a slap in the face of all stereotypes. People are just shocked that I said it. I do it to shock. There are some black women who get absolutely livid about that, but you usually become romantically involved with someone with whom you have a common frame of reference, and I grew up around white people in San Leandro."

His wife has no problem, however, with a joke in the show about how light skin ages more quickly than dark skin: "My wife is my age and Caucasian and she says that 40 years from now she's gonna look it, while I'm still gonna look good. When we go places it'll be like 'Driving Miss Daisy.'" "She wrote that joke," Copeland says.

The conflicts within Copeland are apparent when asked why he still lives in San Leandro with his wife and his three children from a previous marriage. He's sitting in friendly, funky Sabino's Coffee Shop, across the freeway from his home. This is where he sat, drinking coffee and filling notebook after notebook in preparation for writing "Not a Genuine Black Man." One reason, he says, is that San Leandro has transformed into a diverse and tolerant place, one he says he'll never leave. But there's an edge to his voice as he gives the other reason: "My mother fought too damn hard, too damn hard," he says, shaking his head.

One Los Angeles reviewer, Steven Mikulan of the LA Weekly, suggested that perhaps Copeland bites off more than he can chew by weaving his struggle with adult depression into "Not a Genuine Black Man": "That clearly needs to be explored in another show." But many critics as well as audience members of all races seem to be embracing the whole eclectic package.

Stephanie Weisman, artistic director of the Marsh, says that the theater had to construct an additional 80-seat theater space upstairs for previously scheduled shows to keep presenting Copeland's show in the 110-seat main theater downstairs. "It's been a smashing success," she says.

Rob Reiner and his producing partner, Alan Greisman, are developing an HBO series based on Copeland's performance, and the book version will be published by Hyperion Press in June. Copeland is also slated to open the show at New York City's DR2 Theatre in May.

Rob Reiner calls "Not a Genuine Black Man" the "rarest combination of powerful emotion, great humor and social insight — a truly great one-man show." And even though the show harks to the 1970s, Greisman calls its racial discussion "very current stuff — and it also deals with issues like depression, which are not usually dealt with in these kinds of shows."

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Parallel appeal

FOR his part, Copeland believes that audiences don't have to be black — "genuine" or otherwise — to appreciate the show. "I get letters from people who relate to the 'outsider' aspect of it," he says. The Marsh's Weisman says that so many educators and therapists were coming backstage to talk to Copeland that the theater began offering ticket discounts for them one night a week. "It's amazing the faculty and classes that have come in," she says. "They are getting insights into a whole world they might not be aware of."

"I'm college credit — that's the most bizarre thing," Copeland says, adding that he believes white therapists come to the show to better understand their minority clients. "They feel that in some way I take them by the hand and walk with them," he says.

San Leandro's Mayor Young, who attended opening night of Copeland's show along with members of his family, believes that audience members respond to Copeland's story on an individual level. "I think the initial reaction of most of the people I speak with is: 'Oh, my God, he's not going to dredge all *that* up, is he?' " she says. "But I'm proud of Brian; it's really about one man's search for his own identity."

"I was mayor when he attempted suicide, and I knew about it because as mayor I knew about all police issues," she continues. "I think he found his own identity by talking about it and dealing with it in an adult fashion."

Even in 2006, Young believes it's still necessary for the community to deal with racism. "I think, in the end, everybody needs to talk about these issues in order to eradicate them," she says. "My real disappointment is that it took until the late 1980s for San Leandro to begin to deal with the issue."

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'Not a Genuine Black Man'

Where: Hayworth, 2511 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles

When: 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday

Ends: April 1

Price: \$20

Contact: (800) 838-3006. (213) 389-9860

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