

Nine to Watch,

Onstage and Off



Misha Erwitz for The New York Times

Brian Copeland

Playwright and performer

SAN LEANDRO, Calif.

A few years back, Brian Copeland, a talk-show host on KGO radio in San Francisco, received an anonymous letter from a listener: "As an African-American," the writer said, "I'm disgusted every time I hear your voice because you are not a genuine black man." Mr. Copeland had received letters like this before. But this time, instead of throwing it in the trash, he used it as a departure point for an autobiographical one-man show.

That show, "Not a Genuine Black Man," which has been selling out in San Francisco since 2004, is now to open at the DR2 Theater in Union Square in Manhattan in May. He uses childhood memories to provide a firsthand account of segregation in suburban California. In 1971, San Leandro was 99.4 percent white and considered one of the country's most racist suburbs. It was around that time that an 8-year-old Brian Copeland and his family moved to town.

Soon after, they were evicted. How his mother came to sue her landlord and how Mr. Copeland survived an embattled childhood make for the aching heart of the play.

"What I do is I take you by the hand and you see the world through my 8-year-old eyes," said Mr. Copeland, who still lives in San Leandro with his three children and has a memoir coming out in July. The show

also takes time to respond to those who would question his racial authenticity.

Mr. Copeland admits to listening to Rick Springfield. He says he even TiVos "Frasier." "I don't yell at movie screens — that's not black," he observes in the show. "I like white women — that's black."

He contests the notion that "keeping it real" means being what he calls "the worst possible stereotype." "I'm sorry that I don't deal drugs," he says onstage. "I'm sorry that all of my kids were born into wedlock and I support them." Mr. Copeland had worked before as a stand-up. He admired what he called the "funny, heavy, funny, heavy" pacing of Richard Pryor and Norman Lear. He studied "All in the Family" DVD's to learn the proper rhythms.

Rob Reiner, who played Mike on that series, is now producing an HBO story based on Mr. Copeland's story. "I was mesmerized by the way Brian ties together important social issues, emotion and knock-down dead funny humor," Mr. Reiner said.

It was Rob Reiner's father, the comedian Carl Reiner, who helped Mr. Copeland find his voice. Carl Reiner told him to "find the piece of ground that you alone stand on, and write from there."

For a story that starts out with a housing eviction and a family's struggle to find a decent place to live, Brian Copeland finally unearthed a choice bit of real estate — a piece of ground on which only he stands.

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