

Substance, comedy mix it up in 'Black-Jew Dialogues'

By Jules Becker
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[Ron Jones and Larry Jay Tish in one of the skits of "The Black-Jew Dialogues"](#)

Imagine an African-American-Jewish duo closing down a Hub venue but becoming an ever-growing sensation. That's what happened to Ron Jones and Larry Jay Tish's 2006 collaboration "The Black- Jew Dialogues" at the now defunct Tribe Theatre. Jones explained, "We were so good that we ran the theater out of business. We had the largest group (at that adult venue), but they (the theatergoers) didn't drink enough." Now, as Tish noted in a separate interview, "The Black-Jew Dialogues" has traveled to over 250 colleges all over the United States as well as Canada and the United Kingdom (with acclaim at the Edinburgh Festival and the Leeds Jewish International Performing Arts Festival) and dozens of synagogues – the latest Needham's Temple Beth Shalom on Feb. 5.

The Jones (now 52) and Tish (now 54) show is short (50 minutes at colleges and 75 minutes at synagogues and other non-campus venues) but thematically dense. A multi-media experience including video, puppetry, sketch comedy and improv, "The Black-Jew Dialogues" cleverly works at stressing the absurdity of prejudice, dispelling stereotypes and educating about both differences and similarities between the two title ethnic groups in a very entertaining show. At the same time, the disarming show does not shy away from hard issues, such as confronting the early presence of Dutch Jewish slave traders. Highlights include amusing yet insightful exchanges between a black grandmother named Mabel and a Jewish counterpart named Esther, engaging man-in-the-street interviews and informative segments about black newspapers decrying Nazi brutality to Jews in Germany and the crucial participation of Jews in the civil rights movement. Tish and Jones demonstrate great performing chemistry in moving between differences and similarities, adopting puppetry for the man-in-the-street interviews and playing the grandmothers with wigs.

Tish, who studied poetry and creative writing at Goddard College and recently premiered a provocative stage fantasy entitled "The Last Jews" at Boston Playwrights' Theatre, enjoys fine

tuning the show from year to year in line with changes in the world as well as between generations. "It's kind of a hybrid," he explained. "It's kind of like a Lego puzzle." The Temple Beth Shalom performance will include a bar mitzvah, an item that is relatively standard in appearances at synagogues. At the same time, he maintained, "The main skit (Mabel and Esther) has remained the same." A program to make whites less fearful of blacks and 'JEW DAR' centering on identity – Jew (Scarlett Johansson) or not Jew (Sarah Palin) – also continue to be popular features.

Speaking of updates, Tish noted, "We now address Ferguson (Michael Brown) and Staten Island (Eric Garner). We're trying to get what happened in Paris (Charlie Hebdo and the kosher grocery Hypercacher) in there." Speaking of the show as 'the good, the bad and the ugly,' he cited material about such notorious contemporary Jewish figures as Donald Sterling and Bernard Madoff. As for Israel, he admitted, "We don't touch on Israel much. It's such a hard topic because Jews have so many views about it." So it goes with Muslims. "We touch on Muslims," he said, "with over a billion Muslims in the world and only 30,000 in ISIS."

While the show originally looked at all of these issues and elements from the perspective of the co-authors' peers, Tish observed, "There's a lot of narrative now between the generations." Tish said about two years ago, "we wanted to make it (the show) cross-generational as well as cross-cultural... There's a lot of social media now." Where Tish and Jones expressed divergent views and arrived at understanding after a three-day experience set at a hotel, the former now performs with 23-year old California actor and Boston College graduate Lou Wilson as their characters try to write a cultural project at college.

Wilson, in his own interview, offered, "Ron and Larry wanted the students to have another connection to their perspectives. The show is constantly trying to reflect what's happening now." Speaking of contemporary matters and especially 2014, Jones – himself a B.C. graduate who actually worked on an improv group project there with Lou – noted, "This year has been pivotal. I really believe that all that's been happening with Ferguson and the grand juries failing to indict is as important as (the events of) 1963, 1964 and 1965, just like (the 1964 murder of civil rights workers) Goodman, Cheney and Schwerner. This is really real."

The Black-Jew Dialogues, Temple Beth Shalom, Needham, February 5, 7 p.m.; Boston University, March 2 ; Lesley University, March 10; Wheelock College, August 29, 30. www.blackjewdialogues.com or www.dialoguesondiversity.com/thebjd

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