

Mischke's Doll

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Double Take

Being black and gay is seen by some as double . But playwright Djola Branner disputes that notion, And his play, *Homos in the House*, which premieres this month, shows how such attitudes create stigma, erect barriers, and inhibit HIV/AIDS prevention

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Poet, playwright, and performer Djola Bernard Branner is preaching about Sodom and Gommorah. His head is thrown back, his eyes closed in religious ecstasy. He's channeling the sound and fury of some long-forgotten Baptist preacher.

"And say Amen!" The walls of Patrick's Cabaret shiver as the right reverend delivers his exhortation. Half a dozen men gathered in a circle around him murmur amens and umhumpfs. "It's not too late to get out of Satan's bed," he rails. "You can choose the path of God. If you want to know this secret" -- yes, Lord -- "if you want to know his love" -- more amens -- "you can back up! And return to the road of the righteous!" Branner winds up for the big finish, "For the froward is ABOMINATION, but his SECRET is with the RIGHTEOUS!"

*The irony hangs thick as Branner, who is gay, delivers the words. His tone suggests mere bombast, and the other actors sitting around him double over with laughter as Branner finishes the tirade. But the sermon, which closes out the first act of Branner's play *Homos in the House*, is as painful in its judgments as Branner's performance is funny. And when this dramatic look at the troubled intersection of mainline religion, homosexuality, and black culture premieres Feb. 13 at Intermedia Arts, Branner hopes audiences will be equally amused and uncomfortable.*

*Branner hopes *Homos in the House* will push some buttons. He wants the play to provoke people, much as writing it challenged his own thinking. "Writing this play gave me the opportunity to explore the silence that surrounds homosexuality in the African-American community," says the 41-year-old, reflecting on his endeavor. "And I think personally that the silence is related to Christian ethics. The play was an opportunity to examine how the church has used Christianity -- or the interpretation of Christianity -- to oppress people. Not just gay and lesbian people, but lots of different types of people."*

Working with \$25,000 in grants from various arts funders, and in-kind support from the Walker

Art Center, Intermedia Arts, and Patrick's Cabaret, Branner has assembled a talented cast and crew, including actors Daniel Alexander Jones, Roger Syng, Marc Payne, Joe Wilson, Ahanti Young, and Greg Smith, as well as choreographer Baraka de Soleil, set designer Seitu Jones, and costumer Lyle Johnson. Rap, hip-hop, and traditional gospel mingle in the play's musical score, augmented in this production by the MCC Gospel Choir, under the direction of Robert Robinson. A student of Haitian dance, Branner also has infused myriad cues for movement and dance throughout the play.

*The playwright's humor, as evidenced in his autobiographical performances *Sweet Sadie*, a piece about his mother, and *Forever Hold Your Piece*, about his marriage to cabaret namesake and local impresario Patrick Scully, permeates the script. "I've been given this wonderful gift," Branner says. "I get to carry out my own creative vision." But Branner is no Hercules of the Arts: He's decided to hand over the directorial reins to New York director and playwright Carlos Murillo, whose *Near Death Experiences with Leni Reifentahl* played a few years ago at the Red Eye Collaboration in Minneapolis.*

*Unlike much of Branner's previous work, *Homos in the House* is not directly autobiographical. Set in the early 1990s at a black college in the South, the play centers on a budding romance between two gay men: a smart AIDS activist who's proud of his sexuality, and a younger, more conservative student who's just emerging from the closet. When the college president rebukes the activist for talking openly about homosexuality, the pair find themselves struggling to create and maintain identities that both embrace and reject elements of black, gay, and religious traditions. Racism is a distant theme compared to the immediate specter of homophobia in the African-American community. HIV/AIDS education and prevention in particular have been hindered in the black community, Branner indicates, by homophobia. Adding the stigma of gayness to the indignities borne by black people in America is double jeopardy, or as one of the play's characters puts it: "Adding the indemnity of gayness to the indemnity of blackness is, is ... is suicide." Looking to identify the primary purveyor of such sentiments, Branner cast a critical eye in the direction of organized religion.*

*The playwright's own college experience was, in fact, vastly different from that portrayed in *Homos in the House*. Born to a father who made a living as a house painter and occasional composer and a mother who worked as a structural assembler for McDonnell-Douglas, Branner grew up "a virtual single child" in the working-class black neighborhoods of south central Los Angeles during the 1960s. The closest of Branner's three siblings were in their 20s by the time he was born, and after his parents divorced -- the boy was 5 -- he spent most of his time alone, a latch-key kid who snacked and watched television after school as he waited for Mom to come home. The episodes of *Bewitched* and *Green Acres*, *Gilligan's Island* and *Marcus Welby, M.D.* rolled by. Maybe more than anything, Branner says, television shaped his sense of drama. "As a kid, I certainly didn't see many plays," he chuckles. "But I watched a hell of a lot of TV."*

At 17, Branner left for Santa Cruz College, a "hippie college" in northern California. Less than 5 percent of the student population was African-American, and for a kid who'd grown up in all-black neighborhoods, it came as "a shock." His uneasiness about his weight and appearance grew; and now his race attracted attention. Still, he found friends, and at age 19, he came out as gay.

In 1978, he graduated from Santa Cruz with a degree in psychobiology, a field his mother had nudged him toward. "I was convinced by her that I could never make a living as an artist," Branner recalls. "She wanted me to be a doctor. I thought, 'Oh, that sounds boring. I like animals, maybe I could be a veterinarian.'"

To Mama's disappointment, however, Branner moved to San Francisco after graduation and bounced from job to job: research-lab worker, waiter, city bus driver, factory worker. He eventually returned to school, taking up the subjects at which he had excelled all along: dance, drama, art, music, poetry. He studied Haitian dance; he listened to Billie Holiday and old jazz recordings; he read African-American literature; and he immersed himself in the culture of the Bay Area. He found a community of artists and performers -- some black, some gay.

*In retrospect, perhaps the pivotal event in Branner's artistic career so far was his decision to join Pomo Afro Homos, a troupe of self-described "postmodern African-American homosexuals." Branner and fellow performers Eric Gupton and Brian Freeman established the group in 1990. Dishing over drinks at a Mission District coffeeshop, the three hatched a plan to produce a show about contemporary black gay issues, one that went beyond the portrayals of the TV hit *In Living Color*. Incorporating music, dance, and plenty of jokes, the trio drafted nine sketches to be presented at a one-night cabaret. The subject matter ranged from gang colors as metaphor, to AIDS and family issues, to the "Just Us Club," a group of three screaming queens with enough attitude for 30. The show, *Fierce Love*, was a smash. On opening night, they filled the house and turned people away.*

*The troupe added a month-long run of the show in San Francisco, then took their act on the road. For four years, Branner traveled with Pomo Afro Homos to colleges, clubs, cabarets, and theaters across the country, and even to London. The group's visit to Minneapolis in January 1994 marked the beginning of the end for Pomo Afro Homos, however. Branner met and fell in love with local actor and activist Patrick Scully. The ensuing courtship and marriage became fodder for their collaboration *Forever Hold Your Piece*, staged as recently as this fall, when Scully and Branner were negotiating a split.*

Branner learned immensely from his work in Pomo Afro Homos. Freeman taught him how to write comedy, he says, and Gupton taught him how to take an audience and wrap them around his finger. It was a crazy but creative period in Branner's life: "I got stage experience," Branner says, "I got style and sass. And I got to see a lot of the world."

*He also got the idea for *Homos in the House*. During a stop in Washington, D.C., a student and HIV/AIDS activist at a black college told them he was interested in bringing the troupe to his campus. The trio responded enthusiastically, but when they ran into him months later, he had bad news. School administrators had put the kabosh on his idea.*

*For Branner, it reeked of homophobia. And it smacked of a strain particularly prevalent in the black community. Branner knew it well. Pomo Afro Homos, for example, had played numerous venues before it was received by a black theater company. And that company, Branner notes, was in London. Shortly before, the producers of the Black Theater Festival, held annually in Winston-Salem, N.C., had contacted the group regarding an appearance. Pomo Afro Homos immediately sent a tape of their work, but no one from the festival ever called again. In fact, when Freeman followed up, the organizers gave him the run-around. "It appeared to be blatant homophobia," Branner says. "The ironic thing is, there were probably a lot of gay actors and performers at the festival. They just didn't say it." (In 1995, however, Branner performed *Sweet Sadie* at the gathering, becoming the first openly gay person to perform at the event.)*

"Sometimes the hardest thing to criticize is your own house," Branner says of the group's reception in the African-American community. "And we went after everybody: black, white, gay, straight,

wavy."

With Homos in the House, Branner takes a less strident approach. But his target is clear: homophobia. "The black community can be very homophobic," says Laurie Carlos, a local performance artist and an artistic fellow at the Penumbra Theater. "It's evident in the machismo, and in how many gay people get left out."

Homos cast member Joe Wilson says being queer is often the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back when it comes to civil-rights discussions. "You've got the issue of race first," Wilson says, summarizing the attitudes he's heard. "To heap on top of that the idea of being gay, it's like a double scarlet letter. To heap on top of everything the idea of being a sissy, that's not something we're ready to cope with."

Still, adds Intermedia Arts executive director Tom Borrup, the audience for the play isn't just African-Americans. "There's a lot of talk about homophobia in the black community," Borrup says. "But gee, it's not only the black community that's homophobic."

The issue of homophobia plays side by side with matters of religion, racism, community, and culture in Homos, but the end result is hardly a scattershot sermon. While Branner's piece does touch on such subjects, it rarely dwells on them. The matters are more like subtext or scenery, problems for which solutions aren't readily available, and Branner doesn't offer any. "So many plays written about homosexuals look for pat endings," Wilson says. "They apologize, they seek to explain to others who are not gay."

Director Murillo puts it this way: "Taboo subjects intersect in this play, but there's really nothing in this play that's apologetic. Djola is really putting himself on the line."

Branner's willingness to stand in the line of fire may stem from his hope that Homos will get people talking. "I hope it sparks a dialogue, not only about sexuality, but about generational struggles and culture," Branner says. To that end, he's organized a public forum to discuss issues related to the play, particularly zeroing in on how homophobia serves as an obstacle to HIV/AIDS prevention and education in the black community.

Ultimately, if the lessons of Homos in the House are to be interpreted, Branner seems more interested in raising questions than in leveling criticisms. And his willingness to do so may stem from his sense of self. He seems willing to reconsider and reshape his identity. Six years ago he legally changed his first name to Djola because "I never felt that my given name was mine exactly," he says. (Djola, he explains, is a Yoruba word meaning "share the wealth.") Friends describe Branner as a deeply spiritual person, a man who knows himself, a man who has taken his own path. "He's a survivor," Carlos says. "He's gay, he's black, he's tall." She laughs, then adds, "He's lost people and dealt with this terrible disease. He's lost his mother. He's found his life and he's laughing."

"What I love about Djola," says Pomo Afro Homos' Gupton, "is he's really gay. He's chosen to honor his nature. He doesn't protest that his gayness makes him better than anybody. But he moves in this way that suggests that he's affirmed. He owns his nature. He never averts it. There's a level of courage that says, 'Damn, go on girl. Do your own thing, baby.'"

Branner, of course, is doing just that.