LIFE

TREVOR NOAH SPEAKS TO HARTFORD ON INTROSPECTION AND IDENTITY

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Trevor Noah, a comedian and author, takes the stage at the Bushnell for the opening event of The Connecticut Forum on Oct. 6. Noah spoke about growing up mixed race during South African apartheid.

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Famous comedian and author Trevor Noah took the stage at the Bushnell Center for the Performing Arts in Hartford, on Tuesday, Oct. 6.

For those unfamiliar with Noah, here is a quick introduction. He was born in 1984 South Africa during apartheid, to a black Xhosa mother and a white Swiss father, a union that was literally illegal. He recounts his upbringing in his memoir "Born a Crime," and turned his stand-up comedy career into a global television stint, taking over "The Daily Show" from Jon Stewart in 2015 and hosting it for seven years.

Moderating was Michelle Norris, a public radio host who spent years at NPR's "All Things Considered" and founder of the Race Card Project, which invites people to narrow their thoughts on race into six words.

The conversation began with Noah's childhood, which he described as normal to him. He explained that he had community around him and caused usual mischief. At times he was almost unaware that his very existence was a crime. He noticed his grandmother was always hovering around him, constantly making him food, teaching him skills and loving him unconditionally. He assumed that was simply the doting nature of a grandmother. As he grew up, he realized it was also protection from the apartheid government.

It was a story typical of Noah; funny on the surface but carrying a heavy idea underneath.

That idea ran through everything he said. For Noah, comedy is introspective. It starts with looking inward, and humor becomes the tool for connecting with the people around you. He explained that humor changes with language and body language.

Switch languages and you switch jokes, and even personalities. He has never met anyone, he noted, who has the same personality in two different languages. That, he said, is part of what keeps him curious.

Savita Sheth, a longtime fan of Noah's work, attended the forum enthusiastically shared her thoughts on Noah's perspective.

"I think he is so kind and empathetic and how he can see things from everybody's point of view," Sheth said. "Traveling around the world assimilating is so important and you grow as a person and see things from so many points of view".

He used these ideas creatively during his time on "The Daily Show," often remarking on how his curiosity about America lets him see sides of the country; the sides Americans don't see and behaviors that are different than those in other countries.

In one hilarious instance he noted, "America has an allergic reaction to stopping things at a good place"; a trait he said he never noticed in people until he came to the United States.

Curiosity is also how he holds onto himself. Noah spoke about recognizing who you are even when your circumstances change completely, whether that means moving countries, switching careers or landing in a chair once occupied by a comedy legend. He encouraged the audience to continue to grow to keep building identity.

Speaking on discrimination in South Africa, he answered an audience question about the U.S. decision to offer refugee status to white South Africans on the grounds that they were being persecuted. His response was a punchline: the people being "rescued" are among the wealthiest in South Africa, so these "refugees" arrived with luggage. Most immigrants, he pointed out, carry a different kind of load, the emotional baggage of leaving home, of loss, of starting over.

He argued that these white South Africans have benefited from a system that oppressed others, even as that same system lied to them with promises of hope. A recurring theme in America, he said, is helping the oppressors before the oppressed. With obvious skepticism, Noah asked whether a country claiming "genocide" is happening should be answered with a rescue mission.

Being part of the audience was electric. We laughed, smiled and nodded along, but no one was laughing at the expense of the truth. You could feel people understanding the weight of each line a moment after the joke landed. Noah has a gift for making words seem lighthearted before you realize how important they are. The laughter wasn't an escape from how serious the topics are, but it resulted from how he delivered them to us.

The event was held by the Connecticut Forum, a nonprofit known for staging inspiring and unscripted conversations with world-renowned thinkers.

"Many people in our audience know Trevor as a very funny comedian, and some recognize him as a well-respected author whose moving memoir about his childhood in apartheid South Africa spent more than 200 weeks on the best-seller list. After last week's Forum, we hope our audience understands how multi-faceted, wise, and worldly he is: he is philosophical and thoughtful, as well as super funny! He brought his unique perspective and thoughtful insights to the Forum stage, and we've had an overwhelmingly strong response from our sold out audience!" Connecticut Forum Producer and Creative Director Jamie Daniel wrote in an email.

Noah is an artist who discusses important themes in his comedic genius, and Norris, calm and sharp, knew when to encourage him to dig deeper, asking relevant follow up questions. As I left the Bushnell, I thought about how humor can open doors that serious debate and news cannot, leaving a powerful impact.

The forum is looking forward to welcoming Andrew Ross Sorkin, Chris Hayes, Samantha Power and David Miliband for the remainder of their 2026-2027 season.



The crowd at "A Conversation with Trevor Noah" at the Bushnell last Tuesday. Noah spoke to the audience about introspection and identity.

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