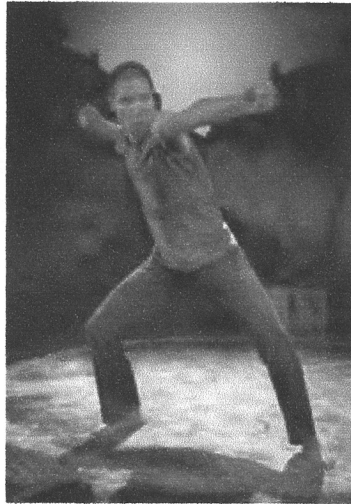


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Will Power's *Flow*: Deft, Powerful, Musical Storytelling

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Will Power in *Flow*.
Photo: Joan Marcus.

New York Theatre Workshop

My faith in New York Theatre Workshop is restored. After two rather lackluster and predictable productions (*Bexley, OH!* and *Cavedweller*), the company has stepped outside of its season of plays that look at the American family to co-produce, with The New York City Hip-Hop Theater Festival, *Flow*, written and performed by Will Power and directed by Danny Hoch. This hip-hop parable of survival is perhaps one of the most refreshing pieces seen in recent months, deftly blending articulate storytelling with a contemporary urban beat.

Power's backdrop is David Ellis' handsome scenic design of an urban street scene that has been passed through the artistic eye of a Japanese block-print. Realistic details (the fire escape balcony that serves as booth for DJ Reborn who provides a terrific live mix; the sneakers dangling from an electric wire; the "walk" traffic signal installed in the audience) are combined with the silhouette of a city block in perspective which is complemented by abstract pen and ink swirls and squares in varying shades of red.

This blend of realism and abstraction serves Power's piece well, which combines the realistic and fantastic to create a moving tale of man's cruelty to man. The evening begins innocuously enough with Powers describing an average day and a stroll through the 'hood. Soon, though a strange storm has brewed up and in the middle of it, an old man, Ole' Cheesy, appears. He tells Power that "It's time

for you to grow" and takes him to the back of a liquor store where Power joins six other storytellers, whom Cheesy has gathered together to ensure that old stories are passed down and survive an approaching storm that he fears.

From here, Power transforms himself into each of the six storytellers, deftly assuming their physicalities, subtly changing his tall, lanky frame, and vocal inflections, with variations on his rhythmic delivery. The first story comes from Breeze, a neighborhood alcoholic who tells his stories on street corners for spare change that he has shaken down from passers-by. Breeze's tale is the one that begins the circle that is *Flow*. He tells of how one cockroach, Fred, managed to unite the cockroaches of the world so that they all knew to "freeze in the light and walk in the black." Fred also warns his brethren roaches:

"And these chemicals worse than crack, don't eat it my fellow roaches
Take it back to the lab so we can adapt!
Naw, naw look, I don't care how good the shit taste
It's gonna leave ya on ya back
And this
Zuu
Roach on roach crime is wack
The toilet gang against the kitchen counter crew-that's wack!"

As amusing as Power's portrayal of Breeze is during this segment of *Flow*, (he cleverly shakes down and taunts the audience for change before telling the story), the tale sets an ominous tone for the rest of the evening, when Power introduces the other five storytellers.

All of Power's characters are a joy to spend some time with. Among the most enjoyable are Preacha Man, a bag-boy at a local supermarket, who allows customers to skip out of line to exchange items while he talks about his vision for a new, youth-inclusive way of worshipping and New Groun, an indigenous man who gives tours of the neighborhood to tourists, telling them about what originally stood on the spots where projects, schools and other modern buildings now stand. When Power becomes Preacha, his face seems to lose all muscle tension even as a broad grin spreads tensely across it. A drawl creeps into his voice that indicates that Preacha might suffer from some kind of mental disability, but one isn't sure because the man is so astute. With New Groun, Power assumes a sort of Native American accent and once again changes his face somehow so that he seems to have gained weight. Whatever his trick, it makes the character a forceful and majestic creature.

Not all of Power's storytelling is as crystalline as it is in these two segments. For instance, when he plays a pre-teen girl who is debating the pros and cons of free-

style and old school hip-hop with her father, one isn't clear as to whom the performer is playing at any given point. It isn't until one looks at the printed text for *Flow* that one sees that Power actually gives the audience four characters during this period. One remains fascinated by the story, here, however. One wishes that director Danny Hoch, himself an accomplished solo-performer, had managed to elicit a more finely tuned characterization from Power here, as this youthful and forward-looking storyteller is the last character the audience meets before the piece's denouement, when the storm that Ole' Cheesy feared arrives.

Through the text and animations (also from scenic designer Ellis) that have been projected above the set's skyline, one has seen the gathering "clouds", but one could not have anticipated that the storm would prove to make Breeze's roach fable so prophetic or to show that Ole Cheesy could possess such infinite foresight, ensuring that the tales be preserved and reconstituted.

In a way, it's the reconstitution of storytelling that makes *Flow* so exciting. One doesn't necessarily feel as though they have walked out of the theater having learned anything new from Power's tales, but one does feel as if a new world of theatrical devices has been opened and that there is great hope and potential for the reinvigoration of old stories. This lesson allowed me to leave P.S. 122, where NYTW has produced the work, feeling more hopeful about the future of theater than I have in quite some time.

Flow continues at P.S. 122 (150 First Avenue) with performances Tuesday through Friday at 8:30pm; Saturday at 3 and 8:30pm and Sunday at 5pm. Tickets are \$30 and can be purchased by calling 212-477-5288. Further information is available online at www.nytw.org.

-- **Andy Propst**

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