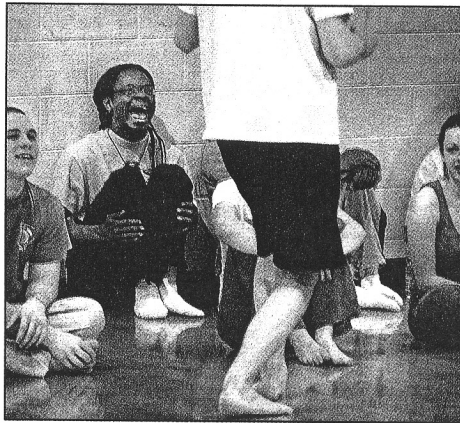


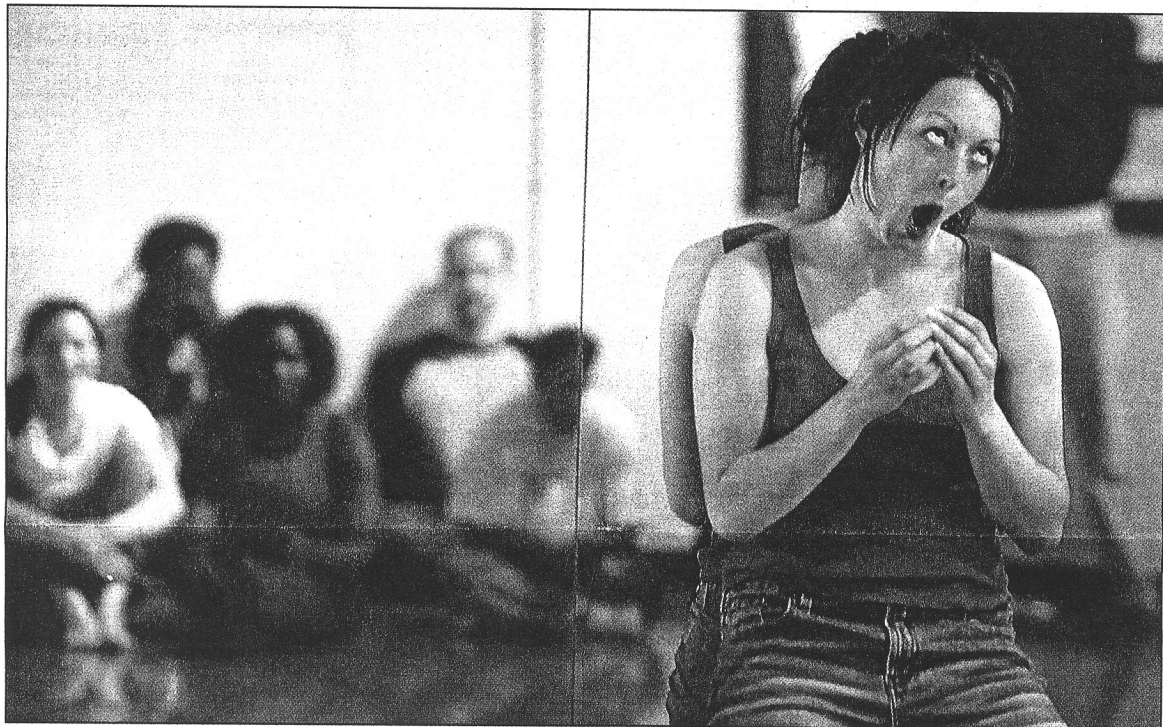
# FANFARE

**Improvise, characterize and use what you know: That's the word at the hip-hop theater workshop. For one class member, that means playing for laughs — and he's cracking up P.A. Bomani.**



As Power made beat box sounds with his mouth, the participants contributed their own sounds. "Now what would that sound look like if it had a walk?"

# HIP-HOP THEATER



Photographs by Jim Weber

**Think of the characters in your neighborhood. Now, be one. That's Rachel Martsof's challenge at the hip-hop theater workshop at Rhodes College.**

**By Christopher Blank**  
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**T**he performer's name is Will Power — only a stage name, of course. But it describes what it took to rise from rap-loving actor to theatrical pioneer. When the New York performer offered a lecture and workshop at Rhodes College this month, he was blazing a trail into a town with little exposure to his art form:

theater that mixes music, rhyming, storytelling, movement and personal history. Power has appeared in major theater festivals on the East and West coasts. His one-man show, "Flow," opened to glowing reviews at P.S. 122 in New York last June.

Why is Will Power hot right now? Memphis, meet Hip-hop Theatre. It's been four years since Brooklyn-based poet Eisa Davis coined the phrase in "The Source" magazine. In Memphis, hip-hop music and culture thrive on the radio and in the club scene. At spoken word cafes and

poetry slams, urban poets cut loose with rhymes and rhythms in the Memphis argot.

But Power and his fellow practitioners of hip-hop theater take the four pillars of hip-hop — rapping, deejaying, breakdancing and graffiti — to a level that local theatrical venues haven't begun to explore: drama created especially for hip-hop "heads," or those who are immersed in the culture.

Power provided the example. At the lecture, the lanky 33-year-old

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## Hip-hop

performed excerpts from "Flow." His body was fluid; his words, poetic; his characters, a multicultural array of people culled from his own neighborhood.

It was just a taste of what artists such as Danny Hoch and Sarah Jones have been developing in New York and San Francisco for more than 10 years. There are major hip-hop festivals in New York, Washington and San Francisco.

Daniel Banks, a New York University teacher and classically trained stage director who has become a voice in the movement, brought an academic approach and historical backdrop to the lecture.

"It's really considered the zeitgeist right now," Banks said at the start of his talk, which he jokingly called "Hip-hop 101."

Banks traced the hip-hop movement to around 1973 with the outgrowth of black nationalism. The storytelling aspect of the genre derives from African "oral literature," passed along by traditional storytellers and culture-carriers known as griots.

The roots of hip-hop theater are in playwrights and poets such as Ntozake Shange (who wrote the choreopoem "for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf") or rap progenitor Gil Scott-Heron (who minted the phrase "The revolution will not be televised.")

It comes from the music of early hip-hop deejays such as Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa.

Since then, generations have assimilated positive aspects (self-empowerment, multiculturalism, activism) and controversial ones (graffiti, gangster rap, violence) into the form.

Before hip-hop theater had a name, artists such as Power had to obey their instincts.

"I was an M.C. and I was an actor. But there was something missing that didn't let me say what was really in my soul," said Power, who grew up in the San Francisco hip-hop scene.

Melding the two marked the beginning of a career change.

He is almost constantly on the road, teaching or performing. Meanwhile, other artists are stepping into the spotlight. Sarah Jones is performing her show "Bridge and Tunnel," produced by Meryl Streep off-Broadway, through June 13.

## PIONEERS OF HIP-HOP THEATER

**Danny Hoch** — Best known for taking his stage characters to the big screen, Hoch's first break was the 1999 film "Whiteboyz," a story about a hip-hopper who, being from Iowa, doesn't fit in the life-style.

Hoch, who is a master of accents and characters, was famously fired from a guest appearance on "Seinfeld" for refusing to act more stereotypically Hispanic.

Hoch used his own money to found and produce the annual New York City Hip-Hop Theatre Festival.

**Jonzi D** — A major figure on the vibrant British hip-hop scene, has performed throughout Europe, Africa and America.

**Sarah Jones** — She is performing in her self-written "Bridge and Tunnel" off-Broadway. A native New Yorker, she performed three previous solo shows, which earned her a Helen Hayes Award and a Drama Desk nomination.

— Christopher Blank

This month, hip-hop theater made the cover of American Theatre magazine.

"We're forming a tradition," Banks said. "On the professional level, finding actors now for hip-hop theater is very difficult. The cast has to be multiskilled with movement, language, music, etc."

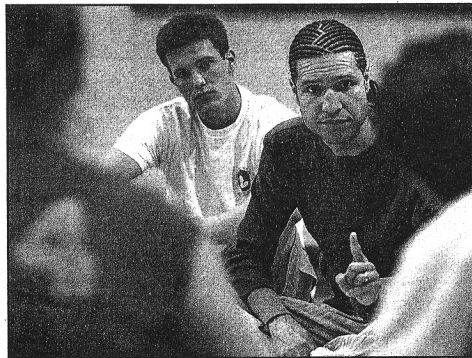
The workshop Banks and Power led at Rhodes April 3 touched on fundamentals of hip-hop theater by exploring the role of the griot.

Power ran the first half of the class, asking the 18 participants to think of a sound common in their neighborhoods. As Power made beat box sounds with his mouth, the participants contributed their own sounds.

"Now what would that sound look like if it had a walk?" Power asked. The participants moved in all manner of rhythmic strolls.

Next Powers had participants walk across the room in their sound character and answer the question "Where are you coming from and where are you going?" For Crystin Gilmore, a senior at University of Memphis, her "moo" became the trudge of a cow. Her cow moaned "I'm coming from the pasture. I'm going to the slaughterhouse."

While it got a laugh at first, Powers and Banks noted this was the beginning of character development. Banks: "How many people do we know whose lives are just like this — coming from the pasture and going to the



By Jim Weber

**Hip-hop theater pioneer Will Power, 33, focuses students on character development, noting the importance of poetry, rhythm and sound in the young art form. Power spends much of his time on the road, teaching and performing.**

slaughterhouse? That's something you could easily elaborate on."

Power had the group compose four lines of verse based on characters from their neighborhoods. Later, Banks would have small groups fashion these characters into improvisational performances using sounds, rhythms and poetry.

Robert Barry Fleming, a

theater instructor at U of M, said the workshop showed him unique ways of incorporating sounds and movement into a work. "Hip-hop theater is a big interest of mine."

Participant P.A. Bomani, a deejay at WRBO-FM 103.5, called the artists' advice invaluable. As a stand-up comic, he's been working on a play of his own using characters he's created. Bomani has booked

theater space in August. What he lacked was a story. "Now I understand about developing a conflict and developing the characters."

Banks told Bomani, "Let me just plant this seed: What does it mean to be Southern in the world today? Make it local. . . . Southern rap is very hot right now. In New York and on the West Coast, they're very interested in the South."

Rhodes College, a private, church-supported institution, is perhaps an unexpected venue for Memphis's introduction to hip-hop theater.

But the theater department chair Cookie Ewing said she thought bringing in Banks and Power "would be a great

bridge between our department and the community."

Next up, said Ewing, bringing Power back for a full length performance.

— Christopher Blar  
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