

Power-ful Performance

One man pays hip-hop homage with several characters

REVIEW

FLOW. Conceived, written and performed by Will Power, developed and directed by Danny Hoch. Set by David Ellis, costumes by Gabriel Berry, lights by Sarah Sidman, musical direction by DJ Reborn, additional composition by Will Hammond, additional movement by Robert Moses. Performance Space 122, 150 First Ave. at Ninth Street, Manhattan. Seen at preview Monday night.

By Gordon Cox

Will Power, it turns out, is the least interesting person appearing in "Flow." He's consistently upstaged by the marvelously varied crew of storytellers who populate his show, a spectrum that includes everyone from an elderly alcoholic with a cheerfully rhythmic demand for spare change to a proud schoolteacher who purses her lips and bats her eyelashes deliberately every time she lands a point.

Of course, it's the self-described rapper-slash-actor who portrays both these characters, and several more, in his electrifying one-man show. And in a venerable storytelling tradition, the narrator — a character named Will Power — provides an affably low-key backdrop against which the real stars of "Flow" can stand out.

The show, which opened last night in a co-production with New York Theatre Workshop, is a savvy choice for the extended-run centerpiece of the fourth annual New York City Hip-Hop Theater Festival. "Flow"

has all the youthful energy that characterizes the work presented by the festival, but it comes coupled with a warmly empowering tale about enduring wisdom that will satisfy even those theatergoers who don't know Nas from Nelly, and who may only be dimly aware that "flow" is a term for a rapper's rhymes and rhythms.

Power shows off his impressive flow through all 80 minutes of the production's running time, and any initial skepticism about the theatrical

viability of an evening-length rap session will fade as Power begins to carve out a musically specific cadence for each of his characters. The actor also uses his leanly limber body to match flourishes of stylized choreography with some very grounded and keenly observed physical characterization.

The seven main characters that Power embodies in "Flow" are all, like the good-naturedly proselytizing grocery bagger and the American Indian tour guide, storytellers in their own way, chosen by a serpentine-shouldered old man to use their gifts to revitalize and pass on ancient truths. It's all, thankfully, a lot less self-consciously earnest than it sounds.

Director and collaborator Danny Hoch, who made his name with similarly populous solo shows such as "Jails, Hospitals & Hip-Hop," wisely keeps his staging simple and focused on his performer's transformational powers. The proceedings are backed, too, by the agile DJ Reborn, whose integral contributions include cinematic snippets of score, a few snatches of pre-recorded dialogue, and a multifarious range of beats (composed by Power and Will Hammond).

Reborn spins in full view, perched on a raised ledge that, in the scenic design by David Ellis, looks like a fire escape, and the art on the back wall has the appealing feel of a city mural. Other components of Ellis' busy set are less successful: There's a high-maintenance circle of gravel on the floor that seems not quite necessary, and the clips of projected

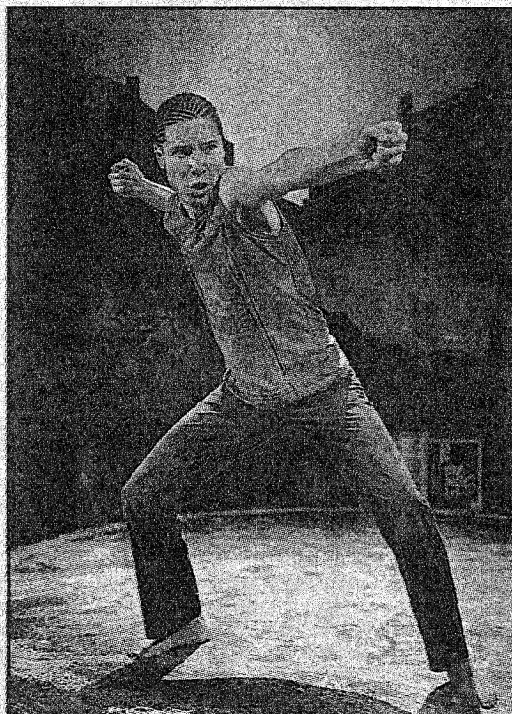


Photo by Joan Marcus

Will Power plays several characters in his play "Flow" Monday night at PS 122.

animation, nifty as they are, become too repetitive to add much to the show.

As the narrative heads toward resolution, it takes a few turns that, while funny and structurally useful, don't have the same convincing life as the preceding character studies. But by that time, Power, with his tightly complicated stream of words, has built up so much buoyant vitality that it's impossible not to remain caught in the flow. ■