

Hip-Hop and Musicals: Made for Each Other

By JEREMY McCARTER

S EVEN years after it presented the world premiere of "Rent," New York Theater Workshop is continuing the search for a new kind of musical. This week, the workshop and the New York City Hip-Hop Theater Festival are co-producing "Flow," a new play by Will Power that sounds even more contemporary than Jonathan Larson's rock musical hit.

Tall and impossibly lanky, wearing cornrows and an infectious grin, Will Power radiates positive energy. He has written a one-man play about seven storytellers who "sing the songs and right the wrongs and carry on." A mix of social realism and fairy tale, the play portrays dozens of people in an imaginary urban neighborhood who are hounded — comically, tragically, unpredictably — by destructive social forces and their own vices.

"Flow" would seem to belong to the same panorama-of-urban-life genre as "Freaks" by John Leguizamo or "Jails, Hospitals and Hip-Hop" by Danny Hoch, who founded the festival and is directing "Flow." Unlike those shows, though, in which a solitary actor plays

Hip-hop theater's fusion of verse and song makes it a kind of natural successor to the traditional musical.

many roles, Will Power isn't only delivering his characters' speeches — he is rapping.

Every line of the script is rhymed, giving it the lift of verse. Will Power may not sing, per se, but "Flow" still has the energy of a musical. With his frequent collaborator, Will Hammond, he has composed new melodies and bass-driven beats. In old-school hip-hop style, DJ Reborn (Robyn Rodgers) uses two turntables to play the music, as well as all of the show's sound cues, live onstage. Will Power dances through parts of his performance, twirling and sliding as he switches characters. Like few shows before it, "Flow" combines the complexity of serious drama with the visual and sonic arsenal of MTV.

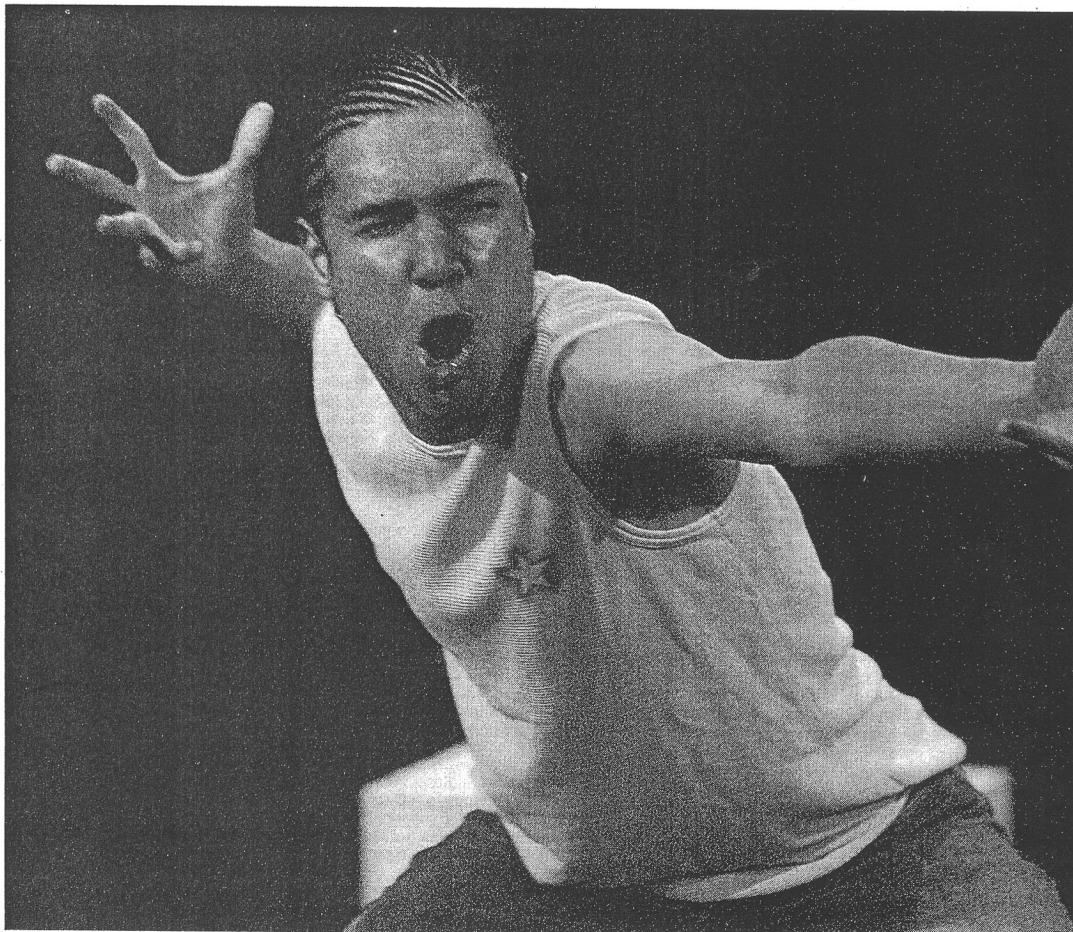
Other hip-hop-based shows have had higher profiles than "Flow" — like "Def Poetry Jam," which was performed on Broadway earlier this year. But that was an evening of poetry, a spoken-word event, not a play in the conventional sense. "Flow" will be presented at P.S. 122 in the East Village, where most of the hip-hop festival is performed, from Thursday through Saturday, the festival's last day. The show reopens there on June 17 for an additional run, ending July 20.

In its first four seasons, the festival's shows have fallen into two broad categories. Some have earned the label hip-hop theater by using elements of hip-hop, like rapping and DJ's. Outstanding examples include dance-theater pieces by choreographers like Rennie Harris, shows by troupes of rappers like Toni Blackman's Freestyle Union, and rhyming adaptations of classic texts like "The Seven," Will Power's update of Aeschylus' "Seven Against Thebes."

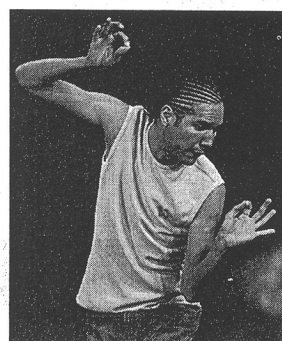
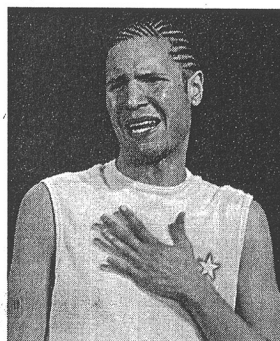
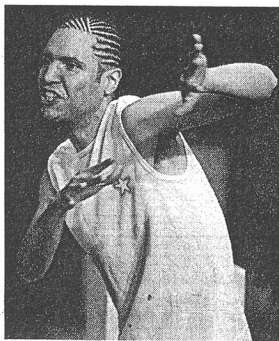
More often, the festival has presented conventional written plays that deal with the concerns of urban youth, a racially diverse group that the festival organizers describe as "the hip-hop generation." Two such solo shows, Sarah Jones's "Surface Transit" (2000) and Mr. Hoch's "Jails, Hospitals and Hip-Hop" (2000 and 2001), have been among the biggest hits so far. (A schedule of this year's festival, which opened last Tuesday, is online at www.hiphoptheaterfest.com.)

Will Power, 32, has been creating hip-hop theater since before it had a name. Born William Wylie, he grew up in a predominantly black working-class area in San Francisco's Fillmore District, listening to the heavyweights of 1980's rap. By age 14, he was an M.C. himself, "battling crews from other neighborhoods." (These showdowns were verbal; as he tells this story over a bowl of soup at a vegetarian restaurant in Midtown, it's hard to imagine him in any other kind.)

His grandparents, who lived in New York, were Broadway buffs. "I saw 'The Wiz' on Broadway when I



Will Power rehearsing his play "Flow" at New York Theater Workshop. It will be presented this week in the New York City Hip-Hop Theater Festival.



was 7, with the original cast — it was hot," he said. "Meanwhile, I was rhyming on the corner." Like the rapper Tupac Shakur, he studied drama, spending two years in the acting program at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University.

His dual passions for acting and rapping converge in the power they derive from the spoken word. "The density of the language, the highly rhetorical style, the lyricism — it all kind of lends itself to being onstage," said Tony Taccone, the artistic director of the Berkeley Repertory Theater in California, which has presented plays by Mr. Hoch and Ms. Jones.

Unlike much of the best-selling hip-hop, Will Power's work does not traffic in violent posturing and misogyny. In "Flow," one of the storytellers belittles

commercial rap's bling-bling sensibility:

*I had my headphones, Jay-Z was playing
I was walkin' down the street, listening to what he was saying
Something about, about gettin' paid
It didn't mean nothin' 'cause they just brought down the World Trade.*

Will Power gives "Flow" a steady beat, or pulse, by punctuating some of his verses with a short sound — "zoo." When he describes an approaching storm, he says "be-de-KAT." The sounds, he said, came to him during a vision he had while walking home one day five years ago. In his mind's eye, he saw griots — storytell-

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ers in West Africa — on the run from unseen pursuers. When they changed directions, they said “zoo”; drums in the distance sounded like “be-de-KAT.” He said he did not know the origin of the vision, only that “it was sent to me.”

In the early 1990's, he and a childhood friend, Mohammed Bilal (best known from the San Francisco cast of MTV's “Real World”), founded Midnight Voices, a rap-theater-music collective. Despite a sturdy Bay Area following, the group didn't last. Sharpening his M.C. skills, he freestyled with Omar Sosa's jazz band. He also began performing his first solo play, “The Gathering,” about the meeting places of black men.

Unknown to him, and to one another, young artists in other cities were conducting similar experiments, including Mr. Hoch, Ms. Jones and the British playwright, M.C. and dancer Jonzi D. When they started touring (the only way they could get their work produced), the contours of a movement began to take shape. In 2000, Mr. Hoch founded the festival, giving the new genre an unofficial headquarters and, for two weeks each June, a showcase.

The festival does not have a monopoly on hip-hop theater: Rennie Harris's celebrated dance drama “Rome and Jewels,” based on Shakespeare's “Romeo and Juliet,” developed independently, as did “Da Boyz,” a hip-hop version of the Rodgers and Hart musical “The Boys From Syracuse,” currently playing in London.

Though the work in New York has been uneven, the festival has drawn large audiences — young, racially diverse and enthusiastic, even by downtown standards. Clyde Valentin, the managing director, said that 3,000 people attended last June.

This year, Mr. Hoch is concerned that New York

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Theater Workshop's connection to the festival will be overemphasized. “It says a play's not valid unless we're doing an Off Broadway run, or a regional run,” he said. “If the Lincoln Center audience is going to see ‘Flow,’ it doesn't all of a sudden mean we've arrived.” Mr. Hoch insisted that hip-hop theater must be “by, about and for” the hip-hop generation.

So far, hip-hop theater's most distinctive, exciting quality is “how” — the way in which its stories are told. In the brightest moments of “Flow,” as in “The Seven,” Will Power shows that hip-hop's fusion of verse and song could make it a potent update of the traditional “Oklahoma!”-style

musical, one better suited to the stage than rock music. Like Rodgers and Hammerstein, who proved that even a carnival barker can sing a musical soliloquy, his work suggests that hip-hop's narrative tools will function well beyond one generation's concerns.

James C. Nicola, the artistic director of New York Theater Workshop, thinks hip-hop theater can tell any kind of story. He compares it to opera, with one critical exception. “Right now there are no conventions, the way opera is full of well-understood, time-honored conventions,” he said. “It's evolving now.”

“Flow” has not solved all the problems of combining hip-hop and theater, nor is it likely to turn New York into a city full of rapper-actor-dancers. But Will Power seems poised to inspire other artists to join him in exploring how hip-hop's fierce lyricism can enhance the language of the stage. □

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