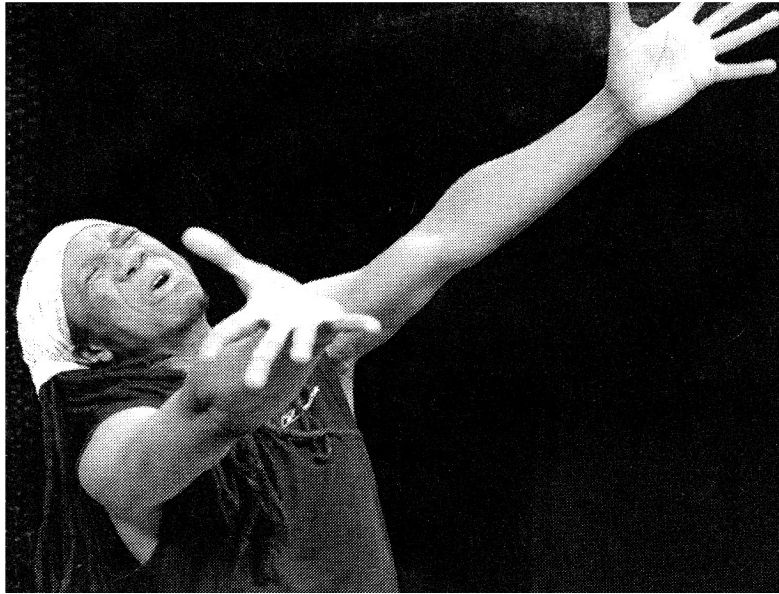


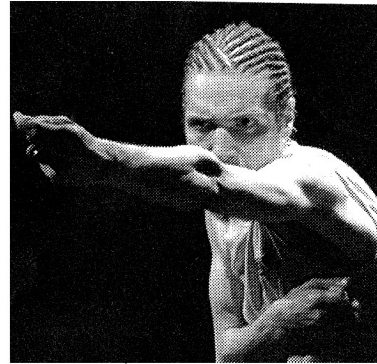
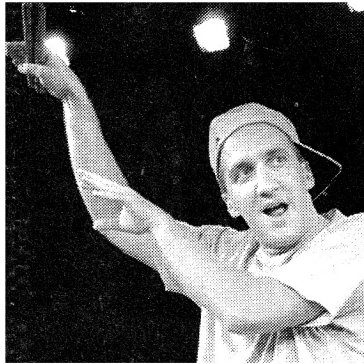
The New York Times

NEW YORK, TUESDAY, JUNE 25, 2002



Photographs by Richard Termine for The New York Times

Opening the third New York City Hip-Hop Theater Festival last week were, above, Jonzi D; below left, Danny Hoch; and Will Power.



CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Hip-Hop's Distinct Voice Is Reshaping Theater

By **BRUCE WEBER**

Forging the rebellious and original spirit of an aggressive new cultural movement with a respect for performance skills and training, hip-hop theater is gaining momentum. It's still on the fringe of the stage universe, but there are signs (for example, the rapper Mos Def's starring in "Topdog/Underdog" on Broadway) that the very force of a culture ever more influenced by youth and diversity is beginning to turn the battleship of American mainstream theater.

Another sign is that the New York City Hip-Hop Festival now includes in the program a plea for tax-deductible contributions, a sign at once of growing pains and of foresight. The very existence of the festival, founded by the performance artist Danny Hoch ("Some People," "Jails, Hospitals and Hip-Hop"), is an expression of hip-hop theater's accruing of critical mass. Its third annual incarnation began last week, and it continues until next Saturday with plays, dance performances and solo shows at P.S. 122 (150 First Avenue, at

A potent new cultural force expands its reach.

Ninth Street, East Village) and the Nuyorican Poets Café (236 East Third Street, East Village). Festival information: (718) 782-2621 or www.hiphoptheaterfest.com.

Forays into the fund-raising arena notwithstanding, the festival hasn't quite mastered the niceties of soliciting good will. It does have a bit of a defiant, chip-on-the-shoulder attitude that is always characteristic of the young and impatient. "America's theaters are still scared of us, don't know we exist, or don't care that we exist," the introduction to the festival program reads, part of a statement that amounts to a manifesto. And over all, the rhetoric is probably too indignant and too callow to preach effectively to anyone but the already converted. But the message is reasonable enough: that the contemporary theater has abdicated its role in addressing contemporary life, turning a blind eye to emerging generations of artists with new and different stories to tell and a new and different way of telling them.

Indeed, the hip-hop theater is most effectively ambassadorial when its most accomplished practitioners are onstage, and this was the case last Tuesday, the festival's opening night, when a constellation of solo performers billed as "The Hip-Hop Theater All Stars" appeared at P.S. 122 for a rainbow-colored and sold-out audience. Featuring Jonzi D, Will Power and Mr. Hoch, each of whom spent about a half-hour onstage, the show was a hip-hop sampler. That the three men have distinct skin colors contributed not-so-subtly to the hip-hop argument for inclusiveness. (The fourth All-Star on the program and the only woman, Sarah Jones, was ill and did not perform.)

Mr. Hoch, who for mainstream theatergoers is perhaps the best-known figure in hip-hop, recreated three character sketches from

"Jails, Hospitals and Hip-Hop": a Cuban student's engaging an American tourist on a Havana street; a white teenager in Montana fantasizing about being a rich, black rap star; and a Puerto Rican teenager from the Bronx who is disabled from an accidental shooting, flirting with a girl in the hospital lobby.

He has an astonishing range and command of accents, and his observations of the physical tics of the young are so acute that they alone argue that body language is as much a part of the generation as spoken language. But beyond that, Mr. Hoch has a genuinely literary touch in his writing, and an unsentimental but aching sympathy for his characters — even, or maybe especially, the flawed and difficult ones.

Mr. Hoch, a New Yorker, appeared as a sandwich between performers from east and west. Jonzi D, a rapper from London who is trained in contemporary dance and began the show, and Mr. Power, a Harlem-born, San Francisco-raised actor, rapper and writer who closed it, both presented narrative pieces in the hip-hop mode. They share a style of oration, employing the singsong poetics of rap, with its insistent rhythms marinated in rhyme, alliteration and interior assonance. But each man fuses recitation with his own style of movement and sense of dramaturgy.

The lithe, light-skinned Mr. Power has the fierceness of gaze of a revolutionary beat poet, and an intense but elastic style of movement — like Kung-Fu Gumbo. His recitation was a fable about a teenager from the Bronx who is thwarted in his ambitions to be a rapper and an M.C.; it didn't quite work as a stand-alone piece, and for someone (like me) unsteeped in rap culture it was a little difficult to follow. But the piece, an excerpt from "The Seven," which Mr. Power adapted from Aeschylus, testifies to a seriousness and an ambition within hip-hop, and its eagerness not to oppose but to join with and add to the theatrical canon.

Jonzi D, a cagy writer, begins his tale of a black man's seeking a welcome in the world with a misleadingly conventional portrait of a young man accommodating himself, humbly and humiliatingly, to his white neighborhood in London. But just when the story seems about to fall victim to the obvious sentiments pertaining to racism, the performer takes his character around the world, to black communities in Grenada, Jamaica, Brooklyn and Africa, where he finds himself equally excluded.

Jonzi D, whose body language alone suggests the different strains of native anger and self-protection that he finds in his travels, is a gifted mimic, physical as well as vocal, and a fine gymnastic dancer. His braided hair falls nearly to his waist, and when he frees it from the bandanna holding its thick strands together, its tendrils flail squidlike and become a striking visual element in his performance. The theme of the story is obvious enough — that there is such a thing as being a permanent outsider — and its literal message, that an individual needs to be proud and strong, isn't exactly subtle. But the reason Jonzi D is a leading figure in hip-hop theater is that he personifies the movement's idea that its aesthetic is itself a worthy statement; the medium is indeed the message.