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THEATER REVIEW

Spinning Storytelling Yarn for a New Generation

By BRUCE WEBER

"Flow," a narrative monologue in rap written and performed by Will Power, is about how stories are passed down from one generation to another and about how storytelling changes. It's about the evolution of a culture, the new stories encompassing the old and adding to them, the new storytellers having not only new stories to tell but new ways to tell them.

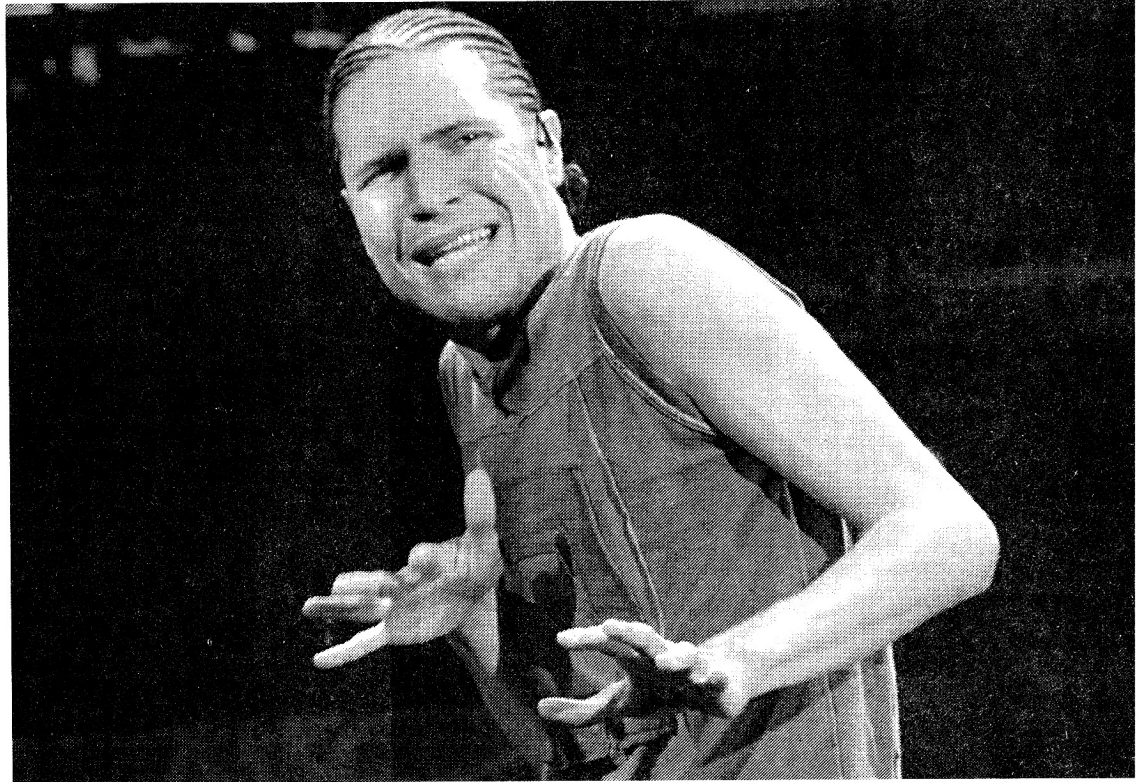
In other words, it's a rap that implicitly tells the story of rap.

But more important, "Flow" is theater with the refreshing aroma of originality. The show, which opened at P.S. 122 yesterday under the auspices of the New York Theater Workshop and the New York City Hip-Hop Festival, blends elements of dramatic communication that may not have been joined before.

On the one hand, Mr. Power employs the syncopated rhythm, the rhymed language, the street culture subject matter, the turntable percussion, the break dancing and other thrillingly fierce choreography of hip-hop performance. Tall, with tight corn rows, he has a sense of music if not melody in his voice; and thin as a rope, with knobby shoulders and elbows that seem capable of jetting off in independent directions, he has an unexpected kind of grace, that of a three-legged dog, maybe, or a man with a hitch in his step. He doesn't move beautifully, but with an urgent, compelling pulse.

On the other hand, he has a fable in mind, a long tale crocheted out of vivid characters, a social milieu both shrewdly observed and shrewdly hyperbolized and a teeming, mythic neighborhood as distinct as ancient Ilium.

Unlike "Def Poetry Jam," the hip-hop poetry extravaganza that appeared on Broadway this season, and its forerunners, the poetry slam competitions that have flourished in barrooms and concert halls around the country, "Flow" is not concerned with drawing attention to the storyteller. Mr. Power himself is a character in the narrative, yes, but it isn't angry; its message isn't "Hey, I'm self-empowered by my words!"



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Telling the story of rap: Will Power in "Flow," a narrative monologue written in rap, at P.S. 122.

FLOW

Developed and directed by Danny Hoch; conceived, written and performed by Will Power. Sets by David Ellis; costumes by Gabriel Berry; lighting by Sarah Sidman; additional composition, Will Hammond; additional movement, Robert Moses; production stage management, Timothy R. Semon; musical direction, D. J. Reborn. Presented by the New York Theater Workshop and the New York City Hip-Hop Theater Festival. At P.S. 122, 150 First Avenue, at Ninth Street, East Village.

For Mr. Power, the messenger, noble as he may be, isn't the message, and as a result his storytelling maintains a humility as it aspires to grandeur. That, Mr. Power may or may not know, he borrows from Homer.

Now it may be true that Mr. Pow-

ers's language will be Greek to many theatergoers. His story is that of the demise of seven neighborhood icons, and the harsh lilt of its argot has its own punctuating sounds. It begins this way:

Seven

*There were only seven y'all
Only seven storytellers in the
neighborhood*

I said

*There were only seven storytellers
in the neighborhood y'all*

Seven

*There were only seven y'all — I
say*

*Only seven storytellers in the
neighborhood y'all*

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Zuu
To sing the songs
And right the wrongs
And carry on, on and on
Zuu.

We do, of course, meet the seven storytellers — who include a homeless man, a schoolteacher, a health-food store clerk, a dancer, an American Indian and a teen-age girl, as well as Mr. Power himself — and many other characters besides. And the best parts of “Flow” involve watching Mr. Power do just that, inhabiting one character after another in seamless succession.

Theatergoers will need to do some flowing themselves. The narrative isn't smooth. Occasionally the travails of a particular character are no easier to follow than a bike messenger through a crowded intersection. It's also true that though Mr. Power has a verbal gift, his rhymes do strain occasionally. He and his director, the gifted monologist Danny Hoch (who is the founding director of the hip-hop festival) have worked hard to pace the show effectively and to vary its riffs; the live D.J., known as D. J. Reborn, helps keep the narrative pulsing in unexpected ways, and intermittent animations, most of

them abstract, projected on the stage backdrop, add vitality as well. But even so, every now and then a sing-songiness begins to set your teeth on edge before Mr. Power is on to the next rhythmic motif.

These are important caveats, but they serve as reminders that Mr. Power is treading in new territory here, experimenting with tools that are new to the theater. Toward the very end of his high-energy, 80-minute performance, he calls out: “Who got next? Who got next?” He's invoking the challenge of the urban basketball court, but by that time it's obvious he's prompting the voices and the stories that will follow him. And what's most impressive about “Flow” is that you can see clearly through the door it is opening to a storehouse of new possibilities.