San Francisco Chronicle

## DATEBOOK

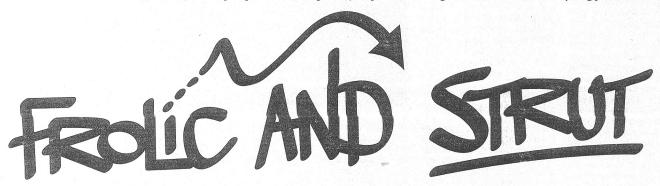
YOUR GUIDE TO THE WEEK OF OVEMB -15, 200

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The next stage: Hip-hop theater Movies pullout: Talking with Russell Crowe, starring in the adventure epic 'Master and Commander'



Hanifah Walidah of Oakland, performing at the Bay Area Hip-Hop theater festival preview, has proved she can "go there" with the best of the young performance artists.



## Inventive, undefinable and a lot of fun, 'hip-hop theater' takes an ancient genre by the horns

By Joshunda Sanders CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Stage right: A slender woman in a turquoise halter top with a flower behind her ear. Robyn Rodgers, better known as DJ Reborn, takes her place between two turntables, puts on her headphones, and blends an overture: Slick Rick's "Children's Story" melts into A Tribe Called Quest's "Check the Rhyme."

In the front row at a preview of the Bay Area Hip-Hop theater festival, bald men with graystreaked goatees tap their tennis shoes against the floor. Cowrie shell earrings sway as a woman nods her head to the beat. And before the star of this show, San Francisco native Will Power, emerges on stage - barefoot, svelte and hair in cornrows - a group of girls jump up from their

seats, dancing and shouting like they're at a house party.

Power, who draws on influences as disparate as Aeschylus and Public Enemy, is the perfect ambassador of hip-hop theater - a new genre that brings the urgency of street life and urban tales to a traditionally stuffy and elitist stage.

In "Flow," Power raps through the delicately woven stories of seven neighborhood characters, each of them caught in a metaphorical storm. He pauses between his rhymes using the sound "bedee-kat," and punctuates the tales of each innercity griot with the word "zoop!"

► HIP HOP: Page 14



► HIP HOP From Page 13

As an eager, freestyling rapper, Power frolics; as a sassy dance instructor, he struts. For more than an hour, he raps and breaks his way through the lives of these characters, as DJ Reborn spins the score.

This is what can be expected from hip-hop theater — the unexpected.

No matter: The element of sur prise has won the new phenomenon nothing but rave reviews. Over three days in September, the sold-out preview at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Forum presented several forms of hip-hop theater to an enthusiastic and diverse crowd of more than 1,400 people, organizers said. For nearly five years, young and mostly black artists have developed an intersection between hip-hop and theatrical performance. In a sense, Will Power and dozens of other pioneers in hip-hop theater have launched a renaissance in theater similar to that which produced Ntozake Shange's "for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow was enuf." With the success of Russell Simmons' "Def Poetry Jam," which won a Tony Award for Best Special Theatrical Event in June, and the expanding popularity of New York's 3-year-old Hip-Hop Theater Festival, the term "hip-hop theater" has sparked a new interest in proscenium-based storytelling through the lens of hip-hop cul-

Once considered the artistic expression of black and Latino urban youth through the four cornerstones of graffiti, break-dancing, rapping and DJ-ing, hip-hop culture has increasingly been used as a marketing tool for everything from fast food to sneakers. Unlike

other mediums in which the hiphop influence may be clearer, the definition of hip-hop theater is not only fluid but debatable.

Hip-hop theater varies from a traditional play infused with hip-hop aesthetics (like rapping) to a narrative that speaks to young urban audiences in a way that "Macbeth" doesn't.

Some artists say defining any play as hip-hop theater that is fresh, innovative and about young urban people is misleading; others say the umbrella term is welcoming and big enough to allow for audience interpretation.

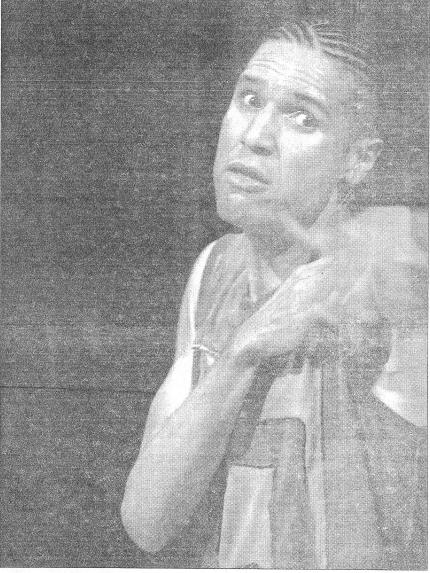
Power, 33, was raised in the Fillmore district, and began acting when he was 10. He chose storytelling in favor of break-dancing, and started rhyming with a group called Midnight Voices long before he wrote plays like his 1999 play about "a cipher and the meeting places of black men," entitled "The Gathering."

If Power works on a theater piece about people in the city, "does that become hip-hop theater because I'm a young black urban male?" The playwright asks the question on the phone from his office in New Jersey. "Hip-hop theater is not 'Topdog/Underdog' or 'Def Poetry Jam,' even though those things are dope," he says. Instead, he says, the tenets of hip-hop — break-dancing, etc. — should be present for the work to qualify.

While there is some power in the label, Power worries that the term "pigeonholes us — some say it's by, for and about the hip-hop generation — but I have problems with that. Tupac rhymed about his mom, does that mean it's not hip-hop?"

In other words, it depends on who's defining it.

Even though hip-hop is a pop culture phenomenon, "traditionally, it's produced by oppressed



GINA GAYLE / The Chronicle

Will Power, a native of San Francisco, is a perfect ambassador for hip-hop theater, bringing a new intensity to the traditional setting.

people who have the broke aesthetic ... projecting dreams or visions of wealth that haven't been produced yet," says Marc Bamuthi Joseph, a writer, artist and Arts-in-Education director of Youth Speaks, the San Francisco group that develops young writers and performers. "It doesn't mean that you use turntablism or breakdance part of the time, it's more about a cultural landscape. The same way that Shakespeare presented Elizabethan theater because that was the time, this is the theater of our time"

The fledgling genre is not only defined by its aesthetics but also its message, says Kamilah Forbes, artistic director of the New York City Hip-Hop Theater Festival (which was created by hip-hop theater pioneer Danny Hoch) and author of "Rhyme Deferred."

What artists and critics alike agree on is that hip-hop theater is poised to bring the hip-hop back to its original purpose: To tell the urgent, often ignored stories of young urban dwellers.

Power says his main goal is to bring young audiences to the theater, "to have their stories and voices and vibrations reflected onstage in a theater setting. We see our voices in music and clothes and movies to a certain extent but we don't see it in theater."

And hip-hop theater tells these stories in a fresh, original way. As it has evolved — from Rennie Harris' dance adaptation of Romeo and Juliet, "Rome and Jewels," to Power's "Flow" — the most consistent thing about hip-hop theater is that it is always a surprise to see how the story will be told.

The essence of seeing a traditional play is to go where the characters take you. In hip-hop theater, the goal is to "go there" as the kids say — but there is all over the place: from the street corner to the kitchen table, from Jonzi D's London to Hanifah Walidah's Oakland to Marc Bamuthi Joseph's Queens. At the festival preview,

this took the form of solo performances and ensemble pieces.

From four excerpts of longer one-person plays to the retelling of the Cain and Abel story through Forbes' "Rhyme Deferred," each composition blurred the line between spoken word and theater while blending the personal and political.

It could easily be called "young people's alternative or bohemian theater," if not for the musicality and the grit.

George C. Wolfe, the acclaimed writer, producer, and most recently, director of "Topdog/Underdog," says he despises the stifling label of "hip-hop theater."

He's heard about it, of course, because he's plugged in and runs the Joseph Papp Public Theater in New York. But he sounds annoyed at the idea that a loose definition of hip-hop theater might include "Topdog/Underdog," since the main characters are young black men and part of the hip-hop demographic.

"I don't understand what hiphop theater is — if there are stories being told" then it's *all* theater, he says dismissively. Wolfe considers the hip-hop theater platform "very successful," however, and says it's up to artists to define their art however they choose.

He describes the reaction his satirical take on black life, "The Colored Museum," caused in 1986. Critics called it "the new black aesthetic" — proof that categories follow artists through the decades.

And Wolfe hates categories. "I don't want to be in the corner, I want to be in the room, doing what I do. If you're an artist, you need to be as brilliant and smart and talented as you can be," he says. "Creating anything is really hard. Labeling yourself is a luxury. Just do the work, and let other

people label it."

That said, the hip-hop label has been a powerful tool for connecting theater to a broad, diverse and intergenerational audience.

The Hip-Hop Theater Festival, in its fourth summer in New York and second in Washington, D.C., plans to expand its reach throughout the country. The festival will premiere at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in May 2004. After that, it will develop shows and workshops in Chicago and Los Angeles. In the meantime, the festival has continued to carry out its initial mission — to find a permanent platform for emerging artists while developing younger theater audiences through its workshops.

"Theater is such a white, uppermiddle-class cultural form in this country," Forbes said. "In order to create new audiences, the hip-hop theater label actually helps. I don't want to say it's just a marketing tool, but it is a tool of recognition and definition. In a way that can be dangerous, but unfortunately, it's sort of inevitable."

For now, though, there is more magic than malice in hip-hop theater. It takes the shape of amusing exchanges between Walidah's characters over a game of spades; or the hilarious poetry of Power while he describes a tenacious roach named Fred. There are jarring yet beautiful statements on the textured worlds of the hip-hop generation in all of the work labeled hip-hop theater.

Whatever you call it, it's great to watch.

Besides, as Wolfe says, "there is this invisible, incredible thing that happens when someone is incredibly honest in the work. And there is no language for that. If there is a word, it's 'divinity.'"

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## **Hip-hop theater**

**Marc Bamuthi Joseph** will present his full-length stage work, "Word Becomes Flesh," Nov. 20-22 at ODC Theater. www.thespokenworld.com.

**Will Power** is working on a play called "Seven," which is based on the Greek tragedy "Seven Against Thebes." He plans to return to the Bay Area Hip-Hop Theater Festival in 2004. Power is in New York conducting theater workshops for young people and performing an encore presentation of "Flow." For more information about performance dates, visit www.willpower.tv.