

Reviews Jun 27, 2003

New York

Flow

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Hip-hop music has found its way into almost every walk of American culture; its influence can be found in the music of pop-megastar Madonna and teeny-bopper Britney Spears. Russell Simmons has turned slam poetry into a Tony Award-winning show and has spread hip-hop's influence throughout the worlds of fashion (with Phat Farm) and politics (with the Hip Hop Summit Action Network). Spoken word legend Gil Scott Heron said that "The revolution will not be televised," but it remains to be seen whether it will be staged.

The mainstream theatrical acceptance of hip-hop is more than 20 years past its due, yet hip-hop on stage isn't a new concept: Although the New York City Hip-Hop Theater Festival is celebrating only its fourth year this month, artists have been creating such pieces for much longer. With *Def Poetry Jam's* critical success on the Great White Way -- an irony that has been beaten to death by journalists -- hip-hop theater is now struggling to become commercially viable.

While the goal of the *Def Jam* clan was to "write" America with political poetry, Will Power offers something different: a one-man show that combines rap music with the griot storytelling tradition of western Africa. Power's *Flow* is built on a technique that lends itself to socially conscious theater; in griot theater, a storyteller passes on wisdom and history to a younger generation. The talented performer leads the griot and inhabits seven characters, including a friendly hobo, a puertariqueña shopkeeper, a precha man, a dance instructor, a Chinese MC, a wise indigenous man, and the storyteller himself. In the rapper's words, "Only seven storytellers in the neighborhood y'all / Zuu / To sing the songs / To right the wrongs / And carry on, on and on."

Flow includes tales that are meant to inspire, and Will Power proves himself to be a remarkable storyteller and a consummate performer; the tall, gangly man infuses his work with dance, music, comedy, smart rhymes, and chameleonic acting. In fact, he is almost too entertaining. The majority of his stories in some way concern urban problems such as drugs and hate crimes, yet the presentation is such that the show is more exciting than challenging.

It begins with a story about cockroaches that have gotten hooked on tasty insecticide in south Chicago and east Oakland. One day, a roach named Fred comes along and tells his brothers that "These chemicals are worse than crack / Don't eat it, my fellow roaches / Take it back to the lab so we can adapt." The hero steers them away from "roach on roach crime" with a one-liner: "The toilet gang and the kitchen counter crew, that's wack!" Who ever thought an allegory about the CIA-crack cocaine conspiracy theory could serve as comic material?

The dark humor makes for a powerful opening, and the show is strongest when it's provocative. A character named New Groan, described as "an indigenous man with strong eyes," listens to commercial hip-hop on his headphones and makes biting comments about the music industry:

*I had my headphones on
Jay-Z was playing
You know Jay Z?
Yeah the guy, big pimpin' yeah right
I was walking down the street listening to what he was saying
Something about "gettin' paid"
It didn't mean nothin' cause they just brought down the World Trade.*

It doesn't take a hip-hop expert to understand his sarcasm, but fans of Jay-Z will catch a deeper meaning: That artist's song "A Dream," which came out after the first WTC attack and before September 11th, contains the lines "Now I'm in the limelight cause I rhyme tight / Time to get paid, blow up like the World Trade." Will Power applies 20/20 hindsight to Jay-Z's lyrics in a way that makes bling-bling party rap seem less relevant these days.

These moments represent Power's material at its best. Other stories involving a flamboyant dance instructor and a "project ho" slash inspirational teacher are too familiar to really hit the mark, but the way that Power tells them more than compensates for the weaker sections. He dances on a stage that looks like an urban dreamscape: An electric red wall has a pop-art design of electrical coil trees with boom box leaves, and video art of graffiti patterns accompanies each story. The booth where DJ Reborn spins the rapper's beats has a potted fern that contrasts with the technology-infused environment.

Power tells his stories in the middle of a sand circle at center stage, and at one point he tap dances inches from its borders. His movements are so precise that not a single grain is misplaced until he purposely scatters the sand at a dramatic moment. Director Danny Hoch has no doubt played a large role in making the act so tight; known for his own dramatic monologues, Hoch is clearly in his element here.

Griot theater has been a part of West African culture for many generations, and dramatic musical monologues date back to the origins of the Greek theater; Thespis sang poems called dithyrambs before any of the Greek playwrights wrote their dramas and comedies. Will Power's art form has a lot of history and one hopes that it will also have a promising future.