

LEGIT

Posted: Fri., Jun. 27, 2003, 1:30am PT

Off Broadway

Flow

(P.S. 122, New York; 175 seats; \$30)

By MARILYN STASIO

A production by New York Theater Workshop and the New York City Hip-Hop Theater Festival of a play in one act conceived, written and performed by Will Power. Developed and directed by Danny Hoch.

With: Will Power.

If rap is supposed to be the rhythm of life, then Will Power is dancing on the edge. The question is, who wants to go out there with him? Although the show is smartly constructed and given a polished delivery, his manic high-wire act demands a lot from an audience, including stamina, sympathy and like-minded sensibility. Not to mention flannel ears.



Rapper Will Power stars in 'Flow,' a one-man hip-hop show about storytelling, directed by Danny Hoch at P.S. 122.

Those elderly white theater patrons who managed to climb the steep stairs at P.S. 122's funky East Village facility without suffering heart attacks looked stunned when the tall, elastic-limbed performer bounded onto the stage, patting his neatly braided cornrows and speaking in what appeared to be a foreign tongue. But, after whispered consultation with their youthful companions, most of the elders in the audience seemed to get the hang of the cadenced rhythms, except for the old guys who kept their eyes glued to the gorgeous disc jockey. You have to admire Power, a dynamic performer who kept his focus and soldiered on with wit and style, even through the lackluster call-and-response segments that almost stopped the show dead in its tracks. But you also have to wonder why the savvy NYTW and partner Hip Hop Theater Festival (theater in residence at P.S. 122) couldn't reconfigure the confining performance space -- or at least dig up the young audience at which the show is so clearly aimed.

For anyone accustomed to the self-aggrandizing content and abrasive delivery of more aggressive hip-hop artists, Power's messianic stories and amiable tutorial style should come as a pleasant surprise. "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," he begins his benign rap. He then proceeds to introduce six of them and offer samples of their storytelling art.

Slipping and sliding from one colorful character to the next, Power doesn't exactly sing and he doesn't exactly dance. But he catches the distinctive rhythms of these street singers' individualized idioms and finds the pulse that makes them come alive. If there's no true poet among them (this is not "Def Poetry Jam"), there is lyricism in their language and compelling messages in their folk stories.

"The stories must pass through," cautions Ole Cheesy, the Griot elder who holds the power of traditional storytelling art and has chosen Power to be the seventh storyteller in the neighborhood. "These tales ain't just for stayin' alive/Inside are the secrets on how to thrive."

An apt student, Power learns Aesop-like animal fables from Breeze, an old drunk who uses a tale about a cockroach named Fred to warn kids about dope. Jacoba, a tall and regal schoolteacher, gives little girls a snappy lesson in strength and dignity. There's a Preacha Man and a "freestyle queen" and plenty more with uplifting life lessons couched in down-home narratives.

Power delivers their messages with the exhausting energy of the truly touched. "Since I am the last storytella' of my crew/I know just what I have to do," he tells us. "I wanna teach you the old stories/And then you go make 'em new."

It's a good message -- if it falls on the right ears.

Musical direction and live mix, DJ Rehorn. Set, David Ellis; costumes, Gabriel Berry; lighting, Sarah Sidman; additional composition, Will Hammond; additional movement, Robert Moses; production stage manager, Timothy R. Semon. Opened June 26, 2003. Reviewed June 24. Running time: 1 HOUR, 20 MIN

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