

Will Power: Gathering Black Men's Stories

By Aida Mashaka Croal

[Send this Article to a Friend](#)



Three years ago, Will Power was all set to open 2017, a dramatic piece on AIDS in the black community, at San Francisco's Lorraine Hansberry Theatre -- when his director informed him that she had become a born-again Christian and could no longer direct the project. Power was at a crossroads. With just ten days left before opening

night, a script that he co-wrote and was eager to perform, and his hip hop theater collective ready to rock, Power made the only choice a brother could: he decided to direct the piece himself.

Today, much has changed. Power has developed a critically acclaimed solo show, toured the US, Canada, England and France, and starred in *Drylongso*, a Sundance-featured film. His image has graced the pages of *Vibe*, *The Source*, *American Theatre* and numerous local newspapers. And somewhere in there, Power found the time to marry the love of his life, Marla Teyolia, who is also his manager. Think a brother would be tired? With a chosen name like Will Power, not a chance. The 31-year-old performer has all the energy of a hyperactive kid, tempered with the quiet focus of a Canon lens, both of which come in handy when you set out to dramatize the meeting places of black men, the subject for Power's *The Gathering*. The solo show, which runs through April 14th at New York's PS 122, will have a brief run at San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts from June 25th to July 1st, and continue to tour thereafter.

"I think the places where black men meet are just so magical and special," Power says of the inspiration for his solo work. "I wanted to celebrate those places. They're so important...and they're disappearing." The term *tour de force* must have been coined to describe feats such as the one Power pulls off in *The Gathering*. Nimble as a cat, the lanky, latte-colored brother doesn't act - he steps inside his characters. An older jazz musician, a hip hop head, a drug addict, an AIDS-infected gang member, a preacher, a proud gay man, the instruments of a jazz quartet, and five totally distinct basketball players: all are finely drawn by Power, who uses every octave of his voice and every inch of his body to get the job done. The result is a rich, orchestral depiction of African American life that will, if you're lucky, come to a theater near you soon.

Performing hasn't always come easy to Power. A hip hop head since pop-locking hit the West Coast in the early 1980s, Power's first passion was breakdancing. Unfortunately, growing pains cut those aspirations short. "I went from 4'11" to 6'1" in three years! I couldn't break, I could barely walk!" he recalls, laughing. Power decided to kick rhymes instead, rocking street corners and eventually basement parties in The Fillmore -- the mostly black San Francisco neighborhood where Power grew up. At the same time, the young lyricist was taking drama classes at the neighborhood community center with the powerful activist and performance artist Rhodessa Jones (her brother is the dancer Bill T. Jones). Soon, Power and friends were rhyming in short theater pieces they created. Hip hop theater is now the official term for the ongoing experiment.

"It was just a way to make sense of it," says Power matter-of-factly. Sitting beside his wife at a low-lit East Village Café, Power easily mixes obligation (this interview) and affection (spending time with a woman he so clearly adores). Both have come separately from respective dinners, which they recount excitedly, each trying to top the other. "As you can see, we like to eat," Power says sheepishly. Their buoyant energy is delightful, and conversation bounces from the definition of hip hop theater ("It's got to incorporate at least one of the four cornerstones of hip hop culture: breakdancing, rap, deejaying or graffiti art. You can't just have a character who's a rapper!") to the coming music revolution ("I want to hear what the next shift in music is going sound like. Beyond hip hop. It gotta be coming").

Freely discussing the autobiographical nature of his work, Power talks about growing up in the Fillmore, having a biological father who abused heroin, seeing his 'hood fall prey to the crack pipe and later watching the area gentrify. "It's all my world. I grew up with these people. I went to the barbershop -- that kid who goes on a date to Burger King and can only afford a coke for himself because he's so broke, that happened to me. I'm the Young Rapper, but I'm also the old man telling the Young Rapper to remember whose footsteps he's following in," he says, thoughtfully scratching his scruffy beard.

"I know I'm young at [solo performance], but I have a gift to be able to talk to the 50-year-old and the 17-year-old. I know it sounds corny, but [when] I'm on stage, I don't feel like I'm by myself. There are so many energies onstage... it's like a channeling thing. These stories want to be told. They're like, 'Tell my story. Tell it! Tell it!'"

Power's plan for the future is simple: to stay open to new possibilities. "I don't want to do another solo show right now. I don't want to just do one thing. I want to do something else." Of his future as a hip hop theater artist, Power is similarly flexible. "I'll do it as long as it speaks to me. *The Gathering* is doing so well right now, I'm going to ride it for another year, keep touring and meeting people. It's good to know when to stick with something, but you know the thing that Miles Davis always said was, 'you gotta know when to get out.'"

[What do you think about this article?](#) Click Here to **Talk Back**

 [Send this Article to a Friend](#)

First Published: April 13, 2001

Photo of Will Power by Thomas Wolfgang Broening.

The Gathering is currently touring the United States. For touring schedule, contact Marla Teyolia, Teyolia Productions, at (973) 748-7774 or teyolia@hotmail.com.