

**WEST END FINAL**

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Incorporating THE EVENING NEWS 35p

The rhythm king

THE GATHERING ★

BAC, SW11

Patrick Marmion

THE Gathering is a congregation of black American characters written and performed by self-styled West Coast poet, Will Power. Basically, we're talking a Spike Lee line-up with the tight-trousered Italians taken out. The main conscripts are drawn from or identified with music — especially jazz, blues, hip hop, rap and dance. This sees Power use sound and poetry to paint a series of boys in the hood from a ranting HIV positive hobo to an entire basketball team. However, the centrepiece of the hour is a dialogue in a barbershop between the barber, an evangelical priest, an edgy rapper and a young gay man — each grooving to their own associated musical genre.

What makes Power's show so distinctive is his skill of ventriloquising an entire orchestra of instruments in the process. He creates sounds from his body like Bobby McFerrin and uses a good deal of onomatopoeia to create the thump and clash of a drum kit, the chime of a keyboard, the throb of a saxophone and the twang of a double bass. The rhythms of the music he simulates are also metered by the rhymes of his language. No less impressive is Power's ability as a mime artist which ensures that words, music and action synthesise into a single bodily whole.

The only problem is whether all this amounts to anything more than party tricks. The answer lies less in Power's rote citation of social issues, than in the sense of music supplying a relentless soundtrack to all black American experience — both personally and historically. It is as though it is impossible to imagine being a black American without these constant theme tunes. There is therefore a disturbed and disturbing sense that Power's characters are trapped in stereotypical patterns. Yet the improvised music and rapping animates as much as it regulates. Here lies the pain and the pleasure of Power's unique performance and makes it well worth checking out.

● Until Saturday 9 December. Box office: 020 7223 2223.