

AMERICAN THEATRE

Up Close and Personal
with **WILL POWER**
and **LISA KRON**

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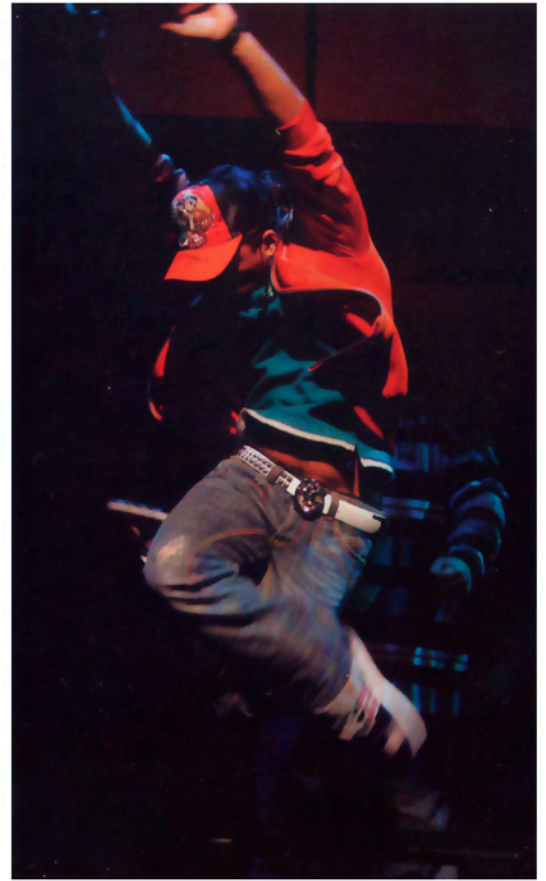
Hip-Hop Visions of an Ancient World



Will Power and company turn Aeschylus every way but loose

AN INTERVIEW BY CHARLES L. MEE

Will Power is best known for his high-octane writing and performance in Flow, the widely toured hip-hop solo show produced by New York City's Hip-Hop Theatre Festival and New York Theatre Workshop [see sidebar, page 30]. But the kinetic performer and pioneer of the hip-hop theatre movement has thrown something new—by way of the ancient—into the mix. The Seven, Power's reworking of Aeschylus's Seven Against Thebes, runs at New York Theatre Workshop through March 12. Originally commissioned by Tony Kelly of San Francisco's Thick Description and subsequently performed at the Hip-Hop Theatre Festival in 2002, The Seven has been rewritten and expanded for this high-profile outing, directed by Jo Bonney and choreographed by Bill T. Jones. Charles L. Mee—himself a prolific adaptor of the Greeks—sat down with Power at NYTW to talk about storytelling, myth and theatre.

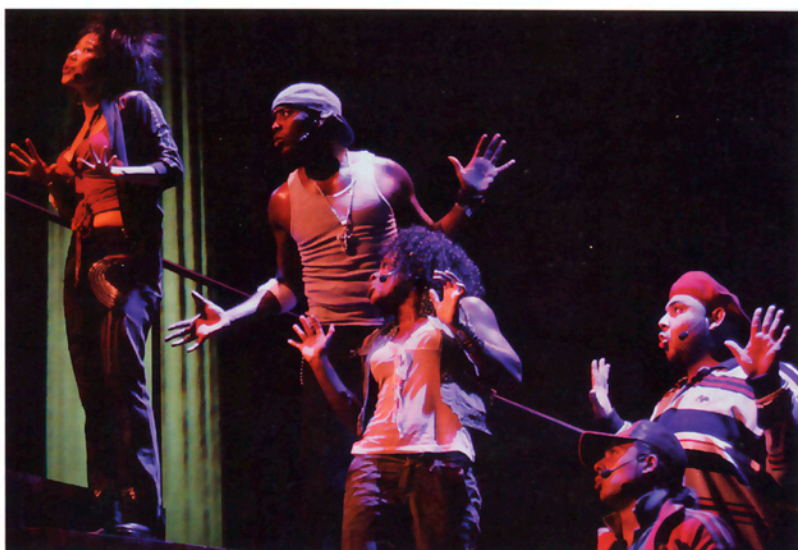
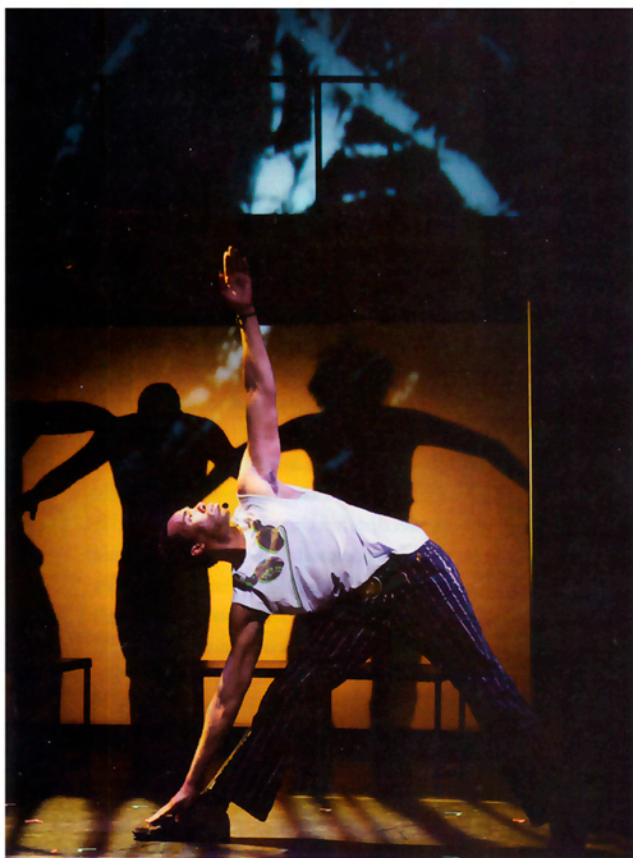


ALL SEVEN PHOTOS BY CAROL ROSEGG

CHARLES L. MEE: In the great tradition of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Shakespeare, you're taking a work from the culture that's been received as an inheritance, and remaking it for your own time and in your own poetic language. I'd like to hear what you feel the piece is—what it is you think we'll see.

WILL POWER: It's a retelling of another story—we're trying to flip it for today. For me, hip-hop is all about flipping it. When I say flipping it, I mean you take something and keep the essence and the quality and the feel of it, but you make it something different. For example, a lot of black folks in the '70s in New York either didn't have access to or couldn't afford musical equipment, so they took their turntables and their record players and they flipped it. They turned them into musical instruments, percussion instruments.

That's really what brought me to the piece. Jim [Nicola, artistic director of New York Theatre Workshop] told me that, from what we



Opposite page, from left, Edwin Lee Gibson and Manuel Herrera; this page, clockwise from top, Jamyl Dobson; Pearl Sun, Postell Pringle, Uzo Aduba, Shawtane Monroe Bowen and Manuel Herrera; and Amber Efé.

know of the way these plays were performed, they were in song. They were chanted. The way Greek plays are performed today probably isn't as true to the way they were written, but hip-hop is not so far from that. That was really interesting to me.

Can you say just what the story is?

Seven Against Thebes concerns itself with the sons of Oedipus. After Oedipus had his big fall, his two sons were embarrassed and they shunned him—they kicked him out. So Oedipus cursed them: "You will fight over the kingdom, the royal family, and eventually you're going to kill each other." And the sons were like, "Aw—we're not gonna do that. Let's make a deal: I'll rule for one year and then you rule for one year and we'll switch back and forth." But, in my opinion, a lack of faith in themselves, symbolized by lack of faith in each other, eventually does them in. They succumb to the belief that there's no

way out—fate is fate. We're destined to repeat the mistakes of our forefathers. The reason it's called *Seven Against Thebes* is that once the two brothers start to fight, the one who doesn't rule the kingdom draws seven armies and they march on the city.

Some of my contemporaries might not agree, but I don't feel like there are any new stories. There are new characters, but the stories are really about the same issues human beings have always been struggling with. I was fascinated by this family. Oedipus was cursed; his father was cursed; and then after his sons kill each other, the sons of the sons come back and fight each other.

What's the curse, do you think?

We're trying to clarify that a little more in the script now, drawing parallels to hip-hop and African-American culture—but the curse is the belief in inevitable fate. Once you believe in that, it's a constant

pull. Oedipus tried to control all this stuff—he tried to do the best he could, but he still fell to the curse. The question is: Do you have choice? Or are we destined to make the same mistakes?

Tell us a little more about how you flipped the story.

The opening monologue is by the DJ. A DJ can play a James Brown record from 1970, then mix it with a Jay-Z record that has that same James Brown sound. These two have a dialogue with each other. Do you know what a sample is? A sample is when you record a section of a song and you loop it in order to create an original song. You create an original song, but the foundation or the elements are from this older song. In some ways what hip-hop is doing is giving a nod to your elders and your ancestors. It's incorporating something old and adding something—like a DJ.

I'm trying to apply those principles of hip-hop to this play. This DJ, she finds a recording of the play *Seven Against Thebes* at a swap meet, and she starts playing it. The story is being told by these old-school, classic-voice types on the record, but then she interprets it. My play is not so much like *West Side Story*, which is a modern-day version of an old play; it's a fusion of both worlds. People ride chariots with hydraulics. They wear Phat Farm togas. They do Apollo at the Apollo. They can reference Shaft and Sophocles. They have both ends.

Who is Oedipus in our world? Who

are Eteocles and Polynices, the two brothers? Who are the Seven? It reminds me of *The Wiz*, which was the first play I ever saw. It's different, but that was an example of taking this old play, *The Wizard of Oz*, and flipping it for the time—and that time was soul and funk. It pisses some people off. "Don't touch the classics." You don't have to do it the way I'm doing it, obviously—but if you can't make the connections to why it's important now, then it's not interesting.

I did a talk at the New School a few weeks ago, and someone asked me, "Are you going to stunt the language? The language of the Greeks is so high." I was like, hip-hop theatre is kind of new, but there are some hip-hop storytellers who have magnificently high language. He said, "Are you saying that's at the level of the Greeks?" Well, yeah, in some ways. Hip-hop pays a lot of attention to language, to rhythm. Jazz had scat. In hip-hop we have freestyling. Freestyling is when you're rapping, but it's improvisational rap—scatting, but with words. It's another level of scat. Hip-hop is thick with language. Some people might see that, someone else might not see it.

What you're doing is what Aeschylus and Sophocles and Euripides did—they took legends and stories and one another's plays and remade them.

As I've been working on this, I've been getting into the mythology. What is a myth? Part fiction, part fact. It's embellishing, but it's for a deep purpose—to keep people's history alive, people's culture alive.

A message. And it's really great entertainment. As I've been studying Homer and these other writers, I've begun to think of my life in terms of the mythology I've grown up with: the West Coast, California, characters in my neighborhood that are larger than life. We had this bully in the neighborhood, for example, and there were stories about how he took advantage of this guy or fought with that guy. Most of it was true, but some of it was made up: "He beat up five guys! No, he beat up six guys!" It all comes out of Homer, right? We're pretty sure they were oral bards, storytellers spinning these tales to keep their history alive. There wasn't any writing. Homer had these stories, but



The cast of *The Seven* at New York Theatre Workshop.

then he had moments to improvise. That reminds me of hip-hop and the oral tradition of rhyming.

What drew you to this?

Partly the love of myth, flipping the story. It's also this idea, which I'm contemplating myself: Do you have a choice? Or are you destined to repeat the mistakes of the forefathers and mothers? I grew up in the Bay Area in the late '80s and '90s, and it was crazy. Now I go back home and the young people are still killing each other. Are we destined to repeat that? We have this president, George W. Bush. Ten years ago his father was president. Now I hear that they're trying to get Jeb Bush revved up. There's a good possibility that we could have a third Bush as president, not in '08, but 2012. So, are we destined to repeat?

We've been facing some exciting challenges about how to end the play. In the Greek tragedy, they kill each other. Aeschylus was, if I'm correct, one of the first playwrights to have the chorus debate the question: "You don't have to kill each other." "Yes we do. Yes we do." "No you don't. No you don't." But ultimately, it's a Greek tragedy, so they kill each other. In our play, do we want them to kill each other? And, if we do, do some characters leave the stage and say, "I'm not going to listen to this record anymore"? How do we negotiate that?

What's happening now in rehearsal?

This has been a really exciting, interesting process.



Jamyl Dobson and Benton Greene in *The Seven* at New York Theatre Workshop.

There have been some big challenges. I'm in hip-hop theatre, I'm doing my thing. Jo Bonney is an excellent choice of director because she understands the world—she's worked with Danny Hoch and Universes. She's someone who's not from the culture, but still has that level of understanding of how to tell the story, the dramaturgy and stuff. Still, hip-hop theatre is a relatively new art form. The first generation of hip-hop theatre artists who came up, we were people who wrote our own material, directed it and performed it: Danny Hoch, Sarah Jones, Universes, in the dance-theatre world, Rennie Harris. Now, we write a play and pass it on, but that's incredibly difficult because the pool of performers who can do this kind of thing is still forming. If you want to do *West Side Story*, thousands of people can do, "When you're a Jet." That's already an established musical-theatre form. But with hip-hop theatre, you have to be able to rhyme, rhyme in character, handle the weight of the original text (because we sampled some of the original text), move with Bill T. Jones's choreography, and sing. It's challenging. We had people coming in who had worked on Broadway and Off Broadway, but just could not do it. We had rappers who could rhyme, but it was like, "Okay, remember: You're a 70-year-old psychic. You've got to rhyme like a 70-year-old psychic." The people we ended up getting are an amazing bunch of folks—young people who, in one way or another, have their pulse on this kind of thing.

Another challenge: My friend Will Hammond and I composed the music. But when I would hear it against Jay-Z or Erykah Badu, the composition was good, but the production was not. All my friends were like, "The music, man..." So we needed to find our own hip-hop producer, someone who could take the song and "up it." But we needed someone who also had theatre sensibilities. That was really difficult to find. First I grabbed the CDs of people I like, and we started contacting people and they were like, "\$20,000 a track." And we were like, "No." Or they were like, "Theatre...I don't understand. What is it? I don't get it." And the people who understood theatre—they didn't have the hip-hop sensibilities. We searched long and hard and we finally found one guy—in Atlanta. His name is Justin Ellington. He grew up with a youth ensemble in Atlanta, so he knows composing for theatre, but he's also a hip-hop producer. He's got a song on

"The way Greek plays are performed today probably isn't as true to the way they were written, but hip-hop is not so far from that."

Ciara's album, but he also works at Alliance Theatre. We can talk about production on the level of Jay-Z, but we can also talk about the feeling of the character. We were so lucky to find him.

The last challenge was the DJ. She has to be able to act; she opens the whole play. What I wanted was someone like DJ Reborn, who worked with me in *Flow*. What we actually needed was a turntablist. But it was really difficult to find that person—I was kind of pulling for a DJ, and Jo was kind of pulling for an actor. So we said, let's get an actor who we can teach to be a DJ, someone who can spin around and cut in the air. She's telling a story, she can cut on this level. I really wanted a female for that role. [The part eventually went to Amber Efé.] The DJ finds the record. She digs the record, but as it goes on, she starts questioning it. Why does it have to be like this? I don't want to generalize, but I feel there's something about feminine energy as opposed to the masculine energy of the old, the conqueror. Also in hip-hop, there are *not* a lot of female DJs—there are some in New York, but not outside. With DJ Reborn for *Flow*—it's like a revelation in Iowa or in Minneapolis. I see young women's eyes just open right there. DJ Reborn is *bad*. That's something that can be a revelation and show people new ways into hip-hop culture. I think it's important, breaking down walls, breaking down stereotypes.

I've learned so much about the characters from the actors. These are seven heroes, and a lot of the actors who are playing them are very unique characters in themselves. Flaco Navaja—he's in *Universes*—is a character. As a person, he's a character. Edwin Lee Gibson, who plays Oedipus—he's strange, but in a beautiful way. Having strong personalities helps a lot. Oedipus is a personality and Edwin is a personality as well.

What to you is exciting about theatre that you couldn't do in some other form, or in some other way?

It comes down to a particular kind of storytelling that theatre involves—people in a room, you know? There was always something about that that excited me. I came up in a community theatre/activist/science-fiction type world. The theatre I knew as a kid was always about stretching the imagination. One of Sun Ra's dancers was my first drama teacher. She came into my community and created this Afro-centric, science-fiction, children's presentational theatre. You can still see that in my work today.

What happened between then and now?

When I was 14, I started to rhyme. Hip-hop hit the West Coast a little later. The first thing that got popular in my neighborhood was breakdancing. I tried to breakdance, but people would just blow me away. This was before the gang activity hit big-time. If you had beef with someone, you would break with them. I was getting taken out. I couldn't hang. So me and my friends, we switched to rhyming. At that point theatre or performance was about expressing yourself, more like a hobby, something to do, something fun. We didn't think hip-hop was something you could make a living from.

In my early twenties, in the neighborhoods there was some mad drama going on. Early '90s, people were dying, getting shot all the time. It was always around. Hip-hop theatre was like, how can we bring it back to telling stories? It wasn't that consciously thought out. Looking back now that I'm older, hip-hop theatre was really a response to the chaos that was going on. A lot of the hip-hop theatre pioneers were going through that at the same time I was. We created these artist collectives in London, New York. We didn't know each other.

Are you thinking about any other ideas for the theatre?

I have this idea about a teenage punk band in the early '70s. They're in high school. They practice in the garage. The Vietnam War is going on, people are getting drafted, people are coming back all jacked up. I think I'm going to develop it for the Children's Theatre Company in Minneapolis. The challenge is, it's a band. They don't have to rap because they didn't rap back then. But they have to sing, act and play instruments. The idea is that the bass player might be playing something and the drummer might jump from behind the drums and do a monologue about his father while the bass player is backing him. I want to see *Sweeney Todd* [directed by John Doyle on Broadway] because I hear they do stuff like that.

I'm 35 and for the first time in my life I'm looking forward to being on the road a little less. That's really how I've made my living, which I love, but I'm married. I have a dog. I have ideas for things that I need time to get out. It's a blessing to have this time to step back.

It will be interesting to see, in a number of years, how the story changes. It's really hard to live in cities now if you don't have a lot of money. A lot of poor people are moving out and some of the suburbs are getting rough. Up where I live, in Beacon, N.Y., it's okay, but Poughkeepsie or Peekskill—whoa. That's starting to be a trend. I don't know if that's going to affect me, affect where I live. I remember the cities of 1970s. It was a whole different world. In San Francisco you could rent half a Victorian as a single mother—and if you had a little more money, you could buy one. Not anymore. If you grow up poor in a city you still have more access to culture. There's more flavor: "I'm from Brooklyn." "I'm from Harlem." But if you live out in the middle of nowhere, and there's still violence—it's just strip mall, it's isolated. It's going to be interesting to see how that's eventually reflected, but we're in the middle of it right now. As a storyteller, you want to be contemporary, but you need a little time to reflect.

No more Greeks?

I'm going to be a Greek scholar after this! I've been reading so much Greek poetry, which is beautiful, but not for a while, man. You're a master playwright—you know how you get into the world. When I was doing *Flow*, I was into that world. Now I want to move to another world—the world of the early '70s. If Disney comes along and is like, "You want to do the *Iliad*?" I'll be like, "No, I'm good." ❧

Charles L. Mee's *Hotel Cassiopeia* runs at Actors Theatre of Louisville's Humana Festival March 21–April 2.

A TRIBE CALLED WILL POWER

BY RANDY GENER

Each time a b-boy or a b-girl steps into a cipher—the circle that draws you in, the communal huddle that grows and gasps and “unhs” to the bang, to the boogie—one more brave soul becomes part of the tribal dance. One more MC steps up to conjure the ecstasy of the collective. You spit the lyrics. You drop to the floor and pop. The cipher thrives on survival of the fittest—sometimes you can get taken out. It’s also about progressing, the circle expanding constantly. After you do your 360, you realize: The cipher is where you connect with what it is, what it been and what it gon’ be.

Will Power, the loose-limbed hip-hop artist and playwright, is a cipher all his own. In his populous solo shows *Flow* and *The Gathering*, he faces down the challenge of the throng by stepping up to the narrator’s plate and winding up inside a congregation. The

Power talks the melting-pot talk of the ‘hood, the distinctive voice of the underclass outsider, even of the wannabe insider. *The Gathering* listens in on the jam sessions in the barbershop, the jazz club, on the basketball court: all-male black sanctuaries where a hip-hop head, an aging jazz musician, a drug addict, an AIDS-stricken gang member, a proud gay man and a rowdy team of ball players keep it real.

One by one, Will Power inhabits each of his characters, often layering stories within stories to reveal their hidden pain or heartbreak, love or disillusion, dreams or braggadocio—the hardcore stuff that pulled them into the cipher. But where most solo performers rely on sketch-comedy skills, quick changes in costumes and mastery of accents to enact transformations, Power depends on the vibe of the spoken word.

and carry on”—is quite endearing.

And disarming: In performance, Will Power doesn’t sing, really. He doesn’t dance. But you will swear to the musicality of his vocals, the choreographic brio of his energy. He thumps. He twirls. He *rhythms*. Everything flows. It’s a shame, in fact, that Power himself isn’t actually appearing on stage in his Aeschylus-inspired cipher *The Seven*—after workshoping it on the road he’s sitting this one out, backstage. Writer’s prerogative, I suppose. It could also be the small price hip-hopppers pay when they embrace the theatrical fold. The cipher is an open-ended and expansive circle, while the classical bent of the Western theatre demands more composed stories and closed-down song-structures. As Power himself has discovered in performance, the boasts, brags and chants (“to the beat y’all”) which drive the raucous energy of the cipher can stop a show cold in front of some theatre subscribers.

Tall, lanky, light-skinned, his hair braided tight, angular limbs shooting forth from knees and elbows, Will Power may initially strike you as a too-animated clay figure—like Gumby with cornrows—but watch out. Watch out for the ferocity of his beats, the octaves of his staccato shouts, the onomatopoeic sounds that represent everything from rain to drums to gunfire. Watch out for the graceful cadences of his movements, the entire history of the hip-hop body in virtuoso display. Switching gears from solos to multi-character plays, Power seems to have found a way of harnessing the cipher’s crescendo of wordplay and uplifting dance. Moving with an urgent pulse, he is marking new modes of hip-hop expression and working through his own generational narrative.



Will Power in *Flow* at Minneapolis’s Children’s Theatre Company.

ROB LEVINE

ready-to-rumble storytellers of *Flow* take their turns passing on knowledge: the elderly drunken hobo, the bad-ass sista schoolteacher, the preacha-man grocery bagger, the know-it-all indigenous tour guide, the dance instructor, the freestylin’ girl-rapper. The storm passes, and a rapper alter-ego of Will is left behind. (Note that there are six of them plus Power, just like in *The Seven*, which refers to six warrior champs plus Polynices as the seventh.)

All his monologues are rapped. Every line is rhymed and aurally backed by live, real-time DJ mixes. Power spins urban fables, speaking of lives ridden by drugs, poverty, hate crimes, misogyny, black homophobia, even species genocide—but his shows never play dreary grooves. This rapper is doped up on the need to entertain and inspire. His belief in the power of the verse to pass on the message—the down-home wisdom of those who “sing the songs and right the wrongs