

By JENNIFER DUNNING

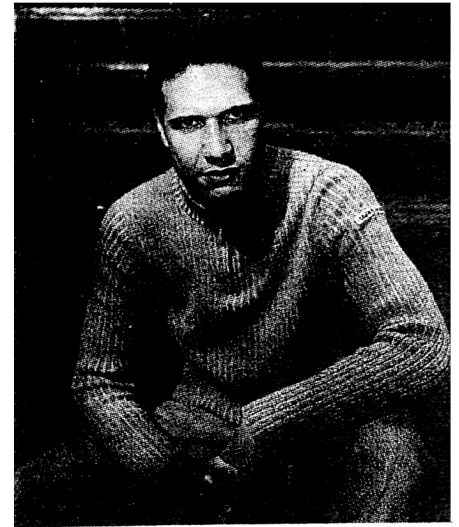
THAT lanky young man sitting on a sunny park bench and muttering into a portable cassette as he scribbles in a notebook may not be the amiable neighborhood madman. He could very well be Will Power, the rap actor and playwright whose "Flow" was a hit of the 2003 New York City Hip-Hop Festival. Now Mr. Power, who likes to write outdoors, has returned with "The Seven," a hip-hop adaptation of Aeschylus' "Seven Against Thebes," which opens on Sunday at the New York Theater Workshop.

That ancient Greek tragedian might not recognize in "The Seven" his comparatively barebones choral tragedy about two brothers who, in vying for control of the city of Thebes, fulfill the curse of family killing family that has been handed down by their father, Oedipus.

Mr. Power has updated it and added characters, giv-

ing them songs, verse and humor that come from urban streets of the 21st century. A D.J. functions as the traditional chorus, overseeing and commenting on the action, which surges across a tiny, multilevel stage made spacious by looming black-and-white projections that partly set the production in the context of the original.

For Mr. Power, 35, there are strong connections between "Flow" and "The Seven." "I saw these storytellers, I guess in Africa, in a vision I had, and then I wrote a whole bunch of other stories," he said of "Flow," a monologue in which he also played storytelling characters that included a homeless man, a health-food-store clerk and a dancer. Both "Flow" and "The Seven," which was written at the invitation of the Thick Description Theater in San Francisco and developed at the New York Theater Workshop's Jonathan Larson Lab, explore man's relationship



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Will Power's play "The Seven" is at the New York Theater Workshop.

NEW FACE

Taking Aeschylus Hip-Hop, Into Modern Urban Streets

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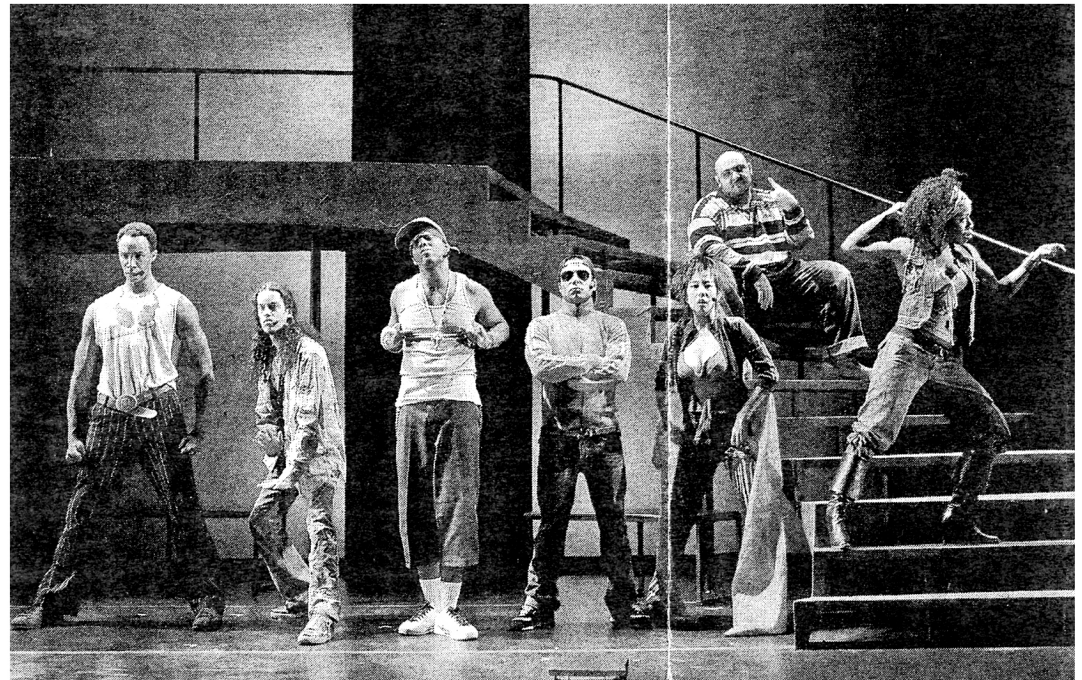
to the past. New York Theater Workshop was where Mr. Larson's musical, "Rent," was developed; "The Seven," with choreography by Bill T. Jones, has a similar scrappy vitality.

"'Flow' was about ancient stories and how to modernize them and use them as a guide," Mr. Power said in a telephone interview on Wednesday. "I was looking at the ancestors, at all the beauty in the past. Tragedy is almost the other side of the coin in terms of the baggage of the past, the pain of the past, the fear and the hatred of the past. I think of the past as things our ancestors accomplished and that we're trying to escape."

Mr. Power, born William Wylie in Manhattan, grew up in the working-class Fillmore district of San Francisco, where he acquired the neighborhood nickname Will Power. He spent summers in New York City with his grandparents, who taught him to love the Broadway theater. "We'd wait on line at the ticket booth on 47th Street," he recalled. "That was the weekend family tradition." "The Wiz," he said, was a revelation.

In San Francisco, he studied theater with a teacher who had performed with Sun Ra. "She started doing this Afrocentric, science-fiction, way-out children's theater," he said. "I think that's still in me."

Mr. Power began performing at 14 as an M.C. in theater that developed from competitions between neigh-



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

A scene from "The Seven," an update of "Seven Against Thebes," at the New York Theater Workshop.

borhood hip-hop crews, eventually writing plays and training at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. Gradually, he came to know and perform with other hip-hop theater artists, among them Danny Hoch, the monologist who suggest-

ed that Mr. Power turn his stories into a theatrical production, which Mr. Hoch directed, and who founded the hip-hop festival in 2000.

"The Seven," directed by Jo Bonney, with music by Will Hammond and Justin Ellington, has taken Mr.

Power a step further into the theater of hip-hop, a relatively new theatrical form. "I am fascinated by the idea of using rhymes, hip-hop verse and music," he said, "of exploring hip-hop as a vehicle to tell a story theatrically."