



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Jamyl Dobson, left, and Benton Greene as the feuding sons of Oedipus.

THEATER REVIEW

Riffing and Scratching And Remixing Aeschylus

By CHARLES ISHERWOOD

The wild ride of luckless ol' Oedipus — accidentally offing dad, marrying mom, being dissed by the kids — is pimped to the nines in "The Seven," a frisky and funny new riff on the classic story, which opened last night at New York Theater Workshop.

Written by Will Power, who also composed the music (with Justin Ellington and Will Hammond), and directed by Jo Bonney, the show is a freewheeling adaptation of one of the more static, less revered Greek tragedies, Aeschylus' "Seven Against Thebes," with a big handful of back story thrown in.

Mr. Power slaps his old record on a new turntable, and then proceeds to spin and scratch it, freely sampling contemporary musical styles and mixing in jokes spanning a couple of millennia of pop culture to create a strange new hybrid: a hip-hop musical comedy-tragedy. If the needle eventually begins skipping, as the nifty conceit wears thin and Mr. Power's playful instincts clash with Aeschylus' ritualistic grandeur, that's only to be expected in a risky adventure in aesthetic cross-pollination.

The onstage narrator, a D.J.

played by Amber Efé, lays down the irreverent tone in the first minutes when she plays a sample of an old-school track. "O house of endless tears, o hopeless end!" we hear a baritone voice ripely intoning. "It is the curse of your father that bears fruit in you, and the harvest is no blessing."

Ms. Efé, sassy and silky voiced, breaks in sharply: "Yo, kinda pessimistic right? But his voice sound tight. Kinda like Freddy Krueger if

The Seven

New York Theater Workshop

he went to Harvard or somethin'. I'm definitely addin' this to the playlist."

That playlist includes generous selections of hip-hop, doo-wop, 1970's funk, R&B, gospel, the blues and even a hilarious snippet of "Dream-girls," all accompanied by Mr. Power's inventively rhymed vernacular verse, more commonly known, of course, as rap. The players are a gifted cast of a dozen singers and dancers in assorted sizes, shapes and skin colors who infuse the production with heat-generating energy even during the lulls. (The choreography is by

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Riffing and Scratching, and Remixing Old-School Aeschylus

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Bill T. Jones, happily cutting loose with street moves to keep the stage in fluid motion.)

None of those lulls occur when Edwin Lee Gibson's Oedipus is gracing the stage. Strutting and sliding in flashy pimp regalia across the raised platform that dominates Richard Hoover's set, Mr. Gibson's Oedipus is the show's presiding spirit: smooth of tongue, limber of leg and always in your face. (Not blind, but never mind.)

As classics scholars will be noting with suspicion, Oedipus is not an actual presence in "Seven Against Thebes," which revisits the tense moments when his two sons, Eteocles, the Theban king, and Polynices, who is besieging the city's seven gates with seven bands of warriors, battle for control of Thebes as the citizens bemoan their fate inside. (Much to the king's annoyance, that: his windy admonitions to the chorus can be boiled down to the phrase "shut up!")

Mr. Gibson and Mr. Power briskly stride over any lit-crit quibbles. Preening over the mess his curse has made, his slick moves suggesting a cross between Sylvester and James Brown, Mr. Gibson's Oedipus grabs ample stage time from Aeschylus to retell his sorry story in one of the production's liveliest rap soliloquies. He also invades the psyches of his truce-making sons, who had agreed to end the family trouble by living in peace and ruling Thebes in turn.

Polynices (often spelled Polyneices), played as a sweet soul with sinewy sex appeal by Jamyl Dobson, has abandoned Thebes for a nature frolic and some yogic maneuvers with his pal Tydeus (a witty, gangly Flaco Navaja). Back in Thebes, Benton Greene's feisty Eteocles takes a liking to ruling over a docile populace, with his nimble white henchman, Right Hand (an amusingly hyperactive Tom Nelis), jumping out of his pinstripes to do his bidding. Dad puts brothers back on a collision course by playing up their rivalry, and in the second act, which hews more closely to the original, Polynices assembles a band of brothers (and sisters) to invade the city, resulting in hella bloodshed, as someone in "The Seven" might put it.

*'O house of endless
tears, o hopeless end!'
(Cue the turntables.)*

Mr. Power's unflagging verbal inspiration keeps the show buoyant — rhymes that feature gag references to Ali G and "The X-Files," Phat Farm and the Acropolis just keep coming. But when things get mildly serious in the second act, the conceit (O.K., the gimmick) loses some of its savor. Unlike "The Gospel at Colonus," Lee Breuer's much-revived transcription of a Sophocles tragedy as a Pentecostal church service, Mr. Power and Ms. Bonney's production is primarily and most successfully a lampoon of its ur-text; it doesn't attempt to recreate the cathartic majesty of tragedy, but rather to pull off its pedestal and give it the mama" treatment by putting it in incongruous context of today's url America.

When it makes a few perfunct attempts at political statement and more ritualistic staging in the second act, with the chorus accusing Eteocles of "tryin' to hold back and hold classified information," or a host of seers predicting doom, the engine begins to idle.

At which point you may wonder why Mr. Power, possessed of a facility for dramatizing a story in idiom all but unknown in today's musical theater, wanted to borrow ponderous gravitas of Greek tragedy — or at least to upend it — to display his talents. Aeschylus has plenty of street cred already. He was doing fine without Mr. Power. And impressive as "The Seven" is, it will be more interesting to see just what Mr. Power can do without Aeschylus.

The Seven

Text and composition by Will Power; direction and development, Jo Bonney; choreographer, Bill T. Jones; sets, Richard Hoover; costumes by Emilio Sosa; lighting by David Weiner; sound by Darron L. West; image design, Kelly Bray, Reese Hicks, Richard Hoover, Frank Luna and Robin Silvestri; music production and additional composition, Justin Ellington; additional composition, Will Hammond; music direction and vocal arrangement, Daryl Waters; production stage management, Wendy Ouellette; assistant stage management, Missy Guisinger and Sharika Niles. Presented by New York Theater Workshop, James C. Nicola, artistic director; Lynn Moffat, managing director. At 79 East Fourth Street, East Village; (212) 239-6200. Through March 12. Running time: 1 hour 50 minutes.

WITH: Uzo Aduba (Second Woman/Amphiaraus), Shawtane Monroe Bowen (Third Man/Hippomedon), Jamyl Dobson (Polynices), Amber Efé (D.J.), Edwin Lee Gibson (Oedipus/Laius), Benton Greene (Eteocles), Manuel Herrera (First Man/Eteocles), Flaco Navaja (Tydeus), Tom Nelis (Right Hand), Postell Pringle (Second Man/Capaneus), Pearl Sun (First Woman/Parthenopaeus) and Charles Turner (Aeschylus).
