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THE SEVEN

The Seven has more energy, more vitality, and more raw theatricality than just about any new musical I've seen this year. *The Seven* is a hip-hop musical by Will Power based on Sophocles' *Seven Against Thebes*. Defying expectations, perhaps, the classical story of Oedipus's two sons who go to war over their kingdom is told here most faithfully. The characters move and talk with the contemporary cadences of hip-hop; but what they say, and what their story means, are the eternal human truths first uttered thousands of years ago.

The Seven begins with the banishment of Oedipus from Thebes (following, you may recall, the discovery that he had killed his father and wed his mother); as he departs, he places a curse on his sons Eteocles and Polynices. These two decide to rule Thebes alternately, with Eteocles going first and Polynices scheduled to take over in a year's time. But of course after a year in power, Eteocles is unwilling to relinquish the throne even to his beloved brother. Polynices gathers an army (the Seven Against Thebes) and attacks Eteocles. Eventually, the two brothers face one another in battle and, fulfilling their father's curse, murder each other.

Power's rendition, which features music co-authored with Will Hammond, direction by Tony Kelly, and movement by Robert Henry Johnson, presents a strong anti-war, anti-tyranny, anti-oppression platform.

The most potent moments in *The Seven* are those featuring the common people of Thebes, the ones whose daily lives are shattered and destroyed by the jealousies and whims of their rulers. Power uses vivid, colorful language to make his themes accessible and pointed, and Kelly and Johnson provide spellbindingly primal choreography to propel the tale forward quickly and relentlessly. Hammond and Power's music is appropriately evocative and stirring. The climactic battle scene is staged perhaps more abstractly than necessary—I felt the creators pulling back from the essential tragic nature of the piece. But overall, *The Seven* is a brilliantly crafted work, bringing musical theatre into the 21st century for perhaps, at least to this observer, the very first time.

Appropriately, just seven performers comprise the entire company, all of them outstanding (and one of them, Venus Opal Reese, even better than that). *The Seven* played only two performances at the 3rd Annual New York Hip-Hop Theatre Festival this summer. But we need shows like this one to help us redefine what theatre can be and connect it to a younger audience. Producers: here's a property worth looking at. (reviewed on June 28, 2002)