

THEATER REVIEW



SETH DICKERMAN

Norman Gee, left, and Benton Greene in Thick Description's production of "The Seven."

Tragedy of 'Seven' transcends years

By Mark de la Viña
Mercury News

Brothers Eteocles and Polynices stalk and swagger like rap stars performing in their own videos. They wear their youthful power like gold chains as they confidently bask in their shared inheritance, the throne of the kingdom of Thebes.

THE SEVEN

The upshot: The classic Greek tragedy is retold as rapper Will Power and composer Will Hammond put this story of warring brothers through the hip-hop wringer.

Where: The Thick House, San Francisco

Through: Sept. 16

Tickets: \$10-\$20; (415) 401-8081

comes a forceful, contemporary look at the cycle of violence among blacks.

Playwright Will Power, the San Francisco-raised rapper who was a member of the hip-hop band Midnight Voices, has modernized

Only problem is that their father, the banished and blinded Oedipus, has cursed them to divide their domain by sword.

The legacy of filial conflict is the stuff of Aeschylus' "The Seven Against Thebes." But when the theater collective Thick Description turns the classical story into the hip-hop musical "The Seven," the nearly 2,500-year-old Greek tragedy be-

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the play to cleverly emphasize that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Eteocles and Polynices (played by Benton Greene and Vincent Heckard) have become part of the tragic legacy of black-on-black brutality that has pitted gang against gang, family against family, brother against brother.

Powerful artist

Mining such topical veins is old hat for Power. With such plays as "2017," a musical about AIDS in black America, and "The Gathering," a piece about the meeting places of African-American men, Power emerged as one of the most intriguing artists in the fledgling hip-hop theater scene.

In "The Seven," Power has crafted often humorous, modern raps that honor the original text, yet he has updated the dialogue to mirror the street-corner braggadocio of contemporary music. When Greene as Eteocles wallows in his power, he slams with "I'm your king/ I'm liking this kingly thing/ Yeah, I'm your king/ Can you tell by this fat-ass ring?"

Director Tony Kelly, who enlisted Power and composer Will Hammond to develop "The Seven," guides the uneven cast through an interpretation that sometimes struggles. The obvious shortfall is that Thick Description has rounded up only six performers for a play about seven warriors trying to wrest power from Eteocles. And not everyone in the cast can handle rapping, acting and dancing with ease. (Acclaimed choreographer Robert Henry Johnson is the architect of "Seven's" breakdance-flavored movement.)

Balance in style

But several performers shine, including Greene, who ably plays the blustery monarch. His muscular hip-hop dance steps in Eteocles' throw-down with Polynices nicely counter the coiled movement of Heckard. As Polynices, Heckard is a fine rapper whose performance is a bit stiff. Ensemble members Venus Opal Reese as Tydeus and Norman Gee as Right Hand add vibrancy to the multidisciplinary proceedings.

If there ever was a testament to the endurance of Greek tragedy, it's in the form's ability to remain vital after more than two millennia. And while "The Seven" has rough edges, this piece of hip-hop theater is a pulsing reminder that sometimes our best, most universal stories are often our oldest.

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THE SEVEN

By Will Power
Music by Will Hammond and Will Power
Based on "The Seven Against Thebes" by Aeschylus

Producer: Thick Description

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