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Stage
A potent hip hop
adaptation of
*Seven Against
Thebes*. That's
right, hip hop
Aeschylus.



Greek Beats: Norman Gee and Benton Greene tell an old story in new language.

Balance of Power

A hip hop adaptation
of Aeschylus takes a
surprisingly light touch

BY MICHAEL SCOTT MOORE

Move the setting of a classic play to the streets of a modern city, dress the conflict as a gang war, write a score in a popular style, and what do you have? Forty years ago it might have been *West Side Story*, but these days you can expect something closer to *The Seven*, Will Power's brilliant hip hop adaptation of Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*.

"Oh come on," you might say. "Aeschylus? Haven't we seen enough of him? After a full *Oresteia* cycle and a production of Charles Mee's *Big Love* — based on *The Suppliant Women* — we've had Aeschylus revivals to last us three or four years. Can't we just move on? Never mind the fact that 'hip hop' and 'Aeschylus' should not be uttered in the same sentence."

If that's your attitude, well, stay home and suffer. But *The Seven Against Thebes* is

a brother-vs.-brother story that lends itself to a gang-war interpretation, which in turn lends itself to hip hop. Will Power and his collaborators — musician Will Hammond, choreographer Robert Henry Johnson, and director Tony Kelly — have produced a brief, potent, rap-and-dance piece that lightly touches these parallels and reinforces Aeschylus' tragedy with resonance and powerful feeling.

The original *Seven* tells the story of the warring sons of Oedipus. In Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* we see Oedipus cursing his disloyal boys — Polynices and Eteocles, who banished him from Thebes — to lives of enmity. The curse is fulfilled in *The Seven Against Thebes*, when Polynices lays siege to the city where his brother sits on the throne. "Seven" refers to the six champions Polynices musters to storm each city gate; the seventh is Polynices himself, whom Eteocles battles in person. Fratricide is naturally as taboo in ancient Greece as parricide or incest, so in the ruins of the siege, Antigone and Ismene find their brothers' shattered bodies and sing,

Antigone: Wail the grief!

Ismene: Weep the wrong!

Antigone: To home and country both belong!

The same bitter, self-knowing sentiment drives Will Power's revision. He

keeps Aeschylus' names and plot but not his language, and the show starts with Oedipus' disembodied voice rapping loosely, slangily, about the curse. Then Eteocles and Polynices come on, in turn, to discuss the power-sharing deal they've settled on to cheat fate. Each man, they've decided, gets the throne for a year. "I can tell you this," chants Eteocles. "Me and my brother are strong/ And we can

work it out so we can live long/ And rule Thebes —" (ending, hard, on a spondee). Rap styles shift with character; Eteocles (Benton Greene) has fast, strict, skittering rhymes, but Polynices (Vincent Heckard) follows a lumbering beat that lapses into

arrhythmic yelling. Both Greene and Heckard rap skillfully, but Greene has more charisma, especially when Eteocles becomes an arrogant, pimped-out king unwilling to relinquish power.

Most of the ancient script is just a wail, a description of the heroes attacking Thebes followed by a description of the men Eteocles pits against them. But Power shows us people on the street — junkie single mothers, prostitutes, dissatisfied business owners — as well as the advisers to Polynices and Eteocles. Norman Gee plays a funny sycophant in Eteocles' court wearing a baggy suit and a porkpie hat ("You the shit, baby!"), and Venus Opa Reese plays the rangy poet Tydeus, who advises Polynices. Gee and Reese double effectively, as street citizens. But what may be the most haunting and memorable scene shows Eteocles consulting the "Psychic," a prophet with six arms and three heads (Selana Allen and others), chanting under a black light while Eteocles addresses her in a slow Jamaican ragga. Her sounds, here, a little like Eddie Grant: "It's all about me/ Can't you see, can't you see, he sings. "I wanna be, gonna be, king of Thebes." The scene works, although I'r

The Seven

Written by Will Power, based on a play by Aeschylus.

Directed by Tony Kelly. Music by Will Hammond and Will Power. Choreography by Robert Henry Johnson.

Produced by Thick Description. Starring Benton Greene, Vincent Heckard, Norman Gee, Venus Opa Reese, and Selana Allen. Through Sept. 16 at Thick House, 1695 18th St. (between Arkansas and Wisconsin), S.F. Tickets are \$10-20; call 401-8081 or visit www.thickdescription.com.

not sure why Eteocles falls into a Jamaican accent; the sheer variety of styles in *The Seven* keeps it lively.

Not all of it's brilliant. A flashback to the brothers' childhood, with Oedipus (Greene again) criticizing Eteocles, is goofy as well as confusing (actors swap roles, the comedy fails). The title also gives more weight to the number seven than it needs, especially since each side musters a gang of only six men total. These are quibbles, though. The real beauty of *The Seven* lies in Power's light

touch, which keeps him from stressing the turf-war parallel or the brother-vs.-brother theme. We never hear these matters discussed; we just watch the tragedy happen.

Power led a local hip hop band, Midnight Voices, before he turned to playwriting (2017, *The Gathering*); his partner,

Will Hammond, sings funk and ska. Robert Henry Johnson premiered a beautiful, eclectic dance piece called *Letters to Jesus* at the Afro Solo Festival last month, and runs his own company in Oakland.

These are local artists commissioned by Tony Kelly to create a new show, and they've come up with a highly original, and musical, blast of grief and rage. Johnson's choreography in particular is strong. He draws his analogies with as much unassuming grace as Power. In

the final scene, after a drum battle between Eteocles and Polynices, the two men go at each other in a pop-locking routine — that jerky, stand-up break dance you see in old videos — and their taut mimes of battle owe as much to Harlem as to figures on a Grecian urn. ●

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