

The NEW YORK Sun



TUESDAY, JULY 2, 2002

BEATS, RHYMES, AND DEATH

By JEREMY McCARTER

Exemplary works of hip-hop theater until now have fallen into two categories. Some plays have used hip-hop as a potent theatrical tool, but haven't told especially compelling stories: Rickerby Hinds's "Keep Hedz Ringin'," which I wrote about last week, is one such exciting but ultimately unsatisfying show. Plays that boast better stories, like Danny Hoch's "Jails, Hospitals, and Hip-Hop," have tended to take hip-hop as their subject without developing it as form.

Will Power is the first playwright in my experience to use hip-hop to tell a story that is genuinely compelling. With his new play, "The Seven," hip-hop theater comes of age.

Please see HIP-HOP, page 10

THE

SEVEN

Hip-Hop Theater Makes Good With Aeschylus

HIP-HOP continued from page 1

"The Seven," which marked the finale of the 3rd NYC Hip-Hop Theater Festival last weekend, is Mr. Power's adaptation of Aeschylus's "Seven Against Thebes." You might feel an impulse to scoff at the prospect of doing ancient Greek tragedy in the argot of young urban America. Resist it.

Mr. Power's show isn't a prank or a gimmick. He doesn't make light of Aeschylus any more than Lee Breuer sent up Sophocles with his 1987 "Gospel at Colonus." "The Seven" is a serious work, one that demonstrates just how flexible and how powerful hip-hop theater can be when a playwright understands what it can do.

Like Aeschylus's play, Mr. Power's adaptation shows the cursed sons of Oedipus fighting for dominion over Thebes. Where Aeschylus only shows us Eteocles (Benton Greene), the brother who defends Thebes, Mr. Power also shows us Polyneices (Vincent Heckard), the brother who attacks it. The show's recitative (all in rhyming couplets) and songs (all rapped) push the brothers to their final, fatal confrontation.

Mr. Power's rhymes are unexceptional, but this seems to be by design. Unlike Mr. Hinds, whose play was full of dazzling rhymes and allusions, Mr. Power keeps the beats simple and the lines comprehensible. This lets him harness the power of hip-hop without allowing it to interfere with his story.

"Seven Against Thebes," a martial play full of outsized displays of anger and pride, is well served by Mr. Power's hip-hop approach. In songs such as "I'm Ready," Eteocles's pep talk to his troops, Mr. Power uses the braggadocio inherent in rap music to give those emotions full voice.

Apart from fitting nicely with the subject matter, the hip-hop in Mr. Power's play also makes it extraordinarily compelling to watch — and to hear. The shifting rhythms of the show's 13 songs (composed by Mr. Power and Will Hammond) also command the audience's attention, even though the music is piped in from a record.

Adding a band or, better yet, a D.J., is one of several positive steps the show could take. Indeed one of the play's best moments comes when the brothers retreat to opposite sides of the stage to play drums as the battle for Thebes rages. The musicianship of both actors is impressive.

If the show deserves praise for its overall conception, some elements of execution are lacking.

The show's cast is uneven; only Mr. Greene, whose Eteocles has a quicksilver intensity, gives a standout performance. It would be a substantially stronger show if Mr. Power, a gifted actor and dancer in his own right, performed as well.

Mr. Power's script also lurches in a few spots. It's not clear why Polyneices decides to challenge his brother's control of Thebes when he does. The final fight between the brothers seems rushed, anti-climactic. Considering this is a hip-hop theater show, it might be stronger to have them spar verbally as well as physically — maybe in a freestyle that changed from one night to the next.

Its shortcomings aside, "The Seven" represents the most promising template yet for the development of hip-hop theater. I hold out hope that next year's festival will concentrate on shows like Mr. Power's and not on ones that happen to be about hip-hop. That would be welcome news for anyone who thinks hip-hop might be just what theater needs.

◆ ◆ ◆