

Will Power helms hip-hop experiment at CTC In Control

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While the union between rock 'n' roll and the stage has yielded mixed results (alas, the great death-metal opera remains unconscionably unwritten), hip hop's possibilities on the dramatic stage have equal if not greater potential. It is essentially a narrative art form, after all, as focused on storytelling as anything else. *Flow*, at the Children's Theatre Company, hitches hip hop to a storytelling format, borrowing liberally from disparate sources while largely steering free from the reefs of cliché. While limited by its one-man scope, it's as distinctive as any stage production in recent memory.

The show, which moves CTC's teen-oriented programming to its new Cargill Stage, is written, composed, and performed by Will Power and developed and directed by Danny Hoch. It takes the audience through the voices of seven storytellers linked by the notion that narrative is the stuff of life. Power makes a good case for his thesis, working against an abstract tapestry featuring floating stereo speakers and a DJ booth. The backdrop changes throughout the night, and Power's multiple character shifts are nicely abetted by Sarah Sidman's incandescent lighting design.

Power is a credible rapper, and DJ Reborn (a woman with an easy and appealing stage presence of her own) lays out decent if unexceptional beats and accents, but this is theater first

and hip hop second. The real distinction in Power's performance is his gift for caricature, his exceptional timing, and the consistent strength of his writing. Things open with Power himself traipsing through the neighborhood on a beautiful sunny day, his mood changing when an old beggar lures him into a shack where the seven storytellers are waiting.



We are subsequently introduced to a young girl from the projects who grows up to be a teacher, a self-styled preacher, a Native American hip-hop aficionado and all-around repository of knowledge, a dance instructor, and a freestyle rapping queen. Power works himself nearly into a trance, punctuating his lyrics with rhythmic nonsense syllables as he moves from story to story and character to character. He's all angles, a thin man with great flexibility of body and voice, moving with ease from gruff rapping to ultra-fem declaiming to the funnily deadpan New Groun (the Native American; he tosses off the

line "We were never immigrants" without leaning on it).

Highlights include the story of a roach summit meeting, an odd tale of a precognizant blind girl, and an idyll of a Sunday block party told by a grocery bagger with pretensions to joining the clergy. On opening night Power came against the considerable inertia of Minnesota recalcitrance when he invoked audience participation, but to the audience's credit, a game attempt was made. It's hard not to be transfixed by Power's performance, which goes past in a blur of abstract interludes, torrents of verbiage, blasts of music, and a sense of a distinctive artist working through a new mode of expression and, perhaps, seeing if it is taking him where he wants to go.

Flow provides a glimpse of new directions that the theater might explore. On its own merits it's very good. In the context of teen programming it is a powerhouse, full of wit, honesty, and a loose-limbed tenacity. It also brings to mind the fact that, while theater has probably existed since the days of mastodon hunts, hip hop has been around for about a quarter of a century now. When rock was about the same age it coughed up punk and, well, prog, two very theatrical and self-conscious genres. Perhaps Will Power knows what time it is.