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Storytelling adapts to new 'Flow'

BY DOMINIC P. PAPTOLA
Theater Critic

When you go to see a Shakespeare play, it takes a few minutes to recalibrate your eyes and ears to the unfamiliar cadence and vocabulary of English spoken in a different way. That's the reaction most adults will probably have to "Flow," the first show for teens to be produced on the new Cargill Stage at the Children's Theatre Company.

Rapper/actor Will Power is versed in the language of the streets, an idiom that changes almost daily and one — like the language of any generation — that's designed simultaneously to include some and exclude others. Or, as Powers said to a mixed audience of more grown-ups than teenagers on opening night, "The few of you who know what I'm talkin' about know what I'm talkin' about."

But if the language of "Flow" hasn't hit the dictionaries yet, its message is an ancient one: We learn best through stories, and the most effective way to move those stories between generations is through telling them live.

In a highly kinetic performance, Power — assisted onstage by DJ Reborn — channels seven urban storytellers, from an old American Indian called New Groun to an up-from-the-projects teacher named

Jacoba to a young freestyler who goes by Swea P.

They share little but the neighborhood and an innate, burning need to testify to what's happening all around them, from drugs and street violence to the need for faith and the rift between the generations. Some of the stories are thinly veiled metaphors — Ole Cheesy riffs on a battle between warring crews of roaches — while others are startlingly immediate.

It's a rich song of comedy and tragedy, hope and despair, rendered in brilliant hues of darkness and light. Power moves like quicksilver among personas and between stories, engaging his characters in conversation and argument. What he's doing isn't gimmickry — it's a legit, ambitious and very skillful blending of traditional theater and contemporary culture.

Is it effective? That's hard to say for a 40-year-old white guy who doesn't know Foxy Brown from OutKast. Looking around on opening night, I can report audience members of all ages seemed nonplussed by the show and the setting. Younger audience members seemed uncomfortable seeing something this hip in the staid confines of a theater — especially

sitting next to their parents. And no matter how willing adults were to engage, most were getting left in the pop-culture dust.

I don't think that, in any sense, means "Flow" is a failure. I think it means what Power is trying to do is something not done much in theater. Breaking through sometimes requires breaking the rules. "Flow" is unlike just about anything you've seen before at a big, institutional theater. But it does what all the best theater does — it tells the stories of a community and encourages us to pass them along.

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What: "Flow"

When: through Nov. 20

Where: Cargill Stage, Children's Theatre Company, 2400 Third Ave. S., Minneapolis

Tickets: \$28-\$18; Call 612-874-0400

Capsule: CTC's teen programming launches with a Power-ful performance.