

Theater review: In hard urban landscape, stories 'Flow'

Rohan Preston, Star Tribune

November 7, 2005 at 5:07 PM

As Will Power bounces onstage to hip-hop music, his corn-rowed hair bouncing atop his 6-foot-plus frame and over his penetrating eyes, he suggests a focused, hard sports figure or a ready-to-rumble rap artist.

Yet he soon softens up, revealing a feminine side in fluid movements and sassy rhymes.

Power's surprising turns come in "Flow," his one-man, many-character show at the new Cargill Stage at the Children's Theatre Company in Minneapolis.

In skits and sketches, the San Francisco-bred performing artist depicts snappy, soft females among a battery of characters. It is an engaging, hip stage work.

Power wrote and composed music for the show, billed as "hip-hop theater," a new, still-evolving form that draws from hip-hop culture the way "Hair," "The Who's Tommy" and other musicals drew from rock-and-roll. And through its choreography,

physical and oral gesture, and a scratch-a-delic soundscore supplied by DJ Reborn, "Flow" is certainly kindred with the sound and culture that dominates our airwaves.

But beneath the urban stances and trappings, this show is about storytelling. In its own words, it aims to "sing the songs and right the wrongs."

As Power inhabits his characters, it is clear that he is reaching for something more timeless, something that connects the ancient Greeks to the griots of West Africa, rappers to shamans.

His characters reveal the performer's impressive personal range, not the range of humanity, although the use of rhyme sometimes takes away from the stories, making them chime a bit.

Still, through him, the storytellers in his show deliver with urgency, from the dancer who teaches through movement to the female teacher, from the freestyle rapper to the indigenous

man who notes the hypocrisy of descendants of immigrants who are anti-immigration.

One storyteller is a streetwise preacher (Preacha Man) who becomes such a threat to the established church that some church members do a drive-by on him.

Another storyteller delivers a fable about a roach named Fred who is supposed to have been dead a long time ago but who, with his kind, just keeps on going. (They have some problems, of course, including roach-on-roach crime.)

In fact, all these storytellers are dying off in "Flow," which means that there is a bit of empowerment at the end. Power encourages audience members, many of them teens, to rise to tell their own stories -- even if it's not delivered in rhyme or Power's zig-zag lyricism.

Rohan Preston • 612-673-4390