

Join the Hip Hop Revolution

A New Genre for a New Generation?

by Asabi (Stephanie Howard) and Steve Willis

Drawing on the raw energy of breakdancing and rapping, a new brand of theatre is emerging: hip hop theatre. From its genesis on urban streets, the hip hop sensibility first moved on to garner international attention in pop music and now is finding its way onto stages across the U.S. in innovative productions that are reinvigorating theatre for a new generation.

Today, you can attend hip hop theatre festivals annually in New York City, San Francisco, Chicago, and Washington, D.C., and the genre is finding its way into regional theatres and campus productions in various parts of the country – including the Southeast.

Two years ago, the National Black Theatre Festival, a weeklong biennial gathering held in Winston-Salem, NC, featured hip hop theatre for the first time. This was a major step for the festival – which is the largest gathering of African American theatre professionals in the country – and an important validation of hip hop theatre.

Daniel Banks, a director who works closely with New York City's Hip Hop Theater Festival and who teaches in the Depart-

ment of Drama at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, came to the SETC Convention in March to explain this genre and conduct workshops for theatre practitioners interested in learning more about it.

Defining Hip Hop Theatre

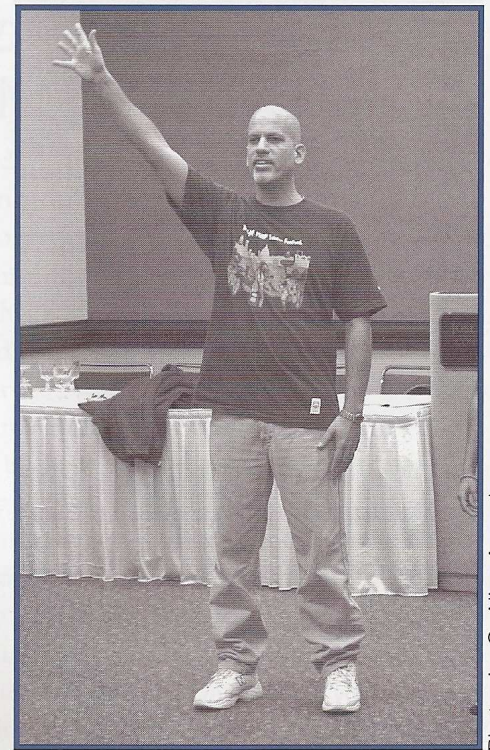
So what exactly is hip hop theatre? The question was asked at all of Banks' SETC workshops. A powerful reflection of today's youth culture, with its creative use of language and movement, hip hop theatre is a hybrid – a blend of hip hop music and theatre – that also harkens back to African storytelling. Beyond that, it's no simple task to define hip hop theatre because it is both avant-garde and nontraditional.

"Hip hop theatre is a ritual form of expression for the hip hop community," Banks said. "It is bringing to theatre the voices of today to tell stories of people whose faces are not often seen on the stages of mainstream theatres or in their audiences."

Often productions are categorized as hip hop theatre because they include one or more of the four main elements of hip hop:

- ◆ breakdancing;
- ◆ rapping (or MC'ing);
- ◆ graffiti; and
- ◆ DJ'ing.

Well-known rapper and hip hop artist



Photos by G. Allen Aycock

Daniel Banks leads SETC members in a participatory workshop to help them understand the components and movements of hip hop theatre.

KRS-ONE – whose name is an acronym for Knowledge Reigns Supreme Over Nearly Everyone – has suggested five additional elements:

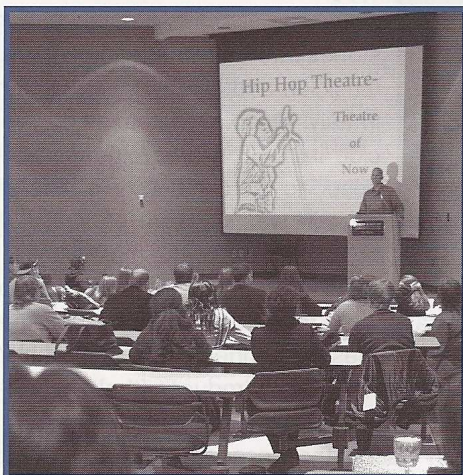
- ◆ beatboxing;
- ◆ street fashion;
- ◆ street entrepreneurialism;
- ◆ street knowledge; and
- ◆ street language.

The Sound of Hip Hop Theatre

Hip hop theatre incorporates a cryptic and sometimes rhythmic African American vernacular – which also may be referred to as slang or Ebonics – and movement in performances that are often participatory and nonlinear.

In a sense, hip hop theatre is an extension of African and African American oral traditions, which depend on the power of the spoken word, a community-centered nature, audience participation and the presence of drums manifested through the rhythmic sounds of the human voice.

The vocality of the hip hop culture, therefore, bears resemblance to the protest songs, jokes and aphorisms of the early African American slave communities. Its



Daniel Banks presents a Thursday seminar at the SETC Convention on the hip hop theatre phenomenon.

vibrant call-and-response interaction is reminiscent of worship services at traditional black churches. In a more contemporary sense, the improvised rhymes used by many hip hop artists recall jazz and blues traditions.

Hip hop theatre is geared toward providing the audience with an experience more like a spiritual exorcism than an emotional release. The playwright focuses on cultural and social messages rather than artistic form or style, allowing ritualistic and philosophical ideas to dominate the play.

Examples of Topics and Plays

In terms of theme and subject matter, hip hop theatre often focuses on political and social justice topics and issues related to resistance, revolt and revolution.

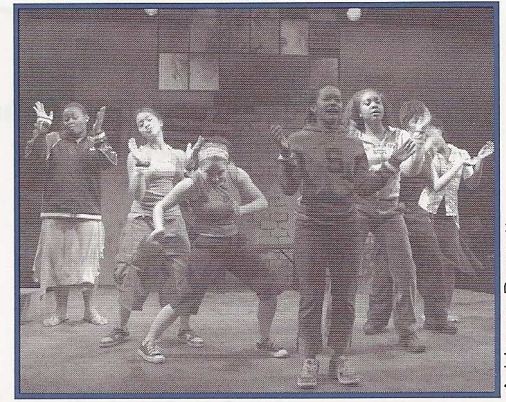
For instance, *Destiny Manifested*, written by James Gillard and winner of the Best Audience Award given by the 2003 Downtown Urban Theater Festival in New York City, is a hip hop drama that focuses on the struggle of M.C. Manifest, who after two years of imprisonment returns to the streets as a changed man. He drops lyrics resembling scriptures and anecdotes instead of words reflecting the gangster lifestyle. Yet his chief adversary aims to expose him as a fake. Consequently, the issues of responsibility, morality and truth are explored.

Another hip hop production, *Universes*'

Slanguage, which opened Actors Theatre of Louisville's Discovery Series in 2004, fuses the dynamics of poetry, jazz, blues, rap, gospel and Spanish bolero through diverse characters. *Universes*, a New York-based theatre company, is composed of Gamal Abdel Chasten, Lemon, Flaco Navaja, Mildred Ruiz and Steven Sapp. The members describe their artistry as "the creation of five collaborating universes in one very real world."

Olive, conceived by Raphael Xavier, is a hip hop production that expresses its message through various forms of breakdancing (i.e., breakin', popping and locking) with sound, music and video. A professional dancer from Wilmington, DE, Xavier got interested in hip hop theatre after performing in a hip hop version of *Romeo and Juliet* with Rennie Harris Puremovement in North Philadelphia, PA.

Kamilah Forbes, the artistic director of the New York City Hip Hop Theater Festival and the founding artistic director of Hip Hop Theatre Junction, a New York-based performing company, successfully gave vision to hip hop theatre with her premiere of *Rhyme Deferred* in 1999. The play is structured within the biblical frame of the Cain and Abel story and shows the struggle between two brothers who are rappers from opposite extremes: one, Suga Kain, represents commercial rap, while the other,



Adrienne Barnett

Students from the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University created this hip hop theatre production, Re/Rites, which was presented in April and directed by Daniel Banks.

What's Being Said about Hip Hop Theatre

'So if hip-hop is now at the center of global culture, how long will it take our theatres to catch up?'

- Eisa Davis, actress/playwright/poet/musician

'It's hip. It's what's happening right now. It's hop – which means, essentially, it's dance, it's movement...the movement of the dance of now.'

- Chadwick Boseman, playwright, *Hieroglyphic Graffiti*, which was performed at National Black Theatre Festival and New York Hip Hop Theater Festival

'Hip hop is inherently political; the language is political. It uses language as a weapon – not a weapon to violate or a weapon to offend, but a weapon that pushes the envelope, that provokes people, makes people think.'

- Todd Boyd, Professor, School of Cinema and Television, Department of Critical Studies, University of Southern California, and author of *Am I Black Enough For You: Popular Culture from the 'Hood and Beyond*

'I see hip hop culture as the new American mainstream. We don't change for you; you adapt to us.'

- Russell Simmons, often called "the godfather of hip hop," and the author of *Life and Def: Sex, Drugs, Money and God*

Hip Hop Traces Roots to 1970s Bronx Streets

Hip hop theatre evolved from hip hop music. Although rap and hip hop are often used interchangeably, the hip hop culture, from which rap emerged, is a lifestyle characterized by its own language, dress, music and philosophy.

The roots of hip hop are often traced directly to the African American community, but Daniel Banks says hip hop has been multi-ethnic since its beginnings in the early 1970s on the streets of the Bronx. A distinct culture emerged as urbanized youth united and, as a way to identify themselves with unions, formed gangs – often referred to as "crews," or "posses" – with whom they found support, identity and family.

Tricia Rose, author of *Black Noise*, traces the hip hop phenomenon to the creativity and survival efforts of a young generation that was drastically affected and limited by the post-industrial period. With limited opportunities to participate in arts educational programs, limited arts exposure and restricted job opportunities, they used easily acquired material, natural space within their communities and their physical bodies to express, entertain and empower themselves. Their innovations manifested as rapping, graffiti, and breakdancing – and ultimately became known as hip hop.

Gabe, represents "underground" rap. Inevitably, Suga Kain steals lyrics from his brother and wins a rap competition. In the end, poetic justice occurs and Suga Kain is challenged to face his plight.

Hip Hop Theatre Happenings

Major hip hop events that are upcoming around the country include:

- ◆ New York City Hip Hop Theater Festival, June 11-18, 2005

- ◆ Washington, DC Hip Hop Theater Festival, July 9-16, 2005

- ◆ Chicago Hip Hop Theater Festival, September 21-24, 2005.

(Visit www.hiphoptheaterfest.com/schedule.html for details on the above festivals.)

In addition, hip hop productions are increasingly being staged in schools and theatres as well – and winning acclaim. For example, a college hip hop production was featured in this year's national Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival in Washington, DC. The University of

Arkansas at Pine Bluff (UAPB) represented Region IV at the national festival this year with *The Hip Hop Project*, written by UAPB students. Also, as mentioned earlier, the National Black Theatre Festival showcased four hip hop productions, including *The Hip Hop Nightmares of Jujube Brown*, directed by Jennifer L. Nelson of the African Continuum Theater Company, and *Rhyme Deferred*, at its biennial gathering two years ago.

Drawing Young People to Theatre

When Banks asked participants at his Saturday workshop why they had come, many said they were teachers who saw hip hop theatre as a way to reach more students.

Indeed, hip hop theatre challenges theatre teachers and professionals to look at the stage in a new light. In this age of multi-tasking and cinema multiplexes, if theatre is to continue to thrive, we must diversify and create more multigenerational audiences.

As education activist, songwriter and

Hip Hop Resources

The New HNIC, by Todd Boyd. New York: NYU, 2003

Hip Hop America, by Nelson George. New York: Penguin, 1998

Black Noise, by Tricia Rose. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan, 1994

Temple of Hip Hop/KRS-One: <http://templeofhiphop.org>

Will Power: <http://www.npnweb.org/ww/luminatingworks.html>

Artists Network of Refuse and Resist!: <http://www.artistsnetwork.org/index.html>

playwright Rose Sanders has said: "Without hip hop, I don't see how we can connect with today's youth." ■

Asabi (Stephanie Howard) and Steve Willis are both assistant professors of speech and theatre at Bennett College for Women in Greensboro, NC.

Hip Hop Attracts Students, Audiences and Media Attention at Bennett College

Why would a small liberal arts college in Greensboro, NC present a season of hip hop theatre?

At Bennett College for Women, a private, historically black college where both of us teach theatre, we saw hip hop as a way to increase student interest in our program. Additionally, it seemed a good fit because of hip hop's roots in social reform. Bennett has a long history of encouraging student participation in social justice causes. During the 1960s, Bennett students actively participated in the well-known "sit-in movement" in downtown Greensboro. When this participation resulted in their arrests, Willa B. Player, Bennett's president at the time, generously supported her students, making certain that class assignments were brought to their jail cells along with personal toiletries and clean clothing.

We subtitled our 2004-2005 season, "A Stage of Spoken Word - Rocking Hip Hop Rhythms." Our first production was *Bellespeak: An Evening of Spoken Word*, directed by Steve Willis, which was presented in September. The show featured original student poetry performed *Def Po-*

etry Jam-style, using minimal scenery and stage effects.

In February 2005, we presented *Reaching for God With Dirty Hands and Tainted Blood*, a new hip hop drama written and directed by Asabi, which blended rap, poetry, music and dance to tell the story of a young African American woman's struggle to come to terms with her personal faith.

Our sense that this type of theatre would engage student performers and audiences has proven correct. The number of students auditioning for productions has increased, and student attendance at performances is at an



Bennett College student Kimberly Bailey and guest artist Lakeetha Blakeney appear in a scene from *The Bennett Players' Reaching for God With Dirty Hands and Tainted Blood*.

Reggie Cheston

all-time high.

Kimberly Bailey, a freshman theatre major from Durham, NC who appeared in *Reaching for God...*, says that being introduced to performances with hip hop themes "enlightened my spirit. Not only did I enjoy the performance more, but I understood better some of the aspects that hip hop deals with, such as violence, struggle, weaknesses, strengths and accomplishments."

In addition to promoting student interest, the hip hop themes also have generated media coverage, including two feature articles about The Bennett Players in the local newspaper during the past six months.

This summer, through a collaborative effort with Bennett's Global Studies program, we will travel with a group of theatre students to the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, South Africa where we will perform a new production, *Soul Rhythm/Sistahs' Voices*, which features excerpts from this season's hip hop plays.

We believe this season of hip hop has been a turning point for the theatre program at Bennett.

- Asabi (Stephanie Howard) and Steve Willis