
"HIP HOP THEATRE: THE VOICE OF NOW"

*Daniel Banks, Ph.D., Department of Drama,
Tisch School of the Arts, New York University*

Hip Hop Theatre is an outgrowth of African Orature. Orature is a term that is used to foreground the unique skills and production of the oral artist and to give this work and process equal weight and legitimacy next to written texts. Orature is dedicated to preserving the history and culture of individual peoples through performance. This art includes storytelling, proverbs, riddles, chants, call-and-response, songs, gesture/mime, as well as other simultaneous presentational techniques. In Orature, important cultural information is passed down from generation to generation. It is a living, spontaneous, and responsive art and the oral artist relies on both memory and improvisation. As Alfred Lord writes in his book on folklore and the oral tradition, *The Singer of Tales*: "For the oral poet, the moment of composition is the performance [...] An oral poem is not composed for but in performance."¹ Audience participation in the creation of the event is key to this type of performance. Orature, thus, has its own logic systems, literacies, and skill sets that are employed to keep cultures alive.

The emcee (or MC) in Hip Hop

culture functions in much the same way as the djeli (the Mande word for oral artist) or griot (a more commonly known term in the west). The emcee, as opposed to many – but not all – commercial rappers, also tells of the community's issues, its values, its ancestors, its heroes and heroines, its triumphs, and its struggles. And the emcee relies on the audience's witnessing and critical eye to perform at her peak. The more acquainted the listener becomes with the history and the art of the emcee, the more apparent a direct lineage with ancient and contemporary djelis and bards will be. Doesn't this remind you of the storyteller of Homer's *Odyssey*? I can also show you an ancient African text, the *Ozidi Saga*, an epic tale belonging to the Ijo people in Nigeria performed by a solo actor in a seven-night festival of story-telling that is similar to the *Odyssey* in its narrative style, mythology, and playful oratory. Such oral artists are found in every culture in the world. Therefore, let us first recognize what is familiar and universal about Hip Hop – people like to hear their own stories told, hear familiar melodies and rhythms, and see themselves or people like them on stage. Hip Hop Theatre does

just this: it puts the culture of Hip Hop – with its language, music, history, and strength – on stage.

Consider the opening monologue to Will Power's *The Seven*, a Hip Hop adaptation of Aeschylus's *Seven Against Thebes*. The DJ, who, in this play, serves the role as the narrator, speaks directly to the audience:

*And hey, don't be afraid
If you've never heard a' B.I.G.
And now don't be afraid
If you ain't heard a' Sophocles
'Cause we welcome all y'all here to
this hip hop Greek tragedy, oh yeah
Now let me tell ya who I be
The one who make Shakespeare
jam with James Brown
Put Snoopy and Snoop in
the same dog pound
I can transform a scratch
Into more than an itch
There are no two worlds
That I can't mix
I am
The DJ.²*

As in any ritual theatre, Hip Hop Theatre instructs – it instructs people who consider themselves part of the global, activist, youth culture of Hip Hop as to their shared history and values. And Hip Hop Theatre also invites people from outside the culture to understand something deeper about Hip Hop, the struggle of youth from historically marginalized

populations, and their victories in expressing themselves through the creative elements of Hip Hop culture –DJ'ing, rapping, aerosol art, beatboxing, and dancing. Viewed through this lens, it becomes apparent that, in Hip Hop, the aesthetics have political valences as forms of expression. In addition, as evidenced by Power's text, Hip Hop is deeply intertextual, drawing on the many traditions of art and self-expression that come before it, from the religious and cosmological worlds of the Bible, Yoruba, ancient Khemet, and other African traditions, to European classics, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and '70s.

Similarly, in a play like *Low*, by the Hip Hop recording artist and internationally known poet and activist Rha Goddess, the audience hears the story of a young homeless woman who is deemed by society to be mentally ill. However, *Low* tells her own story through poetry, autobiography, and rap – a story of physical and emotional abuse at home, racism in school, sexual exploitation, and a sister's attempts at upward class mobility that leaves *Low* behind. And the spectator can begin to understand the tragedy – how this unique and talented human being has fallen – at a particular moment in our country's social and economic history. *Low*

(short for Lowquesha) has a voice, an individual story, and is brought back from the margins into the center of the audience's attention and consciousness. When this play premiered at the Humana Festival at the Actors Theatre of Louisville, I am told, tears flowed and people stayed in their seats long after the play was over. In Aristotle's notion of catharsis in his book *The Poetics*, the unique structure of a tragedy is that the audience is purged of pity and fear. Clearly the audience witnessing Low's journey has the opportunity to release any misunderstanding of who this young, homeless rapper is and to appreciate her struggle and her humanity – hence the ability of theatre to make a story universal as the audience experiences its being told.

The scholar who transcribed *The Ozidi Saga*, J. P. Clark-Bekedere-

mo, describes the oral artist as a “composer-poet-performer, all rolled up into one person, working in the multiple mediums of words, music, dance, drama, and ritual.” He adds that the “nearest European form to this” might be the Wagnerian Opera.³ An examination of Hip Hop Theatre reveals how, throughout time and across cultures, as human beings we have always tried to know ourselves better. We do this through many different practices, not the least of which is theatre. Hip Hop Theatre builds on orality (from multiple cultures), epic, mythology, poetry, opera, tragedy, musicals, Church, and ritual and, simultaneously, re-invents them. It is the voice of now – today's radical and avant-garde theatre, as well as the ritual theatre of a worldwide culture of youth solidarity and activism.

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1. Lord, Albert B. 2000. *The Singer of Tales*. Cambridge: Harvard University. 13. (Italics in original).
 2. Power, Will. 2006. *The Seven*.
 3. Clark-Bekederemo, J.P. 1977. *The Ozidi Saga*. Washington, D.C.: Howard University.

Daniel Banks



*Daniel Banks, Ph.D. (African American drama and Hip-Hop) is full-time faculty in the Department of Undergraduate Drama, Tisch School of the Arts, New York University and has directed theatre extensively both in the US and abroad. He is the Founder and Director of the Hip Hop Theater Initiative, is a past Chair of the Black Theater Association Focus Group (Association for Theatre in Higher Education), and recipient of the National Endowment for the Arts / Theater Communications Group Career Development Program for Directors. He has edited *Across All Lines*, a critical anthology of Hip Hop Theater plays, for University of Michigan Press (due out Fall 2009). He holds a B. A. in English and Drama from Harvard College and an M.A. and Ph.D. in Performance Studies from New York University.*

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