HIP HOP THEATRE INITIATIVE

Department of Undergraduate Drama
Tisch School of the Arts, New York University

3-YEAR REPORT

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METHODOLOGY

Overview:
In the Spring of 2004, three BFA students in the Department of Undergraduate Drama at the Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, asked Daniel Banks, a free-lance theatre director and faculty member in the Department, to help them advance the work they had been doing independently, outside of their training studios and academic classrooms. As the group of students and curricular activities grew, the Hip Hop Theatre Initiative was born – a response to student desire to marry their professional acting training with their love for and commitment to Hip Hop culture.

Under the leadership of Daniel Banks, the Hip Hop Theatre Initiative (HHTI) has produced:

- a curriculum of six courses
- a series of workshops and lecture demonstrations
- a full-length devised Hip Hop Theatre performance

In addition, over the past three years, the HHTI has led workshops and performed in various communities, from Pittsburgh, where it received a commendation from the City Council, to Buduburam, the former U.N.H.C.R. Liberian refugee camp in Ghana.

Mission:
To integrate the rigor of professional theatre training with the performance elements and politics of the youth-driven, grassroots, activist culture of Hip Hop; to train students in critical thinking and theatre making, leading arts workshops in communities, and facilitating dialogue about the social issues pertaining to Hip Hop.

Curriculum:
UG Drama:
Topics in Performance Studies: Hip Hop Theatre Routes and Branches
Traces the development of Hip Hop Theatre and its relationship to the cultural

production of Hip Hop culture. Begins with African Orature, moves through the Beat poets, Last Poets, Gil Scott Heron, choreopoems, and the Black Arts movement up to the emergence of Hip Hop culture in the early 1970s, ultimately focusing on the current innovators of the form.

Devised Theatre Practicum: Hip Hop and Spoken Word Theatre

Focuses on the interplay between the foundational aesthetics of Hip Hop culture and the process of creating theatre from a physical and improvisational methodology. Guest artists train students in the individual performance "elements" of Hip Hop (e.g., DJ'ing, MC'ing, dancing, and beatboxing).

Theatrical Genres: Ritual Theatre

A seminar in research methodology, focusing on world traditions of ritual theatre. Was offered in preparation for the Spring 2005 Drama Mainstage production, *Re/Rites*, a "ritual" performance by and for the NYU community, drawing on Hip Hop and spoken word aesthetics, politics, and values.

NYU in Ghana Program:

Hip Hop Theatre and Hip Life: Routes and Branches

Traces the dual histories of Hip Hop in the U.S. and Hip Life in Ghana. By looking at the history of Highlife, Concert Party, and other Ghanaian music and theatre forms, participants in this course are able to consider what is African about Hip Hop and how Hip Life Theatre can help give youth a voice in Ghana.

Hip Hop Theatre, Hip Life, and Community Action

Similar to the Devised Theatre Practicum, but with an emphasis on learning to teach the work to various target groups and facilitating dialogue around the issues the work addresses and, ultimately, raises in community settings.

Faculty Resource Network:
Sampling Hip Hop – Popular Culture as a Pedagogical Tool (co-facilitated with Prof. Kyra Gaunt, Music Dept).

A week-long workshop with professors from around the country focusing on strategies for incorporating Hip Hop materials into college curricula from various disciplines. A focus on the values and methodologies embodied in Hip Hop culture in order to think about alternative pedagogical models and contexts.

Performances:
Re/Rites: A Devised Theatre Piece Celebrating Hip Hop Culture (Drama Mainstage, Spring 2005)

Re/Rites was also performed at the Pittsburgh Project where it received a Commendation from the Pittsburgh City Council (June 2005)

Selections of *Re/Rites* were performed at the Lower East Side Festival of the Arts (June 2005)

Kofi's Story: From Broadway to Accraway, written and directed by HHTI for the Children's Christian Storehouse, Accra, Ghana. Efua T. Sutherland Drama Studio, University of Ghana, Legon (April 2006)

Community Celebration, Buduburam, former UNHCR Liberian Refugee Camp, Ghana (May 2006)

Dreamscape by Rickerby Hinds, Staged Reading, Dean's Conference Room, HHTI and the Collective (September 2006)

WeDaPeoples Cabaret, Harlem Stages/Aaron Davis Hall, Curated by Sekou Sundiata, November 4, 2006

Related Events:
Blurring Shine by Zakiyyah Alexander, staged reading, New Dramatists, with Drama student, Archie Ekong, in the lead role (Fall 2004)

Deep Azure by Chadwick Boseman, workshop, Hip Hop Theatre Festival, Washington, DC, performed at the Folger Shakespeare Library. With the participation of Drama students Archie Ekong (Actor) and Utkarsh Ambudkar (Assistant Director) (Summer 2004).

Hip Hop Theatre Festival, NYC: Numerous Drama students served as production assistants, assistant directors, interns, and volunteers. Rehearsals, workshops, and panels held at TSOA (Summers 2003-4).

ENGAGEMENT

Teaching/Community Action
Pittsburgh Project, one-week workshop in self-scripting, poetry, and devised theatre for 20 participants, ages 10-60 (June 2005)

Workshop for students at NYU's Day of Community (Fall 2005)

Weekly workshops in writing, dance, singing, and beatboxing at Children's Christian Storehouse, Accra, Ghana (Spring 2006)

Six Monday workshops at Dominion Christian Academy, Buduburam, former UNHCR Liberian Refugee Camp, Ghana, to create HIV/AIDS prevention educational drama. Performed at Community Celebration, May 2006.

R.E.S.P.E.C.T. Ghana, six Friday workshops for 30 teen and young adult participants from 10 schools, Buduburam, former UNHCR Liberian Refugee Camp, Ghana. Simultaneous art activities with local children (approximately 50).

"We the Griot" Workshops given at: West Virginia State University, University of Florida (Gainesville), and the Southeastern Theatre Conference (with student participation); and Rhodes College, Western Michigan University, Wayne State (Black Theatre Association), and the Naropa Institute.

"Hip Hop Theatre: Theatre of Now" lecture/demonstrations presented at: West Virginia State University, University of Florida (Gainesville), the Southeastern Theatre Conference, Bennett College/North Carolina A&T and Disney Theatricals (with student participation); and Rhodes College, Western Michigan University, Wayne State (Black Theatre Association), and the Naropa Institute.

Upcoming presentation (with student participation): SUNY Stony Brook, Civic Performance Conference

Other presentations and panels (Daniel Banks):
International Peace Research Association Conference, Calgary 2006.

Association of Theatre in Higher Education, San Francisco 2005.
Hip Hop Theatre Festival (New York 2003-4 and Washington, D.C. 2004)
International Symposium, National Black Theatre Festival, Winston-Salem 2003
Black Theatre Network (San Francisco 2002 and Kent State 2004).

Beyond NYU:
On a recent State Department sponsored, 6-week, Culture Connect Envoy program in South Africa, Daniel Banks led workshops at the Market Theatre Lab (Johannesburg) and initiated a Hip Hop Theatre Lab in Johannesburg with local theatre actors and Hip Hop artists. Using the HHTI methodology, he trained six of these artists to help him lead a workshop at the Sibikwa Community Theatre (East Rand). In Cape Town, he led workshops in the Langa and Atlantis Townships. In Langa, he worked with a group from Hip Hop Collected, a group in residence at Artscape, who are currently using HHTI workshop methods and exercises to continue their work.

Response from Participants:

"We were re-introduced to ourselves"
- Moshe Maboe (B'boy from Jo'burg, on helping to facilitate workshop with young people at Sibikwa, East Rand)

"I want to thank you for all that you have done out here for me and the greater community/society!!! Your creative injection has already benefited."
- Bradley Williams (a.k.a. Bionic, Producer of Hip Hop and the Hip Hop Theatre), JBG

"I feel really blessed that you came through when you did cause in that week I had to do a lot of growing and I just had so many realizations (as well as decisions) to make. But now I can say the dream is coming together slowly but surely."
- Bonolo Imbawula, HHT Lab, JBG

"It would be so wonderful to have another of those workshops in the near future as it is much needed. Working with so many artists who are only used to grabbing the microphone and rhyming is challenging because we are being granted the theatre space to work in which requires so much more

development."

- Monishia Schoeman, Hip Hop Connected, Cape Town

"It was motivating, inspiring and very much uplifting...opening receptors and just absorbing the positive radiation in the room was like having an outer body experience. Trust that we shall most definitely implement the knowledge acquired from the workshop and pass it on to others. I shall definitely stay in contact with you as I feel there's so much more to learn."

- Jo-anne Peteresen, Hip Hop Connected, Cape Town

Sustainability:

A group of NYU students have formed the 5th Project Collective Company. Company members taught in local educational programs in New York City, Summer 2006. They are also working on two productions, *Quietus* and a revision of *Re/Rites*, for production 2006-7. In Ghana, they performed weekly at Jazz Tone, hosting an open mic for the community. In New York they have performed at such venues as the Knitting Factory and Sin Sin.

A University of Ghana student, Marcia Obei, has founded a Hip Life Theatre group as part of her National Service.

Bennett College now has a yearly poetry/Hip Hop Theatre piece, has published an anthology, and has recorded a CD.

Will Power has returned to University of Western Michigan to devise a play with the students.

The students and faculty liaison at West Virginia State University are in the process of forming a Hip Hop Theatre Collective and programming on-going campus Hip Hop educational events.

Community Connections and Collaborations:
New York City Hip Hop Theatre Festival
Scratch DJ Academy
Downtown Urban Arts Festival
Aaron Davis Hall/Harlem Stages
California State University, San Bernardino
University of California, Riverside
Rha Goddess, Divine Dime Entertainment/We Got Issues
Danny Hoch
DJ Center
Kwikstep/Full Circle Productions
Will Power
reg e. gaines
Marc Bamuthi Joseph/Youthspeaks
Steven Sapp/Universes & Henry Street Settlement
Kamilah Forbes/Def Poetry Jam
Dialogue Dramatic Reading Series, PS 122
Baba Israel/Playback New York
Project 2050
New Jersey Performing Arts Center: Planet Hip Hop
Hip Hop Congress
Tony Tone (Cold Crush Brothers)
King Uprock (Dynasty Rockers)
Hip Hop Association

HHTI Outreach:
Students who have completed the HHTI Curriculum have been hired to teach for such New York City institutions and programs as:

Dorothy Day High School Program
Head Start Pre-School
Go School (Grace Churches)
Brooklyn Arts Council
PS 25 (Oasis Program)
Walton High School (Opening Acts Program)

Clara Barton School (Opening Acts Program)
Gompers High School (Opening Acts Program)
Kipp Academy

SUPPORT

Funding/In-Kind Donations:
Vestax/Korg
Scratch DJ Academy
Humanities Council, NYU
University Research Challenge Fund, NYU
U.S. Embassy, Ghana
Department of Community Service, NYU
Enyce
Triple 5 Soul

Press and Publicity:
Coverage about HHTI and Daniel Banks on Hip Hop and Hip Hop Theatre in such publications and media as:

American Theatre Magazine
BET News
CBS News
MTV U
Voices of America (All-Asian Cable Television)
Netwerk CS (Netherlands)
Southern Theatre
The Charleston Gazette (WV)
The Star (Johannesburg)

THE FUTURE

Upcoming events:

- Presentation of HHTI work and methodology at Civic Performances Conference, SUNY Stony Brook, November 2006
- Presentation at "Dreaming the Americas," No Passport Conference, Segal Center, CUNY, February 2007
- Production of *Dreamscape* by Rickerby Hinds, premiering at the Cyrano Theatre, Anchorage, AL, June 2007, directed by Daniel Banks with Utkarsh Ambudkar and Eboni Hogan, HHTI alums.

Upcoming Publications about Hip Hop Theatre and the work of the HHTI:
Across All Lines, an anthology of Hip Hop Theatre pieces with critical commentary by Daniel Banks, University of Michigan Press.

"The Power of Youth: Hip Hop Theatre in Ghana and South Africa," chapter for Co-Existence International (Brandeis University) anthology on Theatre and Peace-making.

Future Steps:

- Training a second group of actor/activists (Current proposal for a Hip Hop Theatre Studio or Mini-Studio in Department of Drama, Spring 2008).
- Continuing to develop the pedagogical and dialogue facilitation aspects of the curriculum – training youth to lead youth.
- Initiating and facilitating pedagogical discussions and inquiry with faculty from other institutions.

SUPPORTING MATERIALS

1. "Join the Hip Hop Revolution" by Asabi (Stephanie Howard) and Steve Willis, *Southern Theatre, Summer 2005 (XLVI:3)*:26-8.

2. "Hip Hop Workshop Battles Stereotypes" by Laura Allen, *The Charleston Gazette*, Charleston, WV, September 15-21, 2005:12D.

3. Letter of support from Julia Ewing, Chair, Department of Theatre, Rhodes College, Memphis, TN. June 9, 2004.

4. Picture of HHTI students, Brittany Manor, Jacquita Ta'le, Christina Ghubril, Archie Ekong, Eboni Hogan, and Prentice Onayemi receiving Pittsburgh Council Proclamation honoring *Re/Rites* and the work done by HHTI at the Pittsburgh Project, June 2005.

5. "Hip Hop Theatrical" by Adrienne Sichel, *The Star* (Johannesburg) June 20, 2006.

6. "Most Influential Professor" Award from the Organization of Black Women at NYU for work done on *Re/Rites* and with the HHTI curriculum, February 2005.

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 Department 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.

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

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.

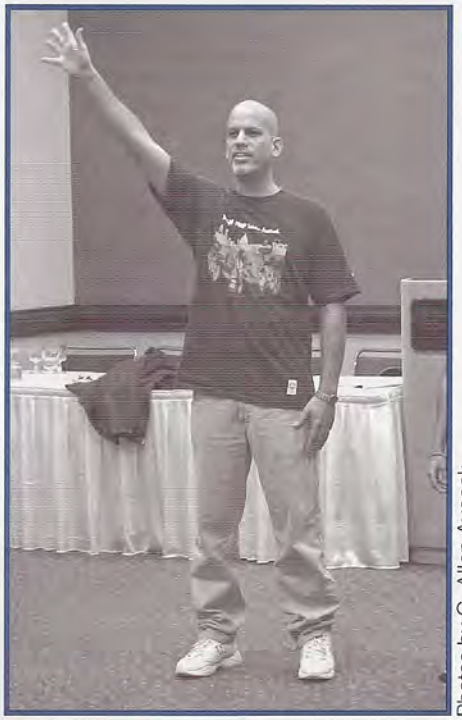
"Hip hop theatre is a ritual form of expression for the hip hop community," Banks said. "It is bringing to theatre the voices of today to tell stories of people whose faces are not often seen on the stages of mainstream theatres or in their audiences."

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 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.



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.

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

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,

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.

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*

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

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/wtw/luminatingworks.html

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

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 Poetry 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.

Reggie Cheston

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.

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 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

EVENT

Hip-hop workshop battles stereotypes

Mix with theater speaks to students, professor says

"It's like a jungle sometimes/it makes me wonder/how I keep from goin' under."
— Grandmaster Flash, "The Message" (1982)

By Laura Allen
For the Gazette

DIG A little deeper into the lyrics of "The Message" by Grandmaster Flash and the real-life drama that has always existed in hip-hop culture is apparent.

It's a social commentary, written almost as a lamentation about the cocaine craze that swept through the early '80s Bronx ghettoes. Nowhere in this track are there derogatory references to women or calls to violence. It's about a guy trying to deal with being poor and black: two things which recent events prove remain major issues in this country.

Yet it's the stereotypical aspects of hip-hop that many latch onto as representing an entire spectrum of music and culture.

That is all the more reason events like "48 Hours of Hip-Hop Theater" on Saturday at West Virginia State University in Institute are needed, says Daniel Banks. The New York University drama professor will present the workshop from 1 to 4:30 p.m. at the Davis Fine Arts auditorium on the campus.

"There are many misconceptions about hip-hop due to media exposure and that creates unnecessary tension around communication between generations," Banks said, in an e-mail interview from San Francisco earlier this week.

"Hip-hop is a culture that is deeply connected to performance, so it's a small step to use the elements of hip-hop to make theater," says Daniel Banks, who leads Saturday's workshop in Institute.

"Hip-hop is a culture that is deeply connected to performance, so it's a small step to use the elements of hip-hop to make theater."

For WVSU drama professor Susan Marrash-Minnerly, the workshop brings to campus an event that will speak to many of her students. Acknowledging the immense popularity of hip-hop and combining it with theater provides students with a more contemporary experience. "This is something that is more relevant to my students' everyday lives," she said. "I felt that it was important that they realize this is out there."

Workshops like this one also help to eliminate the stereotypes around hip-hop, giving it the legitimacy that she hopes will find a place on campus permanently. "My goal is for State to one day have a small hip-hop theater ensemble on campus," she said.

IF YOU GO

"48 hours of Hip-Hop Theater" is a workshop and presentation featuring present and former students of Daniel Banks in performance from 1 to 4:30 p.m. Saturday in the auditorium of the Davis Fine Arts Center auditorium at West Virginia State University in Institute. Contact Susan Marrash-Minnerly at 766-5110.

"My goal is for State to one day have a small hip-hop theater ensemble on campus."

Susan Marrash-Minnerly,
drama professor,
West Virginia State University

For Banks, the workshop is about understanding and awareness.

"There are two or three generations of trained actors who also have emceeing, beatboxing, and breaking skills that are fundamental to who they are," he said. " 'Hip-Hop Theater' presents these as legitimate forms of expression, storytelling and theater making."

Laura Allen hosts and produces "In Touch with the Arts" and "Music in the Afternoon" for West Virginia Public Radio. E-mail her at leh668@hotmail.com.

NEXT WEEK

The Friends of Old Time Music and Dance Fall Fest kicks off the fall season with constant music, dance, workshops and food in the hills of West Virginia. Next week's gazz profiles this communal, cultural happening, which this year has been represented in all its richness by a signature artwork (above) by Charly Jupiter Hamilton.

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Kevin Kuhlke
Chair, Department of Undergraduate Drama
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June 9, 2004

Dr. Kuhlke,

In April 2004 the Theatre Department at Rhodes College sponsored a weekend devoted to Hip Hop Theatre. The event was focused around a lecture/demonstration and workshops lead by Daniel Banks. We were the recipients of an extraordinary experience. The entire weekend was impressive, exciting, and for our students incredibly eye opening. Rhodes College may be extremely competitive academically but our students are rather naïve when it comes to the arts. Part of my mission, while serving as Chair of Theatre, is to expose our students to the diversity available within theatrical and dramatic forms. Daniel Banks' visit and guidance have been invaluable in striving towards that goal.

I was introduced to Daniel at ATHE in Washington, D.C. His easy manner with people and his determination to open the door for people of color in higher education immediately made him a number one choice on my guest speaker list. I was not disappointed. When I first contacted Daniel about coming to Rhodes we discussed several topics, deciding on Hip Hop Theatre. Daniel took it from there. He lined up Will Power and took care of all the arrangements. Daniel and Will came to Memphis to introduce our majors and non-majors to the world of Hip Hop Theatre and changed the perspective of many students. One of our Political Science majors expressed the general opinion of our students:

> " I had no idea what I was going to see, hear or learn. I was dubious to say the least. Hip Hop is not of my world or culture. Why were we hosting a weekend celebrating something I do not consider an art form? It took Prof. Banks and Will Power 15 seconds to show me how uninformed I am. At the end of the lecture I was impressed. I had no idea of the social commentary found in the words and movement, I was completely ignorant as to the history."

This young man was not the only individual to express praise. Words like "exciting", "informative" and "eye opening" appeared in almost every review handed to me at the end of the year. Several students, who had tried every trick in the book to be excused from the weekend, were not only apologetic but enthralled by the entire event.

Why? Daniel Banks. His lecture was informative, clear and concise. He was not stuffy, condescending or judgmental. He interspersed his lecture with Will performing excerpts from" Flow". He created an event! He had the living actor there to demonstrate and underscore his comments. Another interesting element, Daniel used quotes from his own students giving a sense of connection to our students. It was very successful!

At one point during the lecture Daniel tried to get our students to participate in a call and response section. It is important to note that the majority of Daniel's audience was white, self-conscious, and in awe of the world opening up before them. Participating in such an exchange was still too foreign. Daniel never let on he was disappointed in the audience's inability to participate. He offered more background as to its purpose and guided the students into a deeper understanding of the value of call and response.

During the all day workshop I was impressed with Daniel and Will's ability. They carefully and skillfully guided participants through exercises devised to allow a new form to come through the performers' bodies and minds. Again, it was exciting and encouraging. It is obvious Daniel is an excellent teacher. He knew how to push without abusing as well as nurture without indulging. If I could afford it I would have Daniel as a regular speaker and guest artist! Thank you so much for sharing him!

Sincerely,

Julia Ewing
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Pittsburgh City Council Proclamation Honoring *Re/Rites* and NYU Hip Hop Theatre Initiative, June 7, 2005

Hip-hop theatrical

Taking the aesthetics and politics of hip-hop culture to the world is on this theatre director's mind, writes **Adrienne Sichel**

Daniel Banks has the gift of the gab when it comes to initiating significant cultural conversations.

The New York University academic and his baseball cap have become a familiar sight in the Market Theatre precinct over the past few weeks where he has been networking, workshopping, watching performances and talking.

After spending three months at the University of Ghana, exploring his specialty of hip-hop theatre, Dr Banks made his first visit to South Africa courtesy of the US Consulate's Culture Connect programme.

"I've known for a very long time that I've had a date with South Africa," he explains, "and it's really extraordinary to be here. This is no accident. On the night of the millennium off the coast of Salvador, in Brazil, I realised that I needed to bring Brazil, South Africa and the United States together in my Reassembling the Diaspora Project, where people get to share their stories.

"There's something about being here for me that works on a very deep level, unlike East or West Africa. It's this strange sense of familiarity and feeling that I've gone through the looking glass to the other side. It's utopia, it's hell and a garden all at the same time.

"As a person unclassified, and unclassifiable, in the US there's a way in which I get to move, and be here, in which I'm both freer and more restricted at the same time. I would need to write a poem, or dance a dance to describe it because there's no literal language to express it."

First stop was The Market Theatre – "one of the three theatres in the world I want to direct in before I die". As it turned out he could only direct a staged reading, at the Market Lab, of *Blurring Shine* by Zakiyyah Alexander, a young black female American writer. This choice reflected his interest in new writing with an edge, dealing as it does with urban, racial, and economic issues.

But his special gift is to facilitate debate and inspire, which he did in a master class with five young directors as part of the Lab's recent Community Theatre Festival and in a week-long hip-hop theatre work-group. The participants of actors, DJs, rappers, producers, dancers and poets included Napo Masheane and Bradley Williams (DJ Bionic).

"That week three of us had dreams, the same night, about an international company of people coming together, doing this work, taking it into communities around the world to give youth performers a platform to express themselves through both their craft of theatre and the aesthetics and politics of hip-hop. "

Banks is a walking compendium on the history of the American hip-hip movement and the emergence of hip-hop theatre. The coining of this term is attributed to British dancer Jonzi D, in 1992, who is currently back in Mzansi performing and directing a local hip-hop opera.

One definition Banks quotes about this theatrical genre is by Danny Hoch, founder of the Hip-Hop Theatre Festival in New York City. Hoch says it is "theatre by, for and about, the hip-hop generation". Some hold that hip-hop theatre has to have at least one of the performance elements such as emceeing, deejaying, graffiti art or b-boying ...

"I've been wrestling with another definition of it. There are so many struggles now to assert that hip-hop is a culture and not just a commercial record industry. There is good evidence that every culture has its own form of ritual and ritual is important, it keeps the history in the present moment. It's very much like the Ghanaian Sankofa bird which looks backward when it's flying forward. Because without a past you have no future."

Banks is currently editing an anthology of hip-hop theatre for the University of Michigan Press and is enthralled by the contradictions he encounters.

"Those of us creating it, and those people performing it, live contradictory lifestyles. We live in-between the limitations of language in terms of culture, ethnicity, sexuality and spirituality. Spirituality is a h-u-g-e part of hip-hop culture which is missing from what Tower or Virgin Records call hip-hop. We have to start asserting the contradictions. We have to re-frame and re-language all of this so that the complexity is what we celebrate. We must distill it somehow."

His own history is telling. "I was an actor who was told I was un-castable because I was too 'ethnic'-looking. I went into choreography and directing."

While teaching at the NYU drama department he was encouraged to do his PhD in performance studies. His dissertation was titled: "Performing the minstrel mask – black-face and the technology of identity".

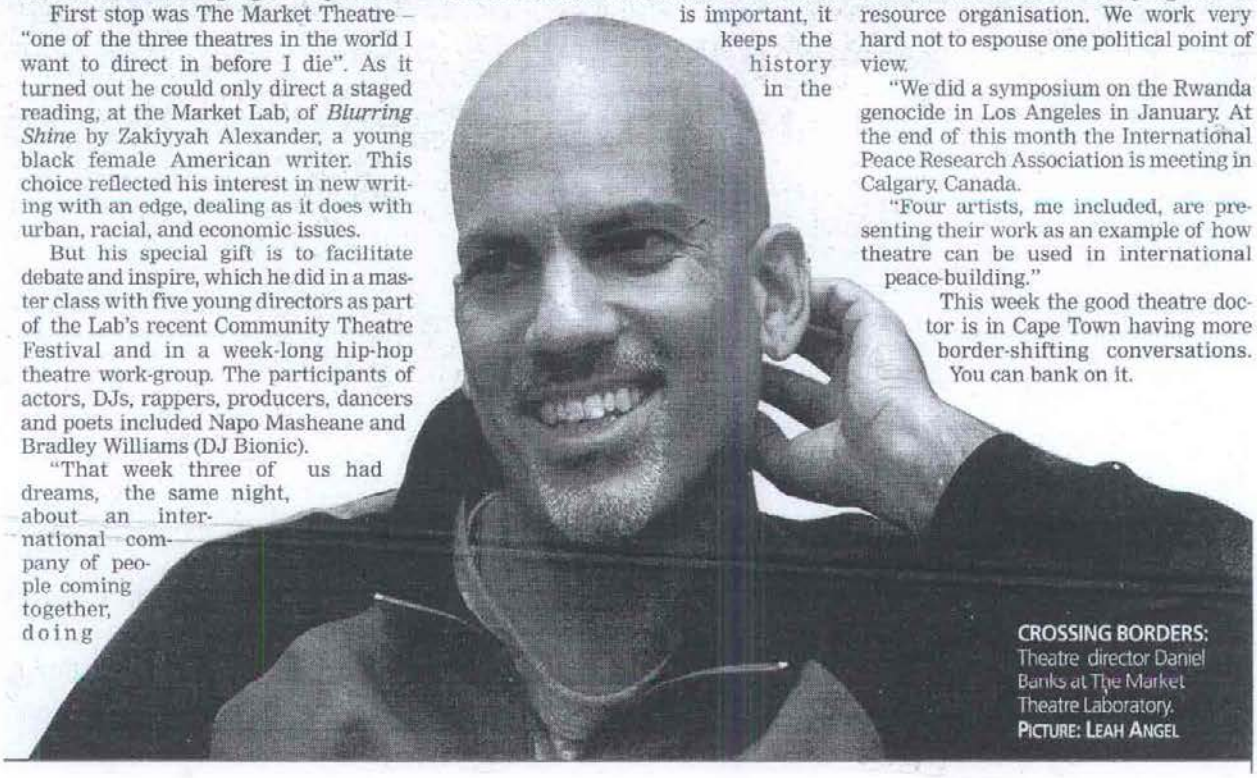
Nor surprising then that issues of oppression and identity are central to his artistic approach, which is reinforced by his serving on the steering committee of Theatre without Borders, a two-year-old volunteer body of international artists.

"We are concerned with keeping international exchange present both in our own work and the agendas of our governments. We're not a lobbying but a resource organisation. We work very hard not to espouse one political point of view.

"We did a symposium on the Rwanda genocide in Los Angeles in January. At the end of this month the International Peace Research Association is meeting in Calgary, Canada.

"Four artists, me included, are presenting their work as an example of how theatre can be used in international peace-building."

This week the good theatre doctor is in Cape Town having more border-shifting conversations. You can bank on it.



CROSSING BORDERS: Theatre director Daniel Banks at The Market Theatre Laboratory. PICTURE: LEAH ANGEL

In Celebration of Students of Color

The Organization of Black Women at NYU present

Daniel Banks

with the award for

Most Influential Professor

February 19, 2005

Students of Color Celebration