

Hip-hop review: Marc Bamuthi Joseph's 'The Break/s'

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The Break/s: A Mixtape for Stage: Marc Bamuthi Joseph's performance. 8 tonight at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts' Novellus Theater. Tickets \$20-\$30. Call (415) 978-2787 or go to www.ybca.org.

"The Break/s: A Mixtape for Stage," Marc Bamuthi Joseph's riveting multimedia hip-hop performance at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts' Novellus Theater, is, first of all, a great idea.

Mix tapes have layers of stories: They have a story made up of all the individual songs and a story from the circumstances of the tape's creation. Joseph's mix tape is both personal and historical, as he speaks of his personal history along with hip-hop's creation. They have some things in common: Both were born in the South Bronx in the 1970s.

As a framing device, the mix tape also solves a technical problem with stitching together an evening's worth of multimedia storytelling. There is frequently an awkward pause while the thematic gears shift between vignettes, a vulnerable moment for performer and audience. Joseph puts those pauses - the breaks - together with video interviews and music.

Joined onstage by beat-boxer and drummer Tommy Shepherd, a.k.a. Soulati, and DJ Excess working the laptop and the mixers, Joseph makes the case that both he and hip-hop exist in that interstitial space.

"I am," he says more than once during the evening, standing onstage in a simple orange T-shirt and cargo pants, echoing Grandmaster Flash, "an American at the edge."

Joseph takes the audience on a trip through space and time to bring key moments of his and hip-hop's life together. So, in that spirit, let's deliver this review in the form of a travelogue.

Haiti: After opening with a catalog of the key contradictions in his life, done in rapid-fire slam style as befitting an award-winning veteran of two Def Poetry Jam tours, Joseph gets into a more conversational rhythm. Once, in Haiti, his ancestral home, he fainted - maybe, he suggests, like "a little Beyoncé," the sight of blood threw him - and the Haitians thought he was possessed by a spirit. They gave him the name of the metaphorical tunnel between Haiti and Africa.

Basically, he says, grinning, he is "super black." But he contains multitudes: His girlfriend is white and his baby is half Chinese. In this first anecdote, Joseph establishes himself as a master of voices, seamlessly stepping between comedy and pathos. Already, though, his comedic voice has much more nuance and bite than his plaintive pleas (mostly to himself) to understand his contradictions.

Paris: At a conference for black choreographers, Joseph finds himself in a funny spot, jet-lagged physically and culturally. This is one of the most polished stories of the bunch. Alternating between straight-ahead storytelling and fluid wordplay accompanied by elegant contemporary dance movements (choreography by Stacy Printz), Joseph relates his understanding of how he fits into this world.

He watches an African woman biting off European performance art in the worst possible way (going in and out of a bag for around half an hour) and ponders his place as another neutered black American in Paris, coming from a long line of "experiments" in cultural exchange. "What is a black man," he wonders, "stripped of his right to threat?"

Japan: If Joseph wants to put aside the dance, the spoken word and the occasional free flows and just become a stand-up comic, he would find himself on the Def Jam comedy tour in no time. It's not just that his comic timing is perfect - his humor is honest.

In this story, his own cultural ignorance is on display. He goes to Japan knowing that there's a huge hip-hop community there - mostly, he says, because he saw an MTV interview with the Wu-Tang Clan and they said so. When it's time to be taken to a club, he is ready.

"Authenticity," he intones, "is in the *building*." And yet the music fails to stop as he pantomimes entering the club. He was the only black guy in the room, besides the guys onstage, and people couldn't care less. "I was invisible," he says, "another guy too old to be at the club."

Minneapolis: The high point of the show comes toward the end. In a bizarre imagining of a journey to Prince's house, where Leonardo da Vinci's "Mona Lisa" is on the wall, Joseph uses his whole body to tell the story, from a dead-on Prince imitation, to the voice and form of a modern-day Mona Lisa, a waitress at a diner, to an oddly perfect da Vinci as some kind of math nerd trying to pick her up.

The result is dirty, weird and amazing. The best hip-hop has come from this imaginative place: In this story, Joseph seemed to be channeling Kool Keith, the RZA, Old Dirty Bastard, any number of out-there rappers and producers.

It's in Minneapolis that Joseph makes the move from doing a show about hip-hop to doing a hip-hop show. His flight of fancy is at risk, but it works. To invoke the hip-hop trope, repeated several times by Joseph: If you don't commit to spinning on your head, you'll break your neck.

Joseph emerges with his neck intact. But all of "The Break/s" is uncommonly good. No false notes. No easy answers. It's as complicated and powerful as the best hip-hop can be.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph acts out his story with the aid of a drummer and beat-box artist.



The Chronicle / Katy Raddatz

Marc Bamuthi Joseph spins at one point in his multimedia hip-hop extravaganza "The Break/s: A Mixtape for Stage."



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