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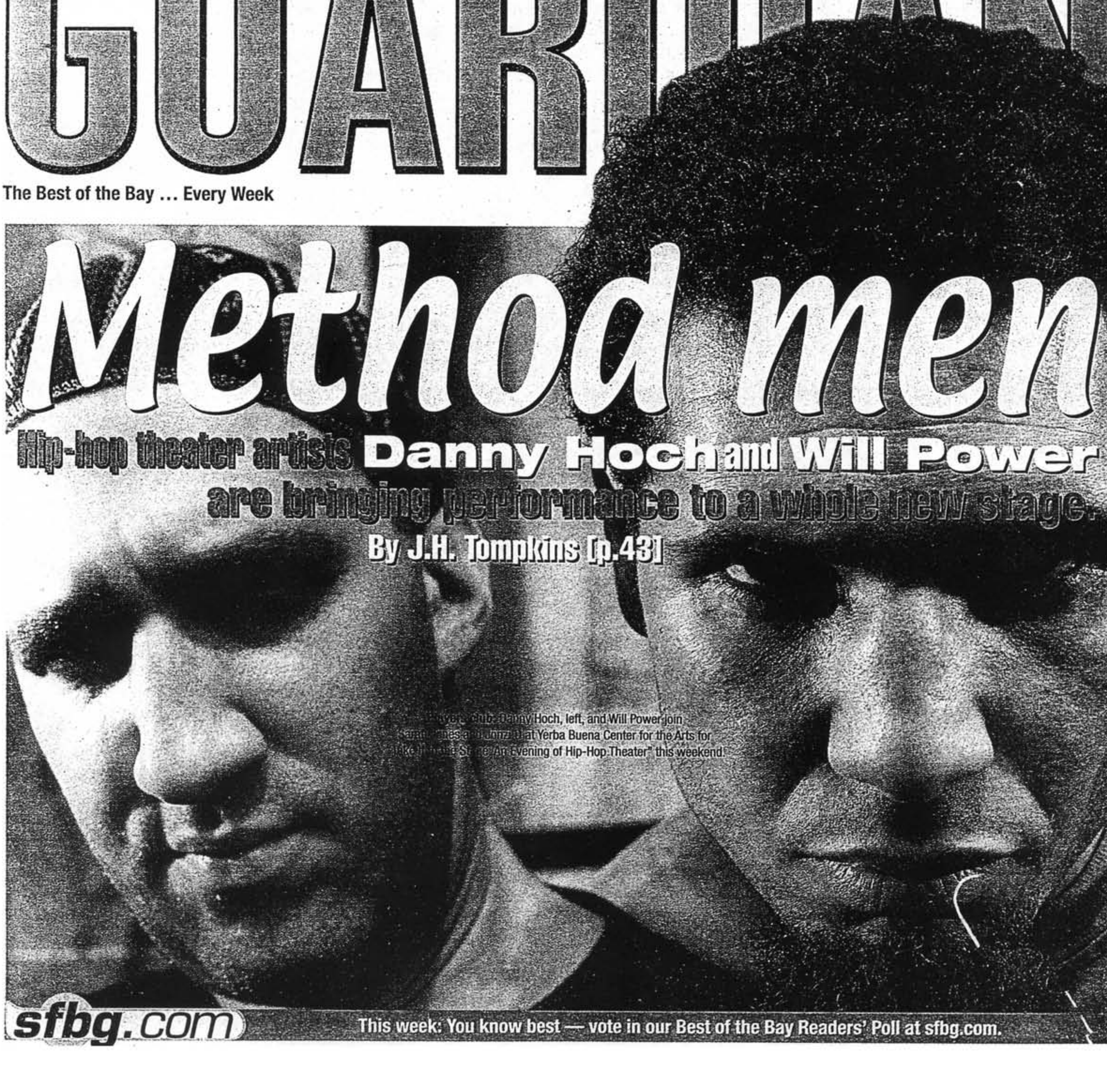
GUARDIAN

The Best of the Bay ... Every Week



Method men

Hip-hop theater artists **Danny Hoch** and **Will Power** are bringing performance to a whole new stage.

By J.H. Tompkins [p.43]

Players club: Danny Hoch, left, and Will Power join Sarah Jones and Jonzi D at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts for "Take It to the Stage: An Evening of Hip-Hop Theater" this weekend.

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Two turntables and a curtain call

Hip-hop theater goes public.

By J.H. Tompkins

JONZI D PHOTO BY FLORIAN PEUS

The next stage: The hyperactive world of hip-hop is a barometer of change, which performers like Jonzi D and Sarah Jones showcase.

A teenager named Flip is onstage, halfheartedly getting ready for work. He's running late, and his mother is on his ass. A white kid who lives so far from the hood that it might as well be Mars, Flip isn't feeling the work thing. What he's all about is keepin' it real, enjoying his alter ego Flip-Dogg, the "number one rapper in the world." Flip-Dogg and his boys are about to drop a new album called *Montana Gangsta Blood Thugs, Ghetto Rollin': Comin' fo That Ass in the Two Gee.* And the fact is that mom or no mom, at that moment Flip-Dogg is chillin' on *The Tonight Show* with Jay Leno, broadcasting live from the first New York City Hip-Hop Theater Festival at P.S. 122 in lower Manhattan.

Danny Hoch, solo performer, activist, and producer of this hip-hop festival, invented Flip for his 1997 show *Jails, Hospitals, and Hip-Hop.* He's on-stage, too, as Flip — guiding his creation as he grapples with racial identity and five-to-life in a fast-food outlet. Chairs squeak as people struggle to get comfortable on this hot Wednesday night in mid June, and a low moan ripples through the crowded audience when someone farts. Opening night is raucous.

"I know what you're thinking, Jay," says Flip-Dog, chopping it up with an imaginary Leno in front of the mythical television audience. "You're thinkin', like, 'How is this white dude such a dope rapper? Well, the truth of the matter, Jay, is that I ain't white, man. I'm really black. See I went to the doctor ... And he told me I got this rare skin disorder ... Like, check out this birthmark, see that's the real color of my skin, and the rest of me is a birthmark ... It's mad rare ...

"I hate [work] sometimes, though, Jay ... I'm just standin' there serving burgers to some damn tractor-driving motherfuckers ... These people are stupid ... All they do is hang out at the mall every day and walk back and forth all day between Foot Locker and Chi Chi's ... These are wack fucking activities, Jay ... I don't aspire to that in my life ... I want fuckin' ... I want ...

"I mean, what the hell I wanna be white for? The shit is stupid ... Look at you, you're corny, Jay! If I had a choice between bein' like you — Jay Leno — or Tupac Shakur, who you think I'ma choose?"

Despite his cartoon qualities, bits of Flip's impossible dream are shared by vast numbers of American youth. Their heroes are rappers, most of them black. They want to be rappers or DJs. Turntables have replaced the guitar as the axe of choice.

Tupac or Jay Leno? Get real.

No nets

Cross-cultural journeys are essentially American, and it's no surprise that life as a hip-hop outlaw, trouble guaranteed, has become a destination of choice. What's unique to this one is that during the last 15 years a reconfigured urban America, the relentless, homogenizing assault of popular culture, and the uncontested reign of hip-hop have spawned a multiethnic youth coalition unlike any that came before it.

"It's an uneasy mix," Hoch says. "But they all relate to hip-hop — that's the unifying factor. And that is fundamentally good."

Hip-hop theater emerged organically and inevitably from text-driven hip-hop music. Solo performers, fledgling ensembles, and hybrid experimentalists bring a no-nets attitude to their work. Their productions have energy, and some offer little else. But in varying degrees, all mine the rich language, style, and sound unique to hip-hop culture, delivering it to audiences starving to see their world onstage. Actors like Hoch, Will Power, Sarah Jones, and Jonzi D — all sharing the stage this weekend in "Take It to the Stage," part of Yerba Buena Center for the Arts' "Hip-Hop Nation" programming — are abundantly talented and professional, and at its best, hip-hop theater is provocative and entertaining. By mainstream standards the audiences are unimaginably young and diverse.

The 31-year-old Hoch, who has been writing and performing since his teens, is to hip-hop theater what Allen

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Iverson is to the 76ers: the Answer. His 1994 solo show *Some People* won an Obie and was filmed for HBO. *Jails, Hospitals, and Hip-Hop* opened at Berkeley Repertory Theatre in 1997 and has played to packed houses around the world since. Talented, crafty, and hyper, Hoch is an artist and activist who blurs the line between these passions and sees a place for both in hip-hop.

"One thing that hip-hop has been able to do," he explains, "is communicate the things a person should know: police brutality, things like that. Now you're starting to see people organize for Mumia and other issues all over the place, in little towns around the country. You expect that in big cities, but I think that hip-hop has played a role spreading this."

"People are always asking if hip-hop brings the races together," he continues. "I don't think it does that. I don't think it brings people together in the sense of creating community. But it does provide a ticket to cross cultural borders, and that is important."

Hoch and Flip-Dogg have shared the stage many times, and it's understandable if their relationship has low moments. At the benefit Hoch seems a little hard on his homeboy, downplaying the rudimentary righteousness of Flip's dreams and working his ignorance for risk-free laughs.

Still, his presence hovers in the wings after Hoch sends him packing. Like millions of American youth, Flip wants to get his chameleon on, to light out for the hood and get seriously different. It's a safe bet that whoever coined the country's saccharine mantra "You can be what you want to be" wasn't thinking about Flip.

Elementary

The Hip-Hop Theater P.S. 122 show in New York is energizing. One of the performers who heat the place up is Sarah Jones, who hobbles out from a back row to the stage as an old lady, greeting the audience and snapping toothless gums. A terrific actor, she is radiant even when hunched over at the waist. A pile of cast-off laundry accumulates on the floor as she slips from character to character, by turns hilarious, moody, sharp-tongued, and sardonic. After a stint as a middle-aged Jewish woman complaining about hip-hop and the state of the nation, she exits, leaving a cheering audience behind.

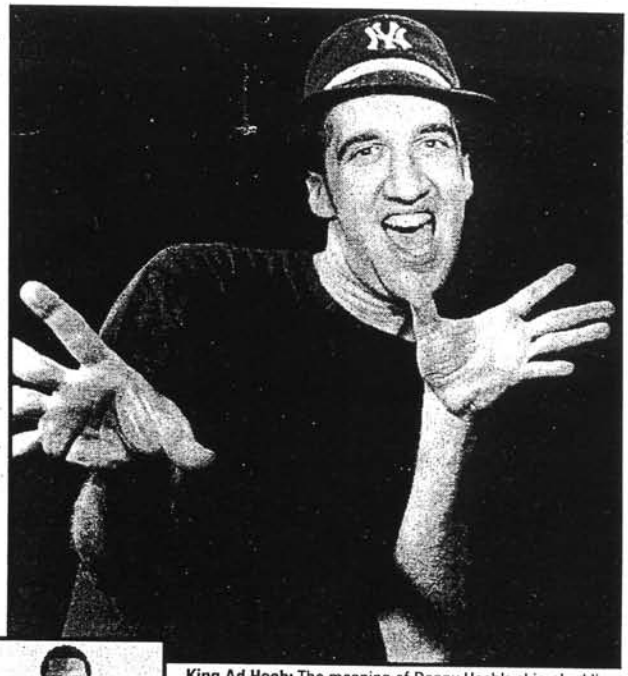

PHOTO BY PAULA COURT

King Ad Hoch: The meaning of Danny Hoch's skin-shedding performance changes dramatically depending on the race of the viewer.

Power surge: Midnight Voices cofounder and "Take It to the Stage" cocurator Will Power's work has intensified since he left the Bay Area.

Holly Bass, curator of the New York festival, published "Blowin' Up the Set," which she said was the first story about hip-hop theater in the mainstream press, in the November 1999 issue of *American Theatre*. "Traditional theater has to open its doors in more ways than it may want to," she says, measuring her words carefully as if to ensure that her challenge is taken seriously. "Ultimately there is an elite class, with a hold on culture. I feel like what's happening is that hip-hop theater is about 21st-century theater, not just hip-hop theater. Our generation will come of age, and we will want to see something onstage that reflects our experience."

Like her colleagues, Bass has poured herself into the festival. She's seen performances, read scripts, talked to actors and playwrights. She's in the thick of the debate about the aesthetics of a very young artistic movement. "A lot of people," she says emphatically, "think that hip-hop theater is strictly a solo piece by someone of color who is under 35. You might be black, 30, and have a solo show, but that doesn't make it hip-hop theater. My own personal opinion is that the four main elements of hip-hop — breaking, graffiti or artwork, MCing or poetry, and DJing — are central to its identity. They need to be referenced, at least one of them, in each production."

Gathered together

Restless youth like the hip-hop-identified Montana "gangsta" rapper Flip — no matter how dimly lit — attempt to exchange the privileges of white skin for an antidote to the emptiness they feel. Their impulse illuminates the mainstream's bleak terrain and how little it offers. It is a world apart from the landscape in Will Power's *The Gathering*. In four sketches Power traces the lowercase rituals that bind and enrich the lives of black men. A jazz band considers life's stacked deck while celebrating music's redemptive power in "The Jam." A ghost searches for peace and forgiveness while gangbanger Baby Troy is dying of AIDS in "The Street." Soopa Smoov, Young T, Swing, P, and O.G. are ballers in "The Court." And in "The Shop," tempers flare as a gay man and a conservative preacher debate their differences.

Power's characters live on America's margins, where they couldn't find much privilege to cash in if they wanted to. In this world Power suggests music and community as healing, almost heavenly elements that promise redemption to those whose lives have been marked by sacrifice, pain, and violence.

"For the most part," Power says, "I don't create these pieces to make some kind of statement. I think my characters are people who are impor-

tant to hang on to — and I want my work to provide a kind of spiritual connection to them."

It's been some two years since Power left the Bay Area, where he was a cofounder of hip-hop group Midnight Voices, a caretaker of the much missed Upper Room space, and an actor, writer, and solo performer. *The Gathering*, part of which he'll perform this weekend at the Center for the Arts program he cocurated with the center's Linda Lucero, was developed with the help of Bay Area performance diva Rhodessa Jones, the show's director. Soulful, tightly produced, and original, it marked a step forward for Power, whose prior work, though brimming with promise, sometimes had a not-quite-completed feel.

"Rhodessa was a huge part of that," he says. "I learned so much from working with her. She has so much experience and insight. She just came in and taught me how to shape it, how to get it ready for the stage."

In retrospect it's clear that exposure to New York's motivated artists, combined with Rhodessa Jones's experience and firm hand, has helped Power to intensify his work. The wisdom of his move was evident at the New York show. Unlike *The Gathering*, where movement is understated and practical, driven by the need to articulate individual voices, *Piece #1* has a gracefully aggressive Power hitting the stage in high gear, spinning in circles, and slicing tight geometrical figures into the air with his arms, providing a visual challenge that's new to his work.

The real thing

During a midwinter broadcast, ex–NBA star and then–TBS halftime commentator Charles Barkley joked that a measure of how much the world has changed could be seen in the fact that "the best golfer is black, and the best rapper is white."

No doubt America's racial landscape — beyond the Tiger Woods–Eminem continuum — has changed in recent years. Harmony comes and goes, depending on social and political climate and regional and generational differences. But in relatively small yet significant ways, there is greater parity than in the past.

The complex, hyperactive world of hip-hop is a barometer of these changes, and hip-hop theater showcases them onstage. In Hoch's work his characters — shaped by cultural and class qualities particular to their ethnic and economic backgrounds — enter into a dialogue linked by the language and sensibilities of popular culture. The result — most of it implied rather than directly stated — is a portrait of how interwoven American lives have become.

"I live in a world that I share with five million Americans," Hoch says. "When I go outside that world, it seems strange to me, and I assume when people come into mine, it can seem strange to them."

The fact of Hoch's whiteness inevitably shapes the creation and reception of his work — human experience is culturally specific — but the fluid, self-assured way that he moves from voice to voice is remarkable. His characters — Flip; Sam, the tightly wound prison guard; Gabriel, the struggling onetime crack baby on the verge of adulthood; Andy, the junkie prisoner with AIDS; the rationalizing rap star MC Enuff; and others — deserve their moment onstage. Beyond the pleasure of witnessing Hoch's facility, there is the rich view when we peer through the windows he creates.

"Danny's Trip to L.A.," a vignette from *Jails, Hospitals, and Hip-Hop*, is instructive, because it's based on Hoch's near-appearance on *Seinfeld*. The show's producers wanted him to play a character named Ramon, "the pool guy," who, in their minds, had a Spanish accent. Hoch balked, asking why they didn't hire a Spanish actor if that's what they wanted. He was fired.

"They didn't want the real thing," he says in the vignette. "They wanted somebody that could do the real thing, but still be one of them."

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Ironically, a similar question surfaced from the other side of the fence when Hoch performed *Some People* as part of the Solo Mio Festival at the Bayfront Theater in 1994. The well-heeled, largely white audience responded to an array of typically Hoch characters, like radio DJ the Caribbean Tiger, dancehall performer Madman, and 16-year-old rapper Floe, with a standing ovation. The response was deserved, but as the crowd left the theater and headed for a parking lot packed with expensive sedans, it was hard to imagine a similar response to the show had the performer not been white.

Central to *Some People's* appeal in this context was watching a white man shed his skin, a process whose meaning changes dramatically depending on the race of the viewer. And as was the case on the *Seinfeld* set, at Bayfront the fact of Hoch's race tended to keep the audience in its comfort zone.

"Since then," Hoch says, "I've taken great pains to get the tickets into enough different people's hands. Because I realize that if it's an all-white audience, and I'm talking about these things, there are so many gray areas that come up. You could say the same thing about *Bring in 'da Noise,* which was a great show until it went to Broadway and all the audience became overwhelmingly white people, and it almost became minstrely. Now I deal with it by demanding that a theater do whatever is necessary to get a hip-hop-generation audience. So much of hip-hop has been about codified language and behavior; to expose that to outsiders, to fiftysomething white folks in a theater, that could be bad."

Concretely, this has meant publicizing performances by contacting youth organizations and by sending out "street teams" — the roving promotions squads used by radio stations that appear at malls, schools, and other places where young people hang out.

"Street teams work," Hoch says. "In this day and age why should a kid go to a play? Because their teacher took them to see a black version of *Hamlet*? Are they going to feel like that has something to do with them?"

Blunt talk

In the prologue to *Jails, Hospitals, and Hip-Hop,* "Message to the Bluntman," Hoch checks in on the ideological warfare within hip-hop, assuming the voice of the ruling elite, saying: "Forties, blunts, hos. Glocks and Tecs / You got your X cap but I got you powerless."

He goes on to deliver an uncompromising perspective on the perils that face hip-hop as the forces that once spawned the music's rebellion threaten to co-opt it. Later, still as the voice of power, he says, "And I laugh at all those rap videos with these guns and hos / While you strike the roughneck pose, I pick my nose / And flick it on ya, ya goner, no need to warn ya / I got mad seats in government from Bronx to California / And I got the National Guards and plus the Navy / Army, Air Force, so I got *niggers* paid to save me."

Hoch gives "nigger" special emphasis to make sure the audience doesn't miss it. And, coming from the mouth of a white man, the word has a special, attention-grabbing violence to it.

When I ask Hoch about it, he answers by saying that this is exactly the word that those in power would use and that the line wouldn't work without it. Which is true, of course, but I felt, and still feel, uncomfortable with the license he takes. That's the point, of course — he doesn't want his audience to just sit back and enjoy — but since America is living with the legacy of centuries of distress visited upon others by white people, it strikes me that Hoch sometimes walks an awfully thin line.

"It's really tricky," Holly Bass says about the passage in "Bluntman." "[America] is expecting things to somehow disappear, yet we're not really willing to open up the wound and clean it out." Bass is black — and the fact that someone reading this could question why I point that out is why I'm doing so.

"But with young artists," she continues, "particularly the white artists, they're grappling with the question of how do you find your place? Artists need to be sensitive, but at the same time they need to be able to do whatever they need to do. Danny never, ever uses the word "nigga" in his conversation, I absolutely know that, but he does in his work, because it's part of the character. I like it; it's controversial, it's grabbing the finger at a sore spot, and I think it works."

She goes on to say that what she's more interested in is "the artistry of what we put onstage, not the politics. I feel like the art is working for the most part, and that's what's exciting."

But everyone involved looks at this art through a slightly different lens. Hoch is activating audiences with his take on the America's urban landscape, while Power is building bridges onstage to the people and places he values. Linked by the urban culture that's grown up around hip-hop music, these artists, as well as others who are bringing their work to the stage — Sarah Jones, Jonzi D, Hip-Hop Theater Junction, Ursula Rucker, and many others — are probing sensitive spots and offer a multiplicity of perspectives in different, constantly evolving forms.

Hip-hop theater is, among many things, challenging, educational, and entertaining — which means it's doing what art is supposed to do. There's a lot to look forward to. ❖

'Take It to the Stage: An Evening of Hip-Hop Theater,' *featuring Will Power, Sarah Jones, Danny Hoch, and Jonzi D, runs Fri/29–Sun/1, Fri.–Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m., Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Theater, 701 Mission, S.F. $28, $15 students and seniors. (415) 978-ARTS.*