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## Theater review: 'The Break/s' swings with confidence

By Rohan Preston, Star Tribune

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When you hear that someone has written a show and performs in it as a dancer, poet, rapper and actor, you half expect it to fail. For it to succeed would be like putting virtuosos Mikhail Baryshnikov, Nikki Giovanni, Jay-Z and Glenn Close in one body.

The surprise about Marc Bamuthi Joseph's "The Break/s" is how competently and fluidly he enters each role. He inhabits Stacey Printz's choreography with writhing vulnerability. He raps with deft flow. And he delivers all the clouds in his soul with commitment.

Joseph is the real deal, swinging with such confidence that you grasp for adjectives to capture his skills.

"The Break/s," which premiered Thursday at Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, is not a perfect piece. How can an autobiographical 70-minute work encapsulate the history of hip-hop?

It is fresh because it is so different from the corporate hip-hop that is dominant today. For one thing, the brash stance is often subverted here. The music, sampled by DJ Excess and beat-boxer Tommy Shepherd, has its own associated memories. From Kurtis Blow and Run-DMC to the Geto Boys and Jay-Z, the songs, and the culture that bred it, have become world forces.

For Joseph, who grew up in New York's Queens borough, all of hip-hop provides a passport to the globe, from festivals in Europe to nightclubs in Japan, a rural village in Senegal to a seaside in Cuba.

One of the funniest vignettes in the show is an alleged visit with Prince, who explains to him how he met the Mona Lisa.

The trope that Joseph uses in "The Break/s" is that this is a story that begins in the middle. There are many such middles here, under James Clotfelter's turntable-style spotlight. There is the middle of the body, black and bold, as a sign of fear and lust; the middle of the country, where he teaches hip-hop to students in Wisconsin; the middle of his thoughts, glimmering with uncertainties about fatherhood and love.

You can think "The Odyssey" or a picaresque. "The Break/s" is a journey story. But it is one that is about affirmation and empowerment, not exploration or conquest.

Going in, I thought that I would say that I have seen this before. But it is not true. Joseph organizes his show like a mix tape, sampling music and imagery, with themes flowing into one another. The structure, herky-jerky in places, surprises. Where it would naturally

break or end, the performer, under the jazzy, riffy direction of John Michael Garces, continues to turn new corners, offering unexpected insights.

What emerges from this polished show is how necessary it is to have mess, to have spaces in the culture where interesting things emerge: the spaces between boxes and categories; the eruptions of consciousness and insights. Joseph does it so well that you want to give him a shout-out.

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