

Between high art and hip hop

From street to classroom to stage, Marc Bamuthi Joseph crosses over

BY JULIE YORK COPPENS

*THIS STORY begins in the middle
Halfway across the planet...*

In a theatre in Louisville, Kentucky, thousands of miles from Marc Bamuthi Joseph's ancestral Africa. Light years away from his native world of hip hop.

I think...

That I'm awake...

Before a well-heeled audience of agents, critics and other performing-arts-industry pros, Joseph—a former high school English teacher, HBO Def Poet and, now, a surprise star of the 2008 Humana Festival of New American Plays—is defying the rules of theatre. And the laws of physics.

His back arches. His legs buckle. His bald brown head slowly, slowly sinks toward the floor.

A vinyl record on a turntable spins in reverse, with a long-drawn screeeeeeeee.

Joseph says:

This is what it looks like right before I fall.

At the moment, though, Joseph is flying.

His show *the break/s*—a dreamlike chronicle of his international adventures, captured in an explosive mix of

spoken word, music, dance and video—premiered to acclaim in March, at Actors Theatre of Louisville's annual pageant of new work. In April, *the break/s* played the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. This month, the production is bound for the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina, another high-profile showcase sure to cement Joseph's cultural cred: "I've managed to convince the performing arts machine," he jokes in the piece, "that I am high art *and* hip hop."

Born in 1975 in the New York City borough of Queens into a Haitian immigrant family of educators, Marc Bamuthi Joseph had early success in theatre and dance but felt destined for the classroom. (His middle name, adopted during a collegiate rite of passage, means "of the tree.") So he went that way. He has a master's degree in secondary education, another reason his streetwise stage slang takes so many startling detours to the academy.

About ten years ago, Joseph was at a high school in Marin County, Calif., teaching literature, writing, and West African dance. He took a group of students to a poetry slam. "My kids

were like, 'You get up there!' " Joseph recalls with a laugh. "I ended up winning."

Now he's performing full-time, though his far-flung gigs usually involve teaching as well. Joseph also mentors teen-aged poets through the Bay Area non-profit Youth Speaks, and curates the Living Word Festival for Literary Arts.

"He's got the spirit of a teacher or rabbi or village elder," says Julie Felise Dubiner, the dramaturg who worked with Joseph on *the break/s* at ATL. "He's about analyzing, reinterpreting, and imparting the wisdom he has gathered on his travels and in his life."

On the last day of his Louisville engagement, Joseph spoke with *Dramatics* about performance and pedagogy, rap and romance, and other things that come together so beautifully in *the break/s*.

Do you feel like teaching is part of the artist's responsibility?

JOSEPH: I used to think, yes. But not all artists are good teachers.

What have your students taught you?



JOSEPH: My students always reveal to me the best of what's possible. They mirror humanity in a truly inspiring way—the whole spectrum of our humanity. But you know, kids are kids. They say dumb [stuff]. I love it all.

There's a funny moment in the break/s where you admit to feeling like an old guy in a Tokyo nightclub. How do you avoid that sensation in the classroom? Do you worry that at some point, your teenaged students will consider you, even hip hop itself, beyond relevance?

JOSEPH: Hip hop is identified in the broad discourse as being about youth culture. And it is. But it is also marginalized and vilified as being a harbinger of the worst elements of society... There's an aesthetic, a political backdrop, a technical reality—all that stuff comes into play. You and I are both part of Generation X, which is a fallacy—I mean, *they* get to be the Greatest Generation, or the Baby Boomers, and we get to be “X.” *(Pulls a grim face and laughs.)* But there are certain realities [that those now in their late twenties to early forties grew up with]: post-Civil Rights, technology, AIDS, multiculturalism... All these are relevant to what I would call the hip hop generation. It has soundtracked our lives. In that regard, it will never go out of style, so long as this generation is around....

As for me, I think that fourteen-year-olds smell a lack of authenticity a mile away. I stopped wearing jeans that don't fit me a long time ago. I'm not trying to be fourteen. I'm trying to be me.

So how do you, Marc Bamuthi Joseph, get these kids writing? What's your method?

JOSEPH: I'm a disciple of Paolo Freire [a renowned educational theorist from Brazil who valued dialogue and lived experience over the handing down of knowledge from teacher to student]. I believe it is possible for

young people to write their worlds into existence. I believe in democratizing access to language.

So in a classroom situation, I start by asking critical questions, like, “If jazz is the broom Africans jumped over to become American, then what is hip hop?” [This is one of the questions posed in a series of video interviews that punctuate the live action of *the break/s*.] I write their responses on the board, and that becomes our palette. Then I ask one more question, and that leads to a writing project: to use the words they and their classmates used. The writing becomes a result of the conversation. And then we break that down. We find the essential truths. Given more time, those pieces become character sketches. Given *more* time, those character sketches become scenes.

I imagine you run into some road blocks.

JOSEPH: No Child Left Behind has handcuffed the American classroom. It's forced teachers to teach to the test, and that has reinforced a kind of binary logic structure that undermines what education should be, which is a place where all people are invited to the precipice of their possibility... I'm not suggesting we throw away our standards. But it's also my experience that young people are paranoid. I go into classrooms, and when I ask young people their opinions, they genuinely struggle. For six class periods out of the day, no one's asking them what they *think*. It's either-or. That discussion and discourse has been taken out of the classroom. I try to create an environment where the more and less adept students are able to share the playing field. I invite the kids to be silly.

I want to hear your answers to some of those questions in the break/s. If jazz is the broom Africans jumped over to become American, then what is hip hop?

MARC BAMUTHI JOSEPH'S *the break/s* was one of six full-length titles that ran in rep in Actors Theatre of Louisville's 2008 Humana Festival of New American Plays. Here are short takes on the other shows on the bill.

The Holy Grail for most Humana playwrights is a commercial transfer or some other form of production life after Louisville. The buzz at this year's festival hummed around *Becky Shaw*, by Gina Gionfriddo, whose play *After Ashley* had an Off Broadway run after it appeared in the 2004 festival. Gionfriddo, a staff writer and producer for the *Law & Order* franchise, used as her title the name of the timid, vulnerable, not-so-young-anymore woman who is one half of the ill-starred blind date at the center of the play. She might well have called it *Max Garrett*, after the financial adviser who is the other half. Max, as played by David Wilson Barnes, is one of the great characters in the long history of the Humana Festival. Obdurate, self-contained, opinionated, supercilious, and possessed of a Rumsfeld-like conviction that he is always right, Max is enormous fun to watch. And Gionfriddo gives him plenty to work with: the play is an intricate dance of good intentions and less noble ones around a failing family business, a marriage under stress, intimations of past deceptions, a matriarch who is dating a con artist, and, of course, Becky Shaw.

This Beautiful City is a portrait of Colorado Springs, with a particular focus on the city's role as the center of the American Evangelical movement and a nexus of conservative Christian politics. The show, a rare Humana Festival musical, was assembled by The Civilians, a New York-based company that creates plays by conducting interviews around a particular subject and then

The spring crop at the Humana Festival

piecing the material they've collected into monologues, scenes, and songs. *This Beautiful City* shows us church youth group meetings, conversations among cadets and officers at the Air Force Academy, multimedia mega-church moments, testimony from citizens of Colorado Springs who feel marginalized by the city's embrace of faith-based conservatism, sermons, prayer circles, and the confession of powerful New Life Church pastor Ted Haggard of an indiscretion that involved some methamphetamine and a long relationship with a male prostitute. All of this is seasoned with songs by Civilians composer and lyricist Michael Friedman, including a lot of high-energy Christian pop that is performed without the slightest hint of irony.

The tone of the entire enterprise, in fact, is one of transparent documentary objectivity. The Civilians are reporting what they found, not making judgments. They leave it to their audiences to draw their own conclusions.

The two characters in Lee Blessing's play *Great Falls* call each other Monkey Man and Bitch, and those are not terms of endearment. The man is a successful middle-aged novelist, trying to bridge the estrangement of his stepdaughter after recently divorcing her mother. The method he chooses to work on the reconciliation is to pick her up in his new car, allowing her to believe they're going for a short drive and a chat. That was in Omaha. Now they're in South Dakota, and headed for Montana.

As the man and his stepdaughter retrace, approximately, the route of Lewis and Clark, the play is a journey of discovery both for them and the audience. Gradually we learn about their lives, and we get the story of the girl's recent past and present cir-



HARLAN TAYLOR

Annie Parisse as the title character and David Wilson Barnes as Max in Becky Shaw.

cumstances at the same moment her stepfather does. Ultimately there's a little bit of a thaw: she entrusts him with a secret she hasn't shared with anybody else in the world, and he performs a uniquely post modern act of parental responsibility (which it would be insensitive to reveal here). Blessing is not offering any easy answers, though, and one leaves the theatre wondering when these two will next get together, and how that will go.

The family in *All Hail Hurricane Gordo*, by Carly Mensch, a graduate student at Juilliard, is fractured in another way. Two brothers, one of whom is suffering from what appears to be a fairly benign personality disorder, share the dilapidated suburban New York home where their parents abandoned them some years before. Chaz, the older, stabler brother, has raised Gordo and still looks after him, and the play's chief concern, which it explores with some humor, is

whether Chaz will continue to be Gordo's keeper or begin to establish a life on his own.

At the heart of Jennifer Haley's *Neighborhood 3: Requisition of Doom* is a really good idea for a computer game—one that uses GPS coordinates to map your own neighborhood as the game environment and then floods this virtual subdivision with ravenous zombies. There's a problem though, some kind of wormhole that causes your game-playing imagination to, pardon the expression, bleed into real life. *Neighborhood 3* puts a technological spin, and a new perspective, on any number of horror movie conventions, notably the one about suburban order concealing something scary and dangerous and the one about our children surrendering their minds and spirits to some sinister force.

—Don Corathers



An excerpt from the break/s

The personal and the political often collide in Marc Bamuthi Joseph's poetry, as in this excerpt from the break/s in which he maps the terrain of an interracial romance.

Real late at night
just the two us
in the dark
when my own snoring wakes me up
in the dark
when my history is irrelevant and I
am a soul to be touched
when all falls away but the words
on the page
she is perfect

the woman I want to come home
to,

but not always who I want to
leave the house with
my perfect match in love
a plague upon my self-perception
and politics
she's turning 30
childless
she wants to get married
I present her every day with a ring
of silence
And a fat rock of maybe
Cuz MAYBE I can choose love
over identity
But maybe...

JOSEPH: Wow... (Long pause.) Then hip hop is the raft they used to survive when the levees broke.

Did you just make that up?

JOSEPH: Yes. (Laughs.)

I thought you'd have pat answers to all these questions.

JOSEPH: No. (Laughs.)

Okay, what about women in hip hop?

JOSEPH: Misunderstood. Misplaced. Misdiagnosed. Like women in America.

And what do you think about white people in hip hop?

JOSEPH: Um... Um... Wow. I feel more and more that race in hip hop is irrelevant. It is okay for anybody to own the culture.

This might be an inflammatory question, but do you see a racial difference in how students respond to your work?

JOSEPH: You know, I don't. If anything, I experience more of a regional difference. The variation is much more by grade level, maturity level, and also the expectations of the

school itself. If I'm working in a high-performing school where young people's opinions are valued in a more meaningful way, then my language is understood and responded to in a meaningful way. It's not so much along race lines. It's more to do with the culture of the school.

What about a gender difference? According to the stereotype, girls would be more active in a poetry-writing workshop—but maybe not in your case.

JOSEPH: I do find, I must say, that there's an important kind of mentorship or modeling that I feel with boys in particular. These are boys who rarely have younger males as classroom teachers.

You talk about your son in the break/s. How old is he now?

JOSEPH: M'Kai is six years old now. He's in the piece actually [a beat-boxing cameo in one of the video segments].

And what does he think of his dad, the hip hop genius?

JOSEPH: He's so not impressed, you know? (Laughs.) He's much more impressed when we go bowling, or if I beat him in a video game.

Last question from the show: Have you ever lost your mind?

JOSEPH: Oh my gosh, totally. All the time. But definitely on stage. There are times when I leave the ground, and for a split second, I have the sensation of flight, where I may not have to come down—it's not mandatory. I become possessed by the moment, which is the best feeling.

One of Marc Bamuthi Joseph's pet projects for the non-profit Youth Speaks is this eight-day International Youth Poetry Slam Festival, set for July 15-22 in Washington, D.C. Now in its eleventh year, Brave New Voices draws more than 450 teenage poets and spoken-word artists from across the country. Details at www.youthspeaks.org; (415) 255-9035.