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## Entertainment XML

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Posted on Sat, May. 14, 2005

### 'Scourge' deftly mixes dance, word

By Mary Ellen Hunt  
TIMES CORRESPONDENT

WITH A SELLOUT CROWD packing the bleacher seating at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Forum space, Marc Bamuthi Joseph's "Scourge" made its raw and much-awaited debut Thursday night as the most high-profile event of the Hip-Hop Theater Festival.

"Scourge" makes a strong addition to the list of works sponsored by Youth Speaks' Living Word Project, the same group that brought us Robert Moses' powerful "Cause" last season. Both works blend poetry with dance in a modern revival of the choreopoem -- a mixture of spoken-word with interpretive movement that Ntozake Shange pioneered in the 1970s on Broadway with "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf."

When Moses' troupe Kin last performed "Cause," it showed evidence of careful editing and honing, however -- and that's the one thing the beautifully produced but overlong "Scourge" could use.

The Oakland-based Joseph gained national recognition for his "Word Becomes Flesh," a one-man show that he's toured from Seattle to New York. He's a charismatic and dynamic performer, and while "Scourge" is a collaborative effort that involves four other dancers onstage as well as eight musicians, Joseph is the undeniable center and mainstay of the work.

To help realize the complex themes of the piece, Joseph has brought together a team of artists who know their stuff. Sean Riley's set -- a trio of sculptural hillocks punctuated by twiggy canes of sugar -- is spare yet textured, while Kathy Perkins' lighting is dramatic and saturated, though not overbearingly so.

Along with composer John Santos, seven musicians provide a multilayered sound accompaniment, from the cacophonous to the bluesy, effortlessly mixing beat-boxing rhythms with Caribbean tunes to create a blended style that transcends several time periods.

Joseph's work comes to Yerba Buena as part of the center's ongoing arts and politics series, wearing its political colors on its sleeve. "Scourge" according to the press material, is divided into four parts, although this was not always readily apparent.

Central to the piece is the history of Haiti -- the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, with a long and violent history of exploitation -- and more specifically where their Haitian background fits into the lives of two kids who have grown up American. But to say that "Scourge" is about Haiti is like saying "The Tempest" is about a shipwreck. There's a lot more here than meets the eye in Joseph's nonlinear collage of lives, myths and experiences, and while "Scourge" may not be resoundingly successful in clarifying our understanding of history, it does resonate in many ways.

In fact, some of "Scourge" has echoes of Shakespeare's "Tempest," anchored by Joseph's own tour de force performance as Grandpere -- a kind of first-generation, world-weary Haitian Prospero, determined to give his Americanized grandchildren, Delina Patrice Brooks and Dahlak Brathwaite, a sense of their place in this history and culture.

The kids have a predictably "yeah, whatever" attitude, though they go along with their grandpere as he leads them through recollections of Haitian rituals and customs. Clad in Mai Lei Pecorari's eclectic loose costumes, the family, along with dancers Amara Tabor Smith and Adia Tamar Whitaker, morph from one character to the next in fluid choreography that knits the poetry to the music in a dizzying panoply.

A mixture of African dance with hip-hop sensibilities, the choreography itself works seamlessly with the text, even though the different sections have different choreographers. Sorting out which of the various dances correspond with the dancemakers is difficult. Credited are Joseph, Whitaker, Stacey Printz and hip-hop phenom Rennie Harris -- but the combination of varying styles seems to capture multiplicity of characters and confusion of identities.

For the first hour or so, "Scourge" is terrific -- a sprawling, absorbing and provocative piece of theater. Right around the halfway mark, though, it starts to lose momentum and wander erratically through multiple story lines and character sketches. The energy that initially is channeled into a honed narrative starts to look much less focused. Elegant wordplay gives way to the assaultive self-indulgence of a poetry slam, showing particularly in the parsing of lines in Brathwaite's long eulogy to his grandfather's legacy near the end.

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Still, "Scourge" is clearly a work of intelligence and careful craftsmanship, unafraid to ask some big questions and leave them unanswered, and that alone puts Joseph at the head of the pack of not just hip-hop theater auteurs, but modern choreographers, too.

One note: "Scourge" deals with a variety of mature subjects, including violence and sex, and also features some raw language.

#### DANCE REVIEW

- WHO: Marc Bamuthi Joseph
- WHAT: "Scourge"
- WHERE: Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Forum, Mission at Third Street, S.F.
- WHEN: Through Sunday
- HOW MUCH: \$19-\$25
- CONTACT: 415-978-2787, [www.ybca.org](http://www.ybca.org)



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