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Performance

Hip-Hop With a Measure of Hope

By Sarah Kaufman Washington Post Staff Writer Monday, April 18, 2005; Page C01

Joy, anticipation, excitement: all feelings common to expectant parents. Then there are the sentiments that don't get talked about much.

There's fear, as in the blood-freezing dread that you're going to screw it all up for your kid.

And there's panic, the impulse to run away so fast the responsibilities can't catch up with you.

In his extraordinary one-man show, "Word Becomes Flesh," Marc Bamuthi Joseph not only talks about the fear, dread and panic (and, eventually, joy) that he experienced while awaiting the birth of his son, he raps, taps, rhymes, soliloquizes and improvises about them. Joseph, appearing at Dance Place over the weekend, is a performing dynamo to chase away all your visions of the bellowing, self-absorbed poetry slammer.

enlarge photo



Marc Bamuthi Joseph, taking rap to a rare parental level in "Word Becomes Flesh" at Dance Place. (Lauren Victoria Burke For The Washington Post)

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With an athletic, surprisingly light-footed physique and a storyteller's way with suspense, Joseph held an immediate lock on audience attention. There is an appealing suppleness in the way he speaks as well as the way he moves. He could read your tax return and make it come alive. But even more than his assertive delivery, it's the ruthless honesty of his account that makes this 75-minute work feel like part of your own soul when it's over.

Unplanned fatherhood weighed heavily on Joseph, he tells us. As a single black man painfully aware of the negative precedent of his demographic, what chance did he have to be a good father? What chance did his son have to grow up okay? Joseph files the performance that sprang from these questions under the relatively new category of hip-hop theater. But this is not the music industry's hip-hop. There's no twirl-on-the-head break-dance routine. There's no loud thumping backbeat, except when Joseph talks about hearing the fetal heartbeat for the first time. It's a sound that "hit me in my knees," he says, while a drummer (part of the excellent three-piece band that shares the stage) plays an insistent, racing ticktock rhythm.

Joseph laces the evening with movement, but it's expressive and emotionally charged, not a show of acrobatics. Mostly he unspools free verse, illustrating his confessions with powerful gestures and flashes of sharp-etched images -- boot camp, slave dancing, an unforgettable lynching rendered in the blink of an eye. The hip-hop sensibility is in the potent mix of body and word, and in the ease of transitions, the way he moves from scene to scene with the sure timing of a DJ gauging breaks in a dance

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beat.

"Birthing my son is *my* process, too," Joseph declares. His belief, spoken with the fire of a polemic, takes a stand not heard in commercial rap, which he disses as "barely melodic danceable misogyny." Far from a foul-mouthed brute crowing about his conquests, he's a sensitive young man who impregnates a woman he has no intention of marrying and agonizes over the consequences. Voicing the anxiety that most parents harbor silently, he admits to feeling over and over like he's just a hair's breadth away from failing his child.

Joseph tackles a host of weighty topics here, weaving them in and out of his narrative. He touches on a difficult relationship with his own Haitian-born father, who disapproved of his dance lust (as a child, Joseph understudied Savion Glover in Broadway's "The Tap Dance Kid"). He ponders marriage, abortion, Bosnia (where he has traveled on a teaching fellowship), 9/11. Speaking to the first-trimester fetus, he bitterly acknowledges feelings of cowardice: "I am wishing you away so I won't have to run."

By some uncommon alchemy -- call it skill, inspiration, certainly artistry -- all the issues dovetail into a pungent examination of the black male experience, especially the culture of violence that has claimed so many of his cohorts in their twenties and thirties. It is all this that makes the idea of raising a son with a casual lover in the 21st century such a daunting experience. And also makes it a chance at redemption.

Joseph, a New York native who now lives in Oakland, Calif., is a former National Poetry Slam champion who has been featured on HBO's "Russell Simmons Def Poetry." He crafted "Word Becomes Flesh" two years ago in the space of several months (after his son, M'Kai, came into the world; during the turbulence of the actual pregnancy, he told me after the show, he "lost his voice as a poet").

The production, which he wrote himself and choreographed with Adia Whitaker, bears distinct slam characteristics: the personal confessional, the aggressive recitation, the encouragement of audience reaction. But Joseph doesn't go the route of in-your-face rant. There are no put-on emotional displays. He doesn't just get mad; he fine-tunes his anger into a literary force of universal relevance.

He is also careful not to alienate anyone in his mixed-race audience -- the only express objects of his anger are long-ago history and the circumstances bred by assorted isms. Joseph's riff on the nasty alliances among racism, capitalism, slavery and self-hate -- which he describes as the most unacknowledged and insidious player in that club of evils -- is a tour de force of rhythmic electricity and rapid-fire, tongue-twisting rhyme.

"Word Becomes Flesh" is at its core a profoundly intimate work. It puts shameful thoughts, secret pleasures, embarrassing truths and all manner of human messiness under the spotlight, and arranges the jumble into what feels like the most glorious of heroic adventures: the journey by which the birth of a baby becomes the rebirth of a man.

Joseph left his audience clamoring for more, and they shall have it.

Dance Place presented "Word Becomes Flesh" with the Washington Performing Arts Society; next April, Dance Place and George Mason University will be among the commissioners of a new work from Joseph called "Scourge," exploring the history of Haiti.

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