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TBA Review: Marc Bamuthi Joseph's "The Living Word Project: the break/s (Work in Progress)"

By Grant Butler

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Umi Vaughan

Marc Bamuthi Joseph moves faster than lightning when he's dancing, but his words and music capture his spirit.

It would be tough to come up with a more complicated title to a piece of performance art than **Marc Bamuthi Joseph's** "The Living Word Project: the break/s (Work in Progress)". Doesn't exactly roll off the tongue, does it?

It also doesn't hint at the amazing feats that Joseph accomplishes in the one-hour-long work, which combines def poetry, b-boy moves, tap dancing and a bit of hip-hop. Dressed simply in a T-shirt, slacks and some spectacularly shiny athletic shoes, Joseph moved across the Gerding Theater stage like a dervish, moving and spinning enough to make the audience sweat right along with him.

Amid all the physical commotion, Joseph shared stories - almost all of them beginning in the middle, a non-linear trick that made it so you had to hang onto every word to understand where the poem was going. Some came directly from the heart, like a remembrance of a grandfather's last night on earth, when multiple out-of-body experiences delivered prophetic and personal connection. Others explored broader themes, like the intersection of racism and capitalism, with each becoming its own distinct, ugly character.

With def poetry, there's always the danger of a work coming unraveled by extremes. I used to watch that HBO series "Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry" and joke "Let's wait for the one where they over-emote ... oh wait, that's *all* of them." Joseph's a veteran of that show, but he's clearly grown as an artist since then. While "the break/s" had its share of unbridled volume, Joseph was the most compelling when he introduced

moments of eerie quiet, like an extremely uncomfortable story about what it was like to visit a hip-hop nightclub in Tokyo.

Joseph exhibited another progression that differs from the heaviness of "Def Poetry." He's really funny.

"I have convinced the powers that be that I'm both high art and hip-hop," he deadpanned. "Ssssh! Don't tell 'em."

Ultimately, Joseph seemed to expand the very concept of hip-hop, taking it beyond a style of music to a cultural frame of mind. Just what exactly is hip-hop, he asked out into the stark silence. It can be Michael Jackson. It can be Stevie Wonder. It's a style of dress. It's an outlook on life. It's folklore, Gospel and order. It's a biblical, ethereal, lyrical miracle.

Much like this performance.

Repeats 8:30 p.m. Saturday-Sunday, Gerding Theater at the Armory, 128 N.W. 11th Ave.

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