

EMISFÉRICA

the break/s

Written and performed by Marc Bamuthi Joseph

For the Living Word Project

Directed by Michael John Garces

NYU Skirball Center for the Performing Arts, September 23- 27, 2008

by Karen Jaime | New York University

the break/s is an autobiographical, multi-media performance that chronicles the journey of Marc Bamuthi Joseph (“Bamuthi”) as a hip-hop instructor both in the United States as well as abroad, including stops in both Senegal and Tokyo. This performance is part of the Hip-Hop Theatre Festival (in partnership with The Center for Multicultural Education and Programs at New York University) running in New York from September 23rd to October 11th. Bamuthi is joined onstage by DJ Excess, an International Turntablist Federation Scratching Category Champion, on one side, and Soulati, a beatboxer and percussionist, on the other. In the middle of the stage there are three screens where Bamuthi’s geographic location is visually articulated in conjunction with the dialogue being performed. Soulati as MC initially sets the tone for the show by asking the audience a series of questions as they enter the space and are looking for their seats. Questions such as “if jazz is the broom that Africans jumped over to become Americans, then what is hip-hop?” and “if you could ask Jay-Z one question what would it be?” firmly situate *the break/s* as a hip-hop performance not only in terms of content but also with respect to form/practice. As hip-hop performance, *the break/s* requires the dialectic, reciprocal relationship of call and response in order to be effective. The aforementioned questions serve not only as critical interventions utilized to disrupt the passive experience of being seated or finding seating, but also operate as Bamuthi’s way to initiate a dialogue with the audience in terms of hip-hop’s history and present while forcing them to reimagine the future.

Bamuthi uses spoken word and dance to effectively engage with issues of race/ethnicity, youth cultures and authenticity. He is able to accomplish this by relaying his personal experiences in places such as Senegal and Tokyo alongside the United States. The questions that Bamuthi initially asks of the audience through Soulati are the same ones he is confronted with himself through his travels. This technique serves Bamuthi as hip-hop instructor well as it forces the audience to search for their own respective answers by engaging with the material on a personal level.

Bamuthi utilizes his experiences in Senegal as an entrance into a discourse on race and through this, complicates the way in which Blackness and hip-hop are performed, received and ultimately defined. For example, while in Senegal struggling with cash, he contacts someone whom he knows is also in Senegal. This person happens to be a white woman, who is actually treated as more of a native than he is because she speaks the language, engages in political/social work there and has lived there longer. She has

established a connection with the place and its people that extends beyond the physical. *She* is the one that introduces Bamuthi to the people that he is seeking to connect with through hip-hop. This experience refers back to one of the questions posed at the beginning of the performance wherein Soulati asked the audience what they thought/felt about white people participating in hip-hop. In essence, this question is asking the audience to complicate their thinking on race beyond physical signifiers and previous markers of belonging.

Bamuthi extends this discourse further by relaying his experience in a hip-hop club in Tokyo. Through his humorous description of being the only black person in a hip-hop club full of Asians he addresses issues of authenticity, essentialism and the consumerist fetish. Bamuthi's belief that he represents hip-hop authenticity in this particular situation, *because* he is black, is challenged by the Asians in the club who pay little to no attention to his presence. He is *not* treated as the physical representation of the hip-hop that they listen to and purchase, but rather as just another hip-hop lover, regardless of his self-professed hip-hop pedigree of being born and bred in the borough of Queens in New York. Through his performance, the quizzical facial expressions, his uproking in conjunction with the dialogue—“authenticity is in the building”—hip-hop is presented as a transcultural, transnational, global entity where “realness” is a subject that is open for discussion.

Bamuthi also deals with the issue of hip-hop as youth culture. Soulati's preshow question “if you could ask Jay-Z one question, what would it be?” serves as a precursor to this segment of the show. Working on a hip-hop publication during his undergraduate years, Bamuthi is presented with the opportunity to interview an older (by rap standards) performer, yet he is more interested in smoking marijuana than in asking any significant questions of said performer. The erroneous assumption made by a young Bamuthi at the time is that hip-hop as youth culture is not a place where this older rapper is going to succeed. Unfortunately for Bamuthi, this hip-hop artist turned out to be Jay-Z, one of the most successful and influential hip-hop artists/moguls of all time. Again, the audience is presented with a situation wherein preconceived notions are challenged.

the break/s as a show about hip-hop is successful because of Bamuthi's dialogue with the audience through spoken word and dance. His skill as a spoken word artist and dancer—on stage he is a whirlwind of modern dance mixed with African dance and old-school b-boying—evidence his experience as both a choreographer and National Poetry Slam champion. His attire of an orange shirt, khaki cargo pants, and low top Nikes is ambiguous. The trope of hip-hop aesthetics is not what he is invested in through his performance. Bamuthi does not speak in “ebonics” and even labels himself as “safe”. Yet the questions he poses are anything but safe. Bamuthi is forcing us to analyze hip-hop not only as a commodity or aesthetic practice but, more importantly, where hip-hop operates as a reflection of a transglobal future where age, race and geographic location fail to define it.