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Minotaur or The King's Bull. By Jonathon Ward.
Urban Youth Theater, Henry Street Settlement
Abrons Arts Center, New York. 23 July 1999
(performance review)

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MINOTAUR; OR, THE KING'S BULL. By Jonathon Ward. Urban Youth Theater, Henry Street Settlement Abrons Arts Center, New York. 23 July 1999.

One might wonder why a classical Greek myth would be of any interest to a company like Urban Youth Theater. *Minotaur; or, the King's Bull* has more to do with how young adults engage a Greek myth than with how well they reproduce it. The journey of this project is crucial to the understanding of the production itself. Henry Street Settlement Abrons Arts Center stands at the crossroads of Little Italy, Chinatown, and the shopping area of Orchard and Delancey Street. No other place exemplifies the meaning of cultural diversity like the Lower East Side, also known as *Loisaida*. This neighborhood has a population of mostly Latinos, Asians, and Jews. The teen company of Henry Street Settlement's Urban Youth Theater consists of approximately thirty-five participants, many of whom are young US Latinos or African Americans from all over the metropolitan area.

Minotaur brought an ancient Greek myth to life with hip-hop beats, rap songs, and dances interwoven among the voices of the teen company. Similar

to ancient Greek theatre, the performance of *Minotaur* was to take place at an amphitheater located by the Henry Street Settlement entrance, but the heat wave in July forced the performance indoors. The hip-hop motifs, however, resembled the oral and lyrical qualities of classical Greek theatre. Also, the production did not use lighting equipment, but relied solely on daylight coming through the theatre's windows. Portable flats and small blocks painted in red, yellow, or blue extended into the audience mapping out the structure of a labyrinth. The natural lighting and inclusive set pulled the audience closer to the contemporary reality of the play.

The performance began with a disc jockey playing hip-hop beats from the seventies while performers rapped lyrics about King Minos of Crete. The plot followed Minos' sacrifice of young Athenian males to the Minotaur, a half-bull, half-human monster. When Theseus, one of the sacrificial youths, slays the Minotaur, Minos' power and leadership collapse.

Rap songs and breakdancing heightened the dramatic conflict of the play by setting up confrontational scenarios between rivals. For example, a rap song turned into a battle between Theseus and



The cast of *Minotaur; or, the King's Bull*, Henry Street Settlement Urban Youth Theater, directed by José Joaquín García. Photo: Tom Brazil.

King Minos, displaying Theseus' witty manipulation of language. The Athenian youths also demonstrated protest by using a popping and locking dance technique. The continuous, abrupt snapping of the performers' joints represented the anger, struggle, and resistance of the Athenian youths.

Prior to the production, members of Urban Youth Theater participated in weekly workshops guided by Latino hip-hop artists such as Latin Empire and members of Rock Steady Crew, who were at the forefront of the hip-hop movement in the seventies. This intergenerational encounter enriched the theatrical process and product, which was not about memorizing steps or songs for a production but about understanding the political and social implications of hip-hop styles.

Jonathon Ward, the director of the Drama Program at Henry Street Settlement and the playwright of the *Minotaur*, witnessed the development of his written work as Latin Empire vocally choreographed the piece. With the collaboration of members in Urban Youth Theater, Latin Empire transformed some of the playwright's lyrical poems into a series of Latin raps. This rap duo, featuring Crazy Taino and Puerto Rock, was one of the first groups to create bilingual Latino rap. In the workshops, Crazy Taino and Puerto Rock encouraged teens to rap in Spanish and English using the beat of *salsa* and *merengue*. The use of Spanish produced a sense of collective identity and agency allowing the Latinos in the company to imagine themselves as part of a larger hip-hop community.

Legendary hip-hop dancers and original members of Rock Steady Crew, such as Crazy Legs and Pop Master Fable, provided teens with the fundamental steps of breakdancing so they could later customize their own moves. Rock Steady Crew, a mostly Puerto Rican hip-hop group also founded in the seventies, now tours internationally and nationally sharing their hip-hop moves with the world. Pop Master Fable, the inventor of popping and locking, choreographed the piece under the direction of José Joaquín García. García and Elizabeth Hernández, the vocal coach and assistant director, trained the teens to think of themselves as performers collectively working in an ensemble.

The production of *Minotaur* was not only a reinterpretation of an ancient Greek myth, but an opportunity for Latino hip-hop artists to pass down a cultural tradition to the next generation. Latino artists situated hip-hop as a social movement, and the teen performers physically embodied this in the songs and dance. In this way, the Athenian rebellion became the breaking of stereotypes often associated with urban youths. The performers beau-

tifully portrayed this act of resistance when Theseus took Minos' golden crown, wore it, and passed it down for all the Athenians to wear.

The story of the *Minotaur* did not end with the conclusion of the plot; rather, the performers formed a circle and each one stepped to the center to demonstrate their dance skills while encouraging the audience to participate. Finally, the director addressed the audience and reminded them that the performance was a gift by and from the future generation. The teens in the company are not caught in the labyrinth of life; instead, they are searching and successfully finding their way out of the maze.

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