

Hip-hop theatrical

Daniel Banks has the gift of the gab when it comes to initiating significant cultural conversations.

The New York University academic and his baseball cap have become a familiar sight in the Market Theatre precinct over the past few weeks where he has been networking, workshoping, watching performances and talking.

After spending three months at the University of Ghana, exploring his speciality of hip-hop theatre, Dr Banks made his first visit to South Africa courtesy of the US Consulate's Culture Connect programme.

"I've known for a very long time that I've had a date with South Africa," he explains, "and it's really extraordinary to be here. This is no accident. On the night of the millennium off the coast of Salvador, in Brazil, I realised that I needed to bring Brazil, South Africa and the United States together in my Reassembling the Diaspora Project, where people get to share their stories.

"There's something about being here for me that works on a very deep level, unlike East or West Africa. It's this strange sense of familiarity and feeling that I've gone through the looking glass to the other side. It's utopia, it's hell and a garden all at the same time.

"As a person unclassified, and unclassifiable, in the US there's a way in which I get to move, and be here, in which I'm both freer and more restricted at the same time. I would need to write a poem, or dance a dance to describe it because there's no literal language to express it."

First stop was The Market Theatre – "one of the three theatres in the world I want to direct in before I die". As it turned out he could only direct a staged reading, at the Market Lab, of *Blurring Shine* by Zakiyyah Alexander, a young black female American writer. This choice reflected his interest in new writing with an edge, dealing as it does with urban, racial, and economic issues.

But his special gift is to facilitate debate and inspire, which he did in a master class with five young directors as part of the Lab's recent Community Theatre Festival and in a week-long hip-hop theatre work-group. The participants of actors, DJs, rappers, producers, dancers and poets included Napo Masheane and Bradley Williams (DJ Bionic).

"That week three of us had dreams, the same night, about an international company of people coming together, doing

Taking the aesthetics and politics of hip-hop culture to the world is on this theatre director's mind, writes **Adrienne Sichel**

this work, taking it into communities around the world to give youth performers a platform to express themselves through both their craft of theatre and the aesthetics and politics of hip-hop."

Banks is a walking compendium on the history of the American hip-hop movement and the emergence of hip-hop theatre. The coining of this term is attributed to British dancer Jonzi D, in 1992, who is currently back in Mzansi performing and directing a local hip-hop opera.

One definition Banks quotes about this theatrical genre is by Danny Hoch, founder of the Hip-Hop Theatre Festival in New York City. Hoch says it is "theatre by, for and about, the hip-hop generation". Some hold that hip-hop theatre has to have at least one of the performance elements such as emceeing, deejaying, graffiti art or b-boying ...

"I've been wrestling with another definition of it. There are so many struggles now to assert that hip-hop is a culture and not just a commercial record industry. There is good evidence that every culture has its own form of ritual and ritual is important, it keeps the history in the

present moment. It's very much like the Ghanaian Sankofa bird which looks backward when it's flying forward. Because without a past you have no future."

Banks is currently editing an anthology of hip-hop theatre for the University of Michigan Press and is enthralled by the contradictions he encounters.

"Those of us creating it, and those people performing it, live contradictory lifestyles. We live in-between the limitations of language in terms of culture, ethnicity, sexuality and spirituality. Spirituality is a h-u-g-e part of hip-hop culture which is missing from what Tower or Virgin Records call hip-hop. We have to start asserting the contradictions. We have to re-frame and re-language all of this so that the complexity is what we celebrate. We must distill it somehow."

His own history is telling. "I was an actor who was told I was un-castable because I was too 'ethnic'-looking. I went into choreography and directing."

While teaching at the NYU drama department he was encouraged to do his PhD in performance studies. His dissertation was titled: "Performing the minstrel mask – black-face and the technology of identity".

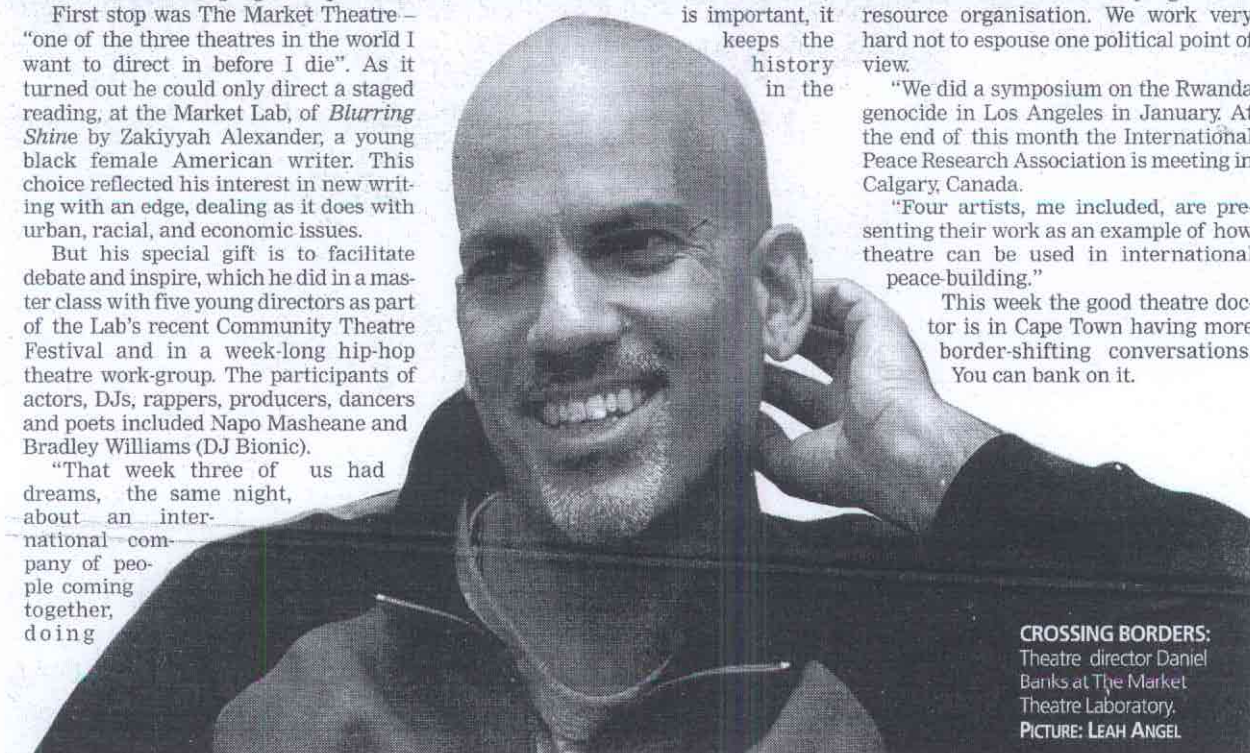
Nor surprising then that issues of oppression and identity are central to his artistic approach, which is reinforced by his serving on the steering committee of Theatre without Borders, a two-year-old volunteer body of international artists.

"We are concerned with keeping international exchange present both in our own work and the agendas of our governments. We're not a lobbying but a resource organisation. We work very hard not to espouse one political point of view.

"We did a symposium on the Rwanda genocide in Los Angeles in January. At the end of this month the International Peace Research Association is meeting in Calgary, Canada.

"Four artists, me included, are presenting their work as an example of how theatre can be used in international peace-building."

This week the good theatre doctor is in Cape Town having more border-shifting conversations. You can bank on it.



CROSSING BORDERS: Theatre director Daniel Banks at The Market Theatre Laboratory. PICTURE: LEAH ANGEL