

HIP-HOP DREAMS BURST TO LIFE IN 'HOW WE GOT ON'

By Don Aucoin
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In Company One's "How We Got On," an aspiring 1980s rapper named Julian articulates the goal of striving young artists in all times and places and genres, spacing it out into two sentences for emphasis: "I will. Be seen."

LET ME TRY A SIMILAR APPROACH REGARDING "HOW WE GOT ON." IT SHOULD. BE SEEN.

Not that this buoyant production of Idris Goodwin's play is something you merely see. Under the fluid direction of Summer L. Williams, with energetic and precisely tuned performances from her talented cast of four, "How We Got On" is also something you hear — in the fullest sense of that word — and experience, and feel.

With this New England premiere of "How We Got On," which premiered last year at the Humana Festival of New American Plays, Williams adds to her record of consistently good work. She has helmed, just to name a few, a fine Lyric Stage Company production of Lynn Nottage's "By the Way, Meet Vera Stark" as well as first-rate Company One productions of "The Brothers Size" and "Marcus; Or the Secret of Sweet," two plays in Tarell Alvin McCraney's trilogy, "The Brother/Sister Plays."

For all of its free-flowing atmosphere, punctuated by frequent rap performances, "How We Got On" is tightly structured, with very few wasted moments during the course of 80 fast-moving minutes.

The play follows the classic coming-of-age arc as it chronicles the birth and pursuit of a dream. In this case, the dream is to attain rap stardom. The dreamers are a trio of 15-year-olds in an unnamed Midwestern suburb called only "The Hill." It's the summer of 1988, and "Yo! MTV Raps" has just come on the air, building a wider audience for hip-hop. Janie E. Howland's set, a series of cubes whose facades consist of cassette tapes, establishes the '80s mood.



Photos by Craig Bailey/Perspective Photos

WHEN IT COMES TO COMPANY ONE'S "HOW WE GOT ON," THE AUDIENCE CAN COUNT THEMSELVES AMONG THE WINNERS.

The trio's most combustible member is Julian, portrayed by recent Emerson College graduate Jared Brown, who skillfully communicates the character's blend of outward cockiness and private self-doubt. Kadahj Bennett is superb as Hank, capturing the comedic possibilities of the youth's nerdy awkwardness but also conveying the depth and fervency of his ambitions. Then there's Luann, portrayed by Cloteal Horne with an air of breezy unstoppableness. At first glance, Luann seems an unlikely rapper, with her penny loafers, knee socks, and plaid skirt. But rhymes just pour out of her, and her skill at improvisation gives her more confidence than Hank and Julian combined.

Their tale is narrated from the present day by a DJ called "Selector," portrayed by Miranda Craigwell, who sits in a raised booth on a corner of the stage, spinning records. Craigwell turns in another vivid performance to join her memorable recent portrayals of the tragic Oya in Company One's production of McCraney's "In the Red and Brown Water," her witty turn as Silvia in Actors' Shakespeare Project's "Two Gentlemen of Verona," and her quiet force as Susan, a junior member of a law firm in David Mamet's "Race," at New Repertory Theatre.

"How We Got On" offers an entertaining and illuminating history lesson while anatomizing the nuts and bolts of building a recording career, with glimpses of the way new technology, such as drum machines, can change the game. But it is the close but contentious relationship between Hank and Julian that drives much of the play.

After a brief encounter in basketball camp, they square off for a rap battle in the parking lot of a new mall. Julian shows up wearing brand-new Michael Jordan sneakers, a vinyl jacket, and a gold chain around his neck. He proceeds to trounce Hank, though it turns out he's not quite playing fair. In any case, it's clear that Hank is better at writing rap songs than at performing them, while it's the reverse for Julian.

The hip-hop scene is burgeoning, but is there room for a couple of rappers from the suburbs? Hank thinks so. Julian isn't so sure, especially after he pays a return visit to the city neighborhood where he used to live. He's also trying to prove himself to his stern and remote father, who dismisses Julian's beatboxing as "farting noises." Hank is also straining to win his father's approval, primarily by persuading dad that rap has academic validity.

But Hank has a far better reason for loving the music, which he spells out early on in the play: "Because everybody, well most people in real life, they take an 'L.' Rich people. Poor. Handsome people. Ugly. Citizens. Immigrants. Everybody takes a loss. But in a rap song, you're the winner, even if you're small, you're fat, even if you're black and you live in The Hill."

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Don Aucoin can be reached at aucoin@globe.com.