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Things to Do

Time Out New York Kids / Issue 41 : Mar 1-31, 2009

Review

Black Violin

New Victory Theater. Conceived and designed by Wilner Baptiste and Kevin Sylvester. 60 min. No intermission.

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The seats at the New Victory really get in the way during *Black Violin*, a raucous, rousing, genre-busting performance piece that dares the audience to get up and dance—assuming you can find the space. (Security won't let you on stage, so don't even try.) The band, particularly frontmen Wilner Baptiste and Kevin Sylvester, encourage everyone to defy convention and follow their instincts, just as the two men did when they decided to combine their virtuosic violin and viola skills

with their love of hip-hop. The Miami-based duo has played with the likes of P. Diddy and Alicia Keys and is one of the few groups out there that fuses seemingly incongruous musical styles, from reggae to rap, jazz to classical. They count Shostakovich and Jay-Z among their influences, and during this hour-long set they cover the Fugees, J.S. Bach and Cold Play.

But their self-titled show is more than just a concert. Decked out in jeans and oversize tees, the guys—who met at a Florida public high school where they began to develop their signature stylistic mash-up—engage in adorably goofy banter, freestyle and even do battle just as rappers do, only with strings instead of stinging remarks. They also chat about their humble beginnings, and share the cliché but clearly heartfelt message that kids should follow their dreams, no matter how offbeat.

It should be noted that a number of folks walked out during the show, so it's definitely not for everyone. (If the subway's too loud for you, bring earplugs.) Then again, there were a lot of adult fans there sans kids. *Black Violin* is not your parents' kids' show—unless mom and dad happen to have Nas on their iPod. If you're a parent like me, you probably do.—*Raven Snook*

Black Violin is playing at the New Victory Theater through Mar 22. Tickets: \$12.50—\$35.



Black Violin
Photo by Colin Brennan

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Inspiration in passionate playing

By Alison Mayes

THEATRE REVIEW

Black Violin

Manitoba Theatre for Young People

To Jan. 30

Tickets: \$13.60

4 stars

Nobody thought it was cool to carry around a viola or violin case when Wil B and Kev Marcus were urban teens in Florida.

But the two African-American friends with a passion for stringed instruments got the last laugh.

As the duo Black Violin told a captivated audience of school kids on Thursday morning, they've applied their own hip-hop "spice" to their extensive classical training.

That has enabled them to tour the world and perform with such high-profile artists as Kanye West, Alicia Keys and Linkin Park.

Black Violin's slammin' one-hour concert at Manitoba Theatre for Young People has to rank as the sweetest school field trip of the year. The show, suitable for ages 10 and up, also has public performances tonight and next weekend; in fact MTYP has added an extra one on Jan. 29.

The likable Marcus and Wil B, who are in their late 20s, set a playful school-ditching tone at Thursday's show by rhythmically rapping, "Put your books down! Get your hands up!" and soon had every kid pumping both hands in the air. The heavyset Marcus, who played electric violin, wore baggy jeans, a T-shirt and a backwards ball cap.

The contrastingly slim Wil B, on acoustic viola, was in black shorts, a knit cap and a T-shirt from Harlem's legendary Apollo Theater, which honoured the duo with an award in 2005.

They're a classy pair who obviously love to connect with kids.

Ace drummer "Beatdown" McQueen laid down a complex array of hip-hop beats on one raised platform, while DJ TK played host with a turntable, microphone and computer for pre-recorded tracks on another.

One flaw of the show was that it was impossible to make out the lyrics when pre-recorded rap was played. The overall volume level, though, was appropriate -- loud without being numbing.

The two string artists credit jazz violinist Stuff Smith as their greatest influence. Their minor-key, often gypsy-like sound brought to mind another swing violin great, Stéphane Grappelli, who recorded with Smith.

Métis and klezmer fiddling also popped to mind as the pair's bows blazed across the strings, often with furious speed and intensity. At one point Marcus flipped his bow into the air like a baton and neatly caught it.

A freestyle segment showed off the duo's ability to improvise.

B.B. King may have his guitar Lucille, but Wil B has Tiffany, his viola. "She" sounded especially soulful and melancholy on The Fugees' *Ready or Not*. It was one of several well-known hits that got effective string spins, including Coldplay's *Viva La Vida*.

Another highlight came when the pair announced they would "throw some stink on Bach." Opening with unadorned baroque interplay, they built the classical piece into a fierce, funk-ed-up wall of sound.

When Marcus accused Wil B of messing up -- playing a nonexistent H instead of a G - - it set the stage for a boastful battle to determine which fiddler was supreme.

Such cocky showmanship is not what you'd expect from guys who were educated to play in symphony orchestras. But Black Violin is a living advertisement for creative self-determination.

The pair kept their pep-talk about hard work and reaching for the stars to a minimum. The inspiring message was right there in their passionate playing.

alison.mayes@freepress.mb.ca

Republished from the Winnipeg Free Press print edition January 23, 2010 C8

The New York Times

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March 20, 2009

Spare Times: For Children

By **LAUREL GRAEBER**

BLACK VIOLIN

Last Friday middle school students crammed the New Victory Theater, swaying in their seats, waving their arms high, cocking their heads in rhythm to the musicians onstage, who included a busy D.J. and an enthusiastic drummer. With the stomping and the turntables, the electronic amplification and the velvety darkness, the limitless energy and the youthful vibe, the setting could have been any pop concert, except for the piece being played: an excerpt from the “Brandenburg” Concertos.

But this wasn’t the “Brandenburg” as Bach envisioned it. “We’re going to spice it up a little bit,” Wilner Baptiste, known as Wil-B (above left), told the crowd. He and Kevin Sylvester, a.k.a. Kev Marcus (above right), look less likely to appear onstage with a symphony orchestra than with [Alicia Keys](#) or the [Wu-Tang Clan](#) (and in fact they have). But Wil-B, on acoustic viola, and Kev Marcus, on electric violin, are both classically trained musicians, who, with the D.J. Dwayne Dayal and the percussionist Jermaine McQueen, make up Black Violin. They borrowed the name from an old jazz album, but Black Violin also expresses their identities as young men who mix the brashness and beats of urban hip-hop with the soaring lines and fleet finger work of orchestral virtuosos.

What’s most amazing is how great it sounds. In addition to the funky “Brandenburg,” during a one-hour set the group explores old Motown riffs from [the Temptations](#) (“Ain’t No Words to This Song”), contemporary hip-hop (the [Fugees](#)’ “Ready or Not”) and its own genre-busting compositions like “Jammin’,” which pairs insistent drumbeats and rap with fast and furious strings. The musicians finished with Coldplay’s “Viva la Vida,” as if to say, “Yeah, we can do the Brit thing too.”

Black Violin’s performances also include an improvisatory interlude and what you might call “Dueling Viols,” a competition that Wil-B and Kev Marcus ask the audience to judge. Along the way they promote education and practice. “I could not have done anything without the fundamentals — classical,” Wil-B said. It seems they’ve managed another ingenious combination: hipness and wholesomeness. (Friday at 7 p.m., with a postshow discussion; Saturday at 2 and 7 p.m.; Sunday at noon and 5 p.m.; 209 West 42nd Street, Manhattan, 646-223-3010, newvictory.org; \$12.50, \$25 and \$35; \$8.75 to \$24.50 for members.) LAUREL GRAEBER

‘ADVENTURES WITH DORA AND DIEGO’ (Friday through Sunday, and Tuesday through Thursday) The young Latino stars of the Nickelodeon animated television series “Dora the Explorer” and “Go, Diego, Go!” have taken their expeditions into new territory at the Children’s Museum of Manhattan, whose exhibition has separate Dora and Diego environments, including Diego’s Animal Rescue Center and Dora’s Fiesta. Intended for ages 2 to 6, the interactive, bilingual displays are designed to teach language, science and music skills, as well as facts about Latin America. From 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Tisch Building, 212 West 83rd Street, (212) 721-1223, cmom.org. Free with museum admission: \$10; \$7 for 65+; free for under 12 and members.

‘ANNA’S PERFECT PARTY AND THE AMAZING MAGICIAN’S MARVELOUS MISTAKE’ (Saturday and Sunday) Young Anna, the heroine of this new play by Karin Diann Williams, is a perfectionist, and her determination to have everything just right tends to make many matters go all wrong. In this production for ages 3 to 10 at the Looking Glass Theater, Anna meets a magician whose attempts to satisfy her desire for the perfect spell cause unexpected complications. (Through April 5.) Saturdays at noon and 2 p.m.; Sundays at 2 and 4 p.m.; 422 West 57th Street, Clinton, (212) 352-3101, lookingglasstheatrenyc.com; \$15; \$12 for 12 and under.

‘ARCHAEOLOGY ZONE: DISCOVERING TREASURES FROM PLAYGROUNDS TO PALACES’ (Sunday through Thursday) Children will step into the shoes of an explorer like Indiana Jones in this exhibition at the [Jewish Museum](#), but the adventures will be purely scholarly. Still, there is plenty of excitement in analyzing artifacts like a jar handle, a clay jug and a bangle and figuring out the purpose behind ancient pieces like a Greek helmet and a bull-shaped vessel. This interactive show also includes a recreated room from the Ottoman period (about 1900), where young archaeologists can dress in costume. (Through June 15.) From 11 a.m. to 5:45 p.m. (until 8 p.m. on Thursdays), the Jewish Museum, 1109 Fifth Avenue, at 92nd Street, (212) 423-3200, thejewishmuseum.org. Free with admission: \$12; \$10 for 65+; \$7.50 for students; free for under 12 and members.

BIG MOVIES FOR LITTLE KIDS (Monday) This series is intended to introduce small children (though all ages are welcome) to classic films. The latest show, “Curly Top” (1935), also stars a classic performer: [Shirley Temple](#), singing “Animal Crackers in My Soup” and other melodies from a more innocent age. At 4 p.m., Cobble Hill Cinemas, 265 Court Street, at Butler Street, Brooklyn, (718) 596-4995, bigmoviesforlittlekids.blogspot.com; \$6.50.

‘BUILDING BRAINSTORM’ (Friday through Sunday, and Wednesday and Thursday) The next generation of budding architects can try out their designs at this new exhibition at the Brooklyn Children’s Museum. The bilingual display (English and Spanish) invites children to build model high-rises, houses and crawl-through spaces while devising solutions to architectural and engineering challenges. The fun also includes working with textures and materials. (Through May 3.) Hours: Friday, Wednesday and Thursday, noon to 5 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; 145 Brooklyn Avenue, at St. Marks Avenue, Crown Heights, (718) 735-4400, brooklynkids.org. Free with admission: \$7.50; free for members and under 12.

‘LA CENERENTOLA’ (Saturday and Sunday) Every culture seems to have its “Cinderella.” In this opera by Rossini, the wicked adult is a stepfather instead of a stepmother; the helping hand comes from a philosopher; and the prince does some masquerading of his own. Part of Dicapò Opera Theater’s Opera for Kids series, this one-hour version is geared to ages 6 and older. At 11 a.m., Dicapò Opera Theater, St. Jean Baptiste Church, 184 East 76th Street, Manhattan, (212) 288-9438, Ext. 10, dicapo.com; \$20; \$10 for children.

‘CENICIENTA’ (‘CINDERELLA’) (Saturday) The heroine could easily lose her glass slipper dancing the tango in this Latin-flavored musical from Teatro SEA, presented in an easily understood combination of English and Spanish. The production also features a surprise: an unexpected character who fills in for the ill fairy godmother. (Through March 28.) At 3 p.m., Los Kabayitos Puppet and Children’s Theater, Clemente Soto Vélaz Cultural Center, 107 Suffolk Street, at Rivington Street, Lower East Side, (212) 529-1545, sea-online.info; \$15; \$12.50 for 2 to 12; free for under 2.

‘CIRCUS INCOGNITUS’ (Saturday) How can one man be an entire circus? Jamie Adkins, an alumnus of Cirque Éloize and Cirque du Soleil, demonstrates in this show. He can juggle, clown, perform acrobatics and walk on a wire — sometimes simultaneously. At 1:30 p.m., TriBeCa Performing Arts Center, Borough of Manhattan Community College, 199 Chambers Street, (212) 220-1460, tribecapac.org; \$25.

‘DEAR EDWINA’ (Friday through Sunday, and Monday, Wednesday and Thursday) What if [Ann Landers](#) had been a child — and she could sing? Then she might have been Edwina Spoonapple, the young heroine of this charming new musical by Zina Goldrich and Marcy Heisler (“Junie B. Jones”). Edwina is an advice columnist who delivers her counsel

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Black Violin

nytheatre.com review

Rohana Elias-Reyes · March 14, 2009

Kids have no expectations about what a violin should or should not do; neither do Kev Marcus and Wil-B of *Black Violin*. They move comfortably between genres: from jazz to rap, from hip-hop to classical, and since they have the chops to back it up, this is a beautiful thing.

The New Victory Theater is another beautiful thing. It's a gorgeous little theater, and more than that, it's an organization that gets kids and their parents. I arrived juggling a bag of swim class gear with a sleeping kid slung over my shoulder and another in desperate need of a bathroom. No problem. The bathroom was clean and complete with a stool, the theater has lockers where you can stow your kid's stuff free of charge, and no fewer than three staff members asked me if they could help. "That's ok," I said, as I gently placed my son on the ground, loaded up the locker, and then stepped back...on to my son's hand. Amazingly he woke up in a good mood and ready to hear some music.

So in we went to my kids' first hip-hop concert experience complete with smoke machine, body-vibrating beats from drummer Beatdown, and scratching and mixing from DJ TK. My five-year-old daughter was instantly mesmerized and shortly busting moves that she must've learned in her Brooklyn kindergarten. Her three-year-old little brother was throwing his hands in the air and clapping along to the irresistible beat. That being said, do heed the recommendation that the show is best for kids six and up; though my kids had a great time, they were really too young and sticking out the last 15 minutes was tough for them.

I would have liked more consistent balance during the performance. There were moments when the tracks from DJ TK and the rhythm from Beatdown were so powerful, and just so loud, that I could barely hear Kev or Wil-B. Whenever I could hear the strings, they were great. Will-B played his viola "Tiffany" to great effect on the Fugees "Ready or Not" and both shone in an interpretation of Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto No. 3*, though they neglected to mention the composer or work, and simply announced they were going to play "some classical." A fun part of the show was a playing contest between the two musicians.

In the end, *Black Violin* is not an edgier more urban *Little Einsteins* and its mission is not to teach kids that allegro means fast or adagio means slow. However, the kids may learn that freestyle is another way to say improvise; that old-school can mean the Temptations, Slick Rick and Doug E Fresh, or someone really old school—like Johann Sebastian Bach; and that all of these things and more are fair game for a couple of string players, a DJ, and a drummer. In fact, if the kids are really paying attention, they may notice that members of *Black Violin* don't just make music—they are constantly listening and responding to each other through music. So while the set the group played is probably identical to what they do for an adult audience, there is a great takeaway for kids: if you work hard and you love what you do, not only can playing the violin be really cool, it is also a lot of fun.

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Message has strings attached: Work hard for what you want

By: Alison Mayes
20/01/2010 1:00 AM

His stage name, Wil B, sounds like it's from the rap realm. His baggy clothes and ball caps suggest the same.

Theatre Preview

Black Violin

Friday and Saturday at 7:30 p.m.;
Jan. 30 at 4 p.m.
Tickets \$13.60 at 942-8898 or
www.mtyp.ca

But Wil B is a classically trained viola player. With homeboy violinist Kev Marcus, he mixes highbrow with hip-hop in genre-busting performances influenced by composers from J.S. Bach to Jay-Z.

The Florida duo, known as Black Violin, performs school and public shows -- recommended for ages 10 and up -- at Manitoba Theatre for Young People from Thursday through Jan. 30.

In terms of rubbing shoulders with stars, they're probably one of the best-connected acts ever to hit the MTYP stage.

One of their big breaks came in 2004, when they accompanied Alicia Keys at the Billboard Music Awards. Since then, they've toured the world as an opening act for the likes of Akon and Wu-Tang Clan, and worked with stars such as P. Diddy, Kanye West, Fifty Cent and Aerosmith.

They're bringing along a DJ and a hip-hop drummer, Jermaine (Beatdown) McQueen. Improvisation and friendly competition between the "duelling" viola and violin are part of the show.

Wil B, 28, was born in The Bahamas and immigrated to the United States with his family when he was about 11. Speaking by phone from Fort Lauderdale, Fla., he says he probably would have taken a negative path if he hadn't been encouraged to develop his musical talent.

"It kind of shakes me inside just to think about . . . what I might have been into, if I didn't have music to motivate me to do better things," he says.

A school security guard who had been a saxophone player heard the 14-year-old Wil B drumming on tables and told him he should join the school band. The boy tried to sign up as a sax player, but was accidentally put in the string program -- a mistake he now calls a blessing. He made an "instant connection" with the viola and never looked back.

He and Marcus, now 27, met at the Dillard High School of Performing Arts in Fort Lauderdale, an inner-city public school where acceptance was by audition. Both later won full music scholarships to universities.

One of Marcus's professors gave him a tape of an influential, hard-swinging African-American jazz violinist named Stuff Smith. It changed the pair's lives, making them realize they could synthesize all the styles they loved: classical, jazz, R & B, hip-hop, even reggae and gypsy.

"(Smith) made us think, 'Wow -- you can honestly do whatever you want with this violin.' He played with such soul, such enthusiasm. We couldn't stop listening to it. It was a huge influence."

The pair named themselves Black Violin after Smith's final solo album, released shortly before his death in 1967.

Their own self-titled CD came out in 2008. The album cover is a drawing of an African-American boy playing a violin while walking a tightrope over a city street.

It's an image that implies a confident balancing act between genres, says Wil B. It also suggests that music has lifted the boy up. "He's very comfortable. He's not afraid. He loves music. He's not down below (on the street), where all the violence can possibly be."

In their shows for young people, Black Violin's message is to find what you love, then work your butt off to succeed at it.

"Look, we're doing something that no one would think would be possible," he says.

"Whatever you're doing, do it to the fullest. Whether it's music, or you're an English major or a chemist, or you love computers, think outside the box and set your own direction."

alison.mayes@freepress.mb.ca

Republished from the Winnipeg Free Press print edition January 20, 2010 D3