

Winnipeg Free Press

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