

HYPE MAN: a break beat play

by **Idris Goodwin**

directed by **Jess McLeod**

Sept. 11–Oct. 13, 2019



PLAY GUIDE

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ABOUT THIS PLAY GUIDE

This play guide is a resource designed to enhance your theatre experience. Its goal is twofold: to nurture the teaching and learning of theatre arts and to encourage essential questions that lead to an enduring understanding of the play's meaning and relevance. Inside you will find information about the plot and characters within the play, as well as articles that contextualize the play and its production at Actors Theatre of Louisville. Oral discussion and writing prompts encourage your students to reflect upon their impressions, analyze key ideas and relate them to their personal experiences and the world around them. These prompts can easily be adapted to fit most writing objectives. We encourage you to adapt and extend the material in any way that best fits the needs of your community of learners. Please feel free to make copies of this guide, or you may download it from our website at actorstheatre.org. We hope this material, combined with our pre-show workshops, will give you the tools to make your time at Actors Theatre a valuable learning experience.

HYPE MAN STUDENT MATINEES AND THIS PLAY GUIDE ADDRESS SPECIFIC EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES:

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.1
Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.2
Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.3
Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.5
Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.6
Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7
Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.2
Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS

TH.Re7.1 Perceive and analyze artistic work.

TH.Re8.1 Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

TH.Re9.1 Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

TH.Cn10.1 Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

TH.Cn11.1 Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

If you have any questions or suggestions regarding our play guides, please contact Abigail Miskowiec, Learning & Creative Engagement Associate, at 502.584.1265 ext.3065.

**LEARNING
& CREATIVE
ENGAGEMENT
ASSOCIATES**

Janelle Renee Dunn
Abigail Miskowiec

**RESIDENT
TEACHING ARTISTS**

Clare Hagan
Alyssa Rae Hendricks
Keith McGill
Talleri McRae
Morgan Younge

**LEARNING
& CREATIVE
ENGAGEMENT
APPRENTICES**

Michaela Barczak
Matthew Dryburgh

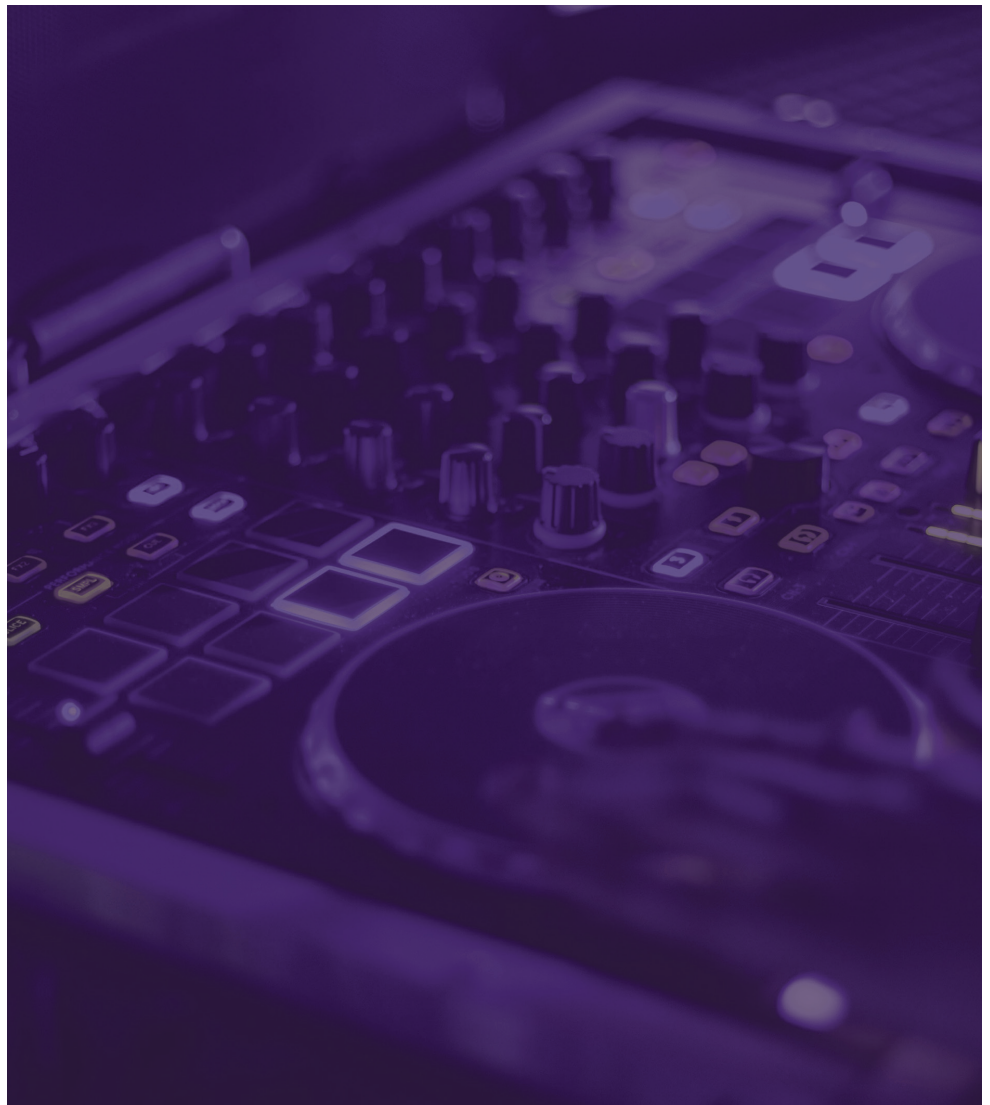
PLAY GUIDE BY

Emma Leff
Abigail Miskowiec

GRAPHIC DESIGN

Sheyenne Santiago

316 West Main Street
Louisville, KY 40202-4218



HYPE MAN: A BREAK BEAT PLAY SYNOPSIS

Hip-hop artist Pinnacle and his back-up rapper, Verb, have been laying down tracks together since childhood. Add the skills of genius beatmaker Peep One and a TV appearance to the mix, and their group might finally have it made. But when local police shoot an unarmed black teen, Verb feels called to respond—raising questions about whether it's the trio's responsibility as artists to speak out for justice. A timely play about using your voice, filled with explosive energy and electric rhymes.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

VERB: African American male, early 30s. Verb has been the hype man for Pinnacle since they were teenagers. They have recently found more widespread success. Verb has a complicated past with alcohol, drugs and partying. He has recently sought professional help for his substance abuse.

PINNACLE: White male, early 30s. Pinnacle is a rapper and Verb's longtime friend.

PEEP ONE: Female, mixed race, mid- 20s. The beatmaker. The newest addition to the group, she creates instrumental beats and tracks.

THE SETTING

Hype Man takes place in a shared rehearsal studio. However, throughout the play, there are scenes that shift to a figurative performance venue. Additionally, a few moments take place in a “liminal space,” or a space that doesn't exist in literal time and space, more in the thoughts and feelings of the characters.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT: IDRIS GOODWIN

Idris Goodwin is the Producing Artistic Director of StageOne Family Theatre in Louisville, Kentucky. He has 20 years of professional experience in the performing arts, as a playwright, director, break beat poet and producer. For StageOne, he penned *American Tales*, *Frankenstein* and the widely produced *And In This Corner: Cassius Clay*, winner of the 2017 Distinguished Play Award from the American Association for Theater and Education. His play *How We Got On* was developed at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center and received its premiere at Actors Theatre of Louisville's Humana Festival. Other works have been produced Off-Broadway and at the Kennedy Center, Steppenwolf Theatre and Oregon Shakespeare Festival. He has also appeared on HBO, *Sesame Street*, BBC radio and Discovery Channel. Goodwin's supporters include the National Endowment for the Arts and the Ford, Mellon and McKnight Foundations, and he is the recipient of the 2019 Allan Cowen Innovation Award. A seasoned educator, Goodwin regularly teaches master classes and lectures across the nation. For six years, he taught undergraduate playwriting at Colorado College, where, in 2015, he was voted Teacher of the Year. He is a proud member of the Dramatists Guild of America and sits on the boards of Theatre for Young Audiences/USA and Children's Theatre Foundation of America.

GLOSSARY

BREAK BEAT: Break beat refers to styles of music that use a section of a song in which the drums and/or rhythm section takes over from the melody, creating a rhythmic “break” in the music. Sometimes these breaks are sampled from other tracks or created using instrumentals. Some styles of music that use break beats include hip-hop, drum and bass, and EDM.

HYPE MAN: A hype man performs with hip-hop artists and rappers. The job of a hype man is to get the audience excited and maintain energy and momentum throughout a performance. Often, this is done using interjections and exclamations, as well as call-and-response chants. A hype man also provides backup vocals. The hype man is a figure that emerged in hip-hop culture in the 1980s and has evolved over time.

BEATMAKER: A beatmaker creates the beats and instrumentals for hip-hop and rap music. Most commonly, beatmakers use computer software, and sometimes other equipment, to build tracks using beats, tunes and samples of tracks by other musicians.

BARS: A unit of measurement in music, and in rap lyrics specifically. Bars are often used to create a beat and a rhyme scheme in a song. Colloquially, the term “bars” is often used to describe lyrics and writing more generally in rap and hip-hop.

HOOK: The hook is a section of the song that repeats throughout. Sometimes the hook is the chorus, but other times, it’s an instrumental riff. It’s generally considered the catchiest part of a song. Hooks are particularly prevalent in rap and hip-hop.

EQ: A term in music production. Short for “equalizing” or editing the vocals of a track.

OVERDUBBING: A term in music production. Refers to recording over an existing track to add in more sounds or layers.

VERB’S TOP FIVE HYPE MEN –

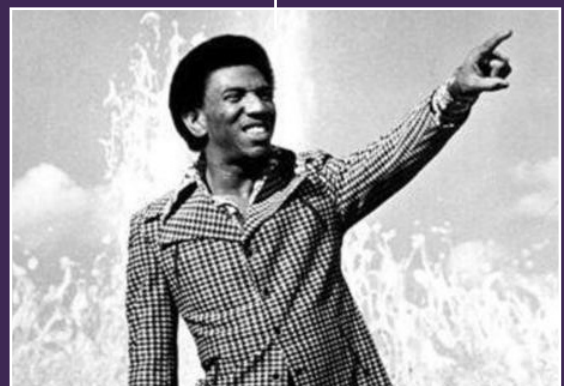
FLAVOR FLAV: A hype man for the 1980s rap group Public Enemy, who were known for their politically charged music. Flavor Flav is considered to have popularized the role of the hype man.

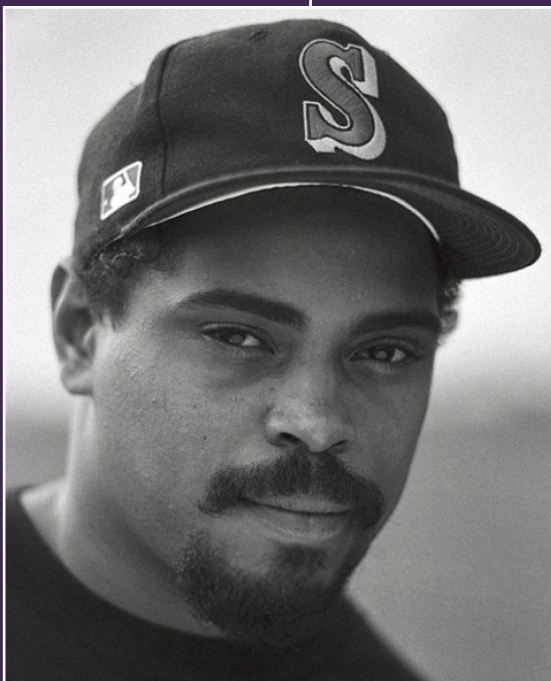
TOO BIG MC: Also known as 2 Bigg MC, the hype man for MC Hammer, who was best known for “U Can’t Touch This.”

SPLIFF STAR: The hype man for Flipmode Squad, a 1990s hip-hop super group that featured notable rappers signed to the Flipmode label. It included prominent female rapper Rah Digga and mogul Busta Rhymes.

SEN DOG: The hype man for Cypress Hill, which was the first Latino American hip-hop group to achieve platinum album status.

BOBBY BYRD: Performed with James Brown, a singer famous in the 1960s and 1970s, and who is considered “the Godfather of Soul.”





REFERENCES

DR. DRE: A rapper and producer who began his career as a member of the 1980s rap group N.W.A. and has since worked with Snoop Dogg, Tupac, Nas, Eminem and others as a producer. One of the most influential figures in hip-hop history.

MALCOLM X: An influential activist in the 1960s. He was a leader in the Nation of Islam, an African American religious and social movement. He was also heavily involved in racial justice activism, but rejected the Civil Rights Movement in favor of the more radical Black Nationalism and Black separatism.

NOTORIOUS B.I.G.: Also known as Biggie Smalls or just Biggie, a famous rapper who was active in the 1990s. He was involved in a feud with former friend Tupac Shakur. He died at the age of 24 in a drive-by shooting, and his posthumously released album *Life after Death* is still considered one of the most influential albums of all time.



RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE: A 1990s rock band known for overt political messaging in its music. Often critical of government and/or authority figures.

SNOOP DOGG: A rapper who became famous in the 1990s. Snoop Dogg's slow and simple rapping style, as well as his ability to freestyle, distinguished him from other popular rappers at the time. Later converted to Rastafarianism and released a Reggae album.

TUPAC: A famous rapper in the 1990s. Like Notorious B.I.G., Tupac became a central figure in the East Coast-West Coast feud. His rap focused on social issues, unlike the



popular gangsta rap of the time. Tupac was also killed in a drive-by shooting at the age of 25.

HIP HOP AS A POLITICAL STATEMENT

In *Hype Man*, hip-hop dictates how the story is told and how the characters understand the world. Throughout the play, Verb, Pinnacle and Peep One consider how they can – and whether they should – use their craft to make a comment about the political and social injustice they see before them. Throughout hip-hop history, artists have used their music to critique inequalities in the world, especially where race and class are concerned. Put simply, hip-hop has always been political.

Hip-hop originated in the 1970s in the Bronx, where DJs at house parties began to mix funk and disco records to create new and distinct sounds. As hip-hop developed into both a music genre and a culture, its focus on social issues became clear. Thematically, the music often centered on life in neighborhoods like the Bronx. By the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan's policies, which led to low employment, crumbling infrastructure, high incarceration and a lack of social services, sparked a wave of political commentary in hip-hop. Though hip-hop was not necessarily political in its inception, the tumultuous era that birthed the genre defined the medium. The subject matter of much of the music, and the strong communal aspect of it, evolved in response to the negative effect the 1970s and 1980s had on marginalized communities.

Over the course of the next two decades, hip-hop culture evolved, and the music became more popular, eventually spreading across the country and the world. Previously, hip-hop artists had been ignored by mainstream record labels; in the late 1980s, things changed. Labels started to recognize that hip-hop had money-making potential. Agents, many of whom were white, began to sign more hip-hop artists and started to market the music to a new demographic: white men. By the 2000s, hip-hop had become a global force.

Contemporary artists continue to address social and political issues, while attaining more widespread success. Kendrick Lamar, for example, won the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for Music for his album *DAMN.*, in which he addresses issues such as American imperialism and institutional racism. The Pulitzer Prize committee lauded the album as “a virtuosic song collection unified by its vernacular authenticity and rhythmic dynamism



Kendrick Lamar often uses public performances and music videos to further comment on political issues. His 2016 GRAMMY performance, shown here, focused on the mass incarceration of black men in America. Photo Credit: Kevork Djansezian – Getty Images

that offers affecting vignettes capturing the complexity of modern African-American life.” Other artists like Jay-Z, J. Cole, Chance the Rapper and Kanye West have used their music and celebrity status to speak out about political issues, especially as they affect black people in America.

Although hip-hop has long been seen as a male-dominated industry, female MCs have made a considerable impact on the genre as well. Many hip-hop groups in the 1980s and 1990s included women as featured artists, but when MC Lyte released the first solo album by a female rapper, a torrent of women broke into the industry. These artists explored issues such as femininity, sexuality and the struggle for power in a predominantly male field. Early 2000s superstars such as Queen Latifah and Missy Elliott made way for the rise of Cardi B, SZA, M.I.A. and others and female-fronted hip-hop now dominates the airwaves.

Throughout the history of hip-hop, political and social issues and conflicts have played a critical role, often serving as the backdrop for the movement. The characters in *Hype Man* are part of a long line of hip-hop artists who have used the art form to reckon with the political and social issues of their time.

– Emma Leff

SPEAKING OUT AND TAKING A STAND

Before rehearsals began for Actors Theatre's production of *Hype Man: a break beat play*, Resident Dramaturg Hannah Rae Montgomery sat down with playwright Idris Goodwin to talk about what compelled him to create this timely hip-hop drama and why he's thrilled to share it with Louisville audiences.

(Continued on next page)

SEPT. 11 – OCT. 13, 2019



BROWN-FORMAN SERIES



Idris Goodwin

HANNAH RAE MONTGOMERY: What inspired you to write *Hype Man*, and what is the play about for you?

IDRIS GOODWIN: On a basic level, *Hype Man* is about a band. It's a workplace drama, the business just happens to be rap music. The play's characters are members of an interracial hip-hop group that's on the precipice of stardom—but their success is threatened when the controversial police shooting of a black youth forces them to confront their differences.

Hype Man is the latest of my "break beat plays." I made a commitment, starting with *How We Got On* (which premiered in the 2012 Humana Festival), to write a series of plays about hip-hop. And I don't just mean that the plays feature rap. They're also investigating how the invention of hip-hop has affected America, our relationships to

one another around issues of race, and the importance of this music for young people trying to find a voice. *Hype Man* is set around the present moment and addresses contemporary questions like: what does it mean to be an ally? If you're participating in an art form that came from protest movements and represented the disenfranchised, do you have a responsibility to honor those roots?

The play is also exploring what it means to be a hype person. The role of the hype man/woman/person in a hip-hop crew is to help the primary rapper express their message. The hype person's like a living exclamation point, an accelerator or an engine to fuel what the main rapper's trying to get out there. Hip-hop is about saying difficult things that no one wants to say, but doing it in such a slick way that people nod their heads in agreement. Through the working relationship between Verb and Pinnacle, the hype man and main rapper in this story, the play's looking at hip-hop as a countercultural art form that's become more mainstream—to the point that Pinnacle thinks he can participate while remaining apolitical. But eventually Verb will challenge him to speak out and take a side.

HRM: What do you hope audiences will take from the experience of seeing *Hype Man*?

IG: I wrote this play during the height of the Black Lives Matter movement. The conversation around racially motivated police brutality, and black folks not feeling safe in all spaces, isn't new. It's been going on within the black community and in hip-hop for a long time. But the Black Lives Matter movement started mainstream discourse around this phenomenon. The immediate response from some was censorship, of denying that the black body exists under threat. A lot of people weren't open to hearing what was being said.

Hype Man is all about that tension around who has the privilege of remaining unaffected. The conflicts that emerge between Verb (who's black) and Pinnacle (who's white) in the wake of police killing a black teen in their city illustrate that sure, black folks and white folks can share a space, we can consider ourselves friends, but there's a disconnect in how we experience the world. Verb and Pinnacle have had a real connection since childhood, but there's a fundamental difference in each character's sense of urgency related to



Crystal Fox in *How We Got On*,
2012 Humana Festival.
Photo by Alan Simons.

the shooting. For Pinnacle, the issue of police brutality gets to be more theoretical. For Verb, it's like, No, this could happen to me or my family at any time. This isn't some philosophical discussion, this is my life. *Hype Man* exists in that intersection. It's asking the audience to consider how we can find ways to say, "I may not completely know where you're coming from, but I'm there for you, and that's more important than whether I understand your experience on a personal level."

HRM: What excites you most about *Hype Man* being produced here in Louisville?

IG: Again, Actors Theatre is where the first break beat play premiered! If that hadn't happened, I don't know that I would've written this series. Also, until now, I've never lived in the same city where I've received a major production. And to have this production happen at the top of Robert Barry Fleming's first season as the new Artistic Director of Actors, while I'm Artistic Director of StageOne Family Theatre, which has its offices in the same building—that's incredibly exciting. It feels like being part of a greater theatre moment.

It's also exciting that Jess McLeod, who's based in Chicago, will be directing; she understands my work on a real molecular level. And there's going to be some great local collaboration, too. Steffan Clark, the choreographer, is from Owensboro, Kentucky. Plus there's a character in the show, Peep One, who's a beatmaker, meaning she creates the tracks that Pinnacle and Verb rap over. So I roped in Rhythm Science Sound, a married couple who are anthropologists, DJs and beatmakers here in town, to provide custom beats. In the script, I encourage theatres producing *Hype Man* to identify beatmakers in their communities and invite them to make new tracks specifically for those productions. That way, the sounds in every production will have a different flavor because they're reflecting that region.

Because theatre encompasses so many kinds of art—costume construction, dance, lights, music, painting, poetry—it's important for us to reach out to artists beyond our usual collaborators. That allows us all to learn from each other and make something new together.

—Hannah Rae Montgomery

WRITING PORTFOLIO

NARRATIVE: CCRA.W.3

In *Hype Man*, the characters have to make a choice about whether or not to stand up for what they believe in. Create an original character who has to make a similarly important choice about acting on their beliefs. Be specific about the situation. Then write a scene showing how your character makes their decision. Who might they discuss the issue with? What kinds of conversations lead the character to a decision? Think about poetic devices like rhythm, meter, diction and imagery as you write. Then try speaking it out loud to see what it sounds like.

INFORMATIVE: CCRA.W.2

Write a review of the performance of *Hype Man* that you saw at Actors Theatre of Louisville. What parts of the play (the actors' performances, the set, props, costumes, lighting and sound design, etc.) were your favorites and why? How effective were these elements in telling the story? Back up your claims with evidence and details from your experience of watching the performance. Then make a copy and send it to the Learning & Creative Engagement department at:

Actors Theatre of Louisville
c/o Abigail Miskowiec
316 West Main Street
Louisville, Kentucky 40202

We will share your thoughts with the creative team.

ARGUMENTATIVE: CCRA.W.1

At the beginning of the play, each of the characters has a different perspective on how they should address the shooting. Verb is compelled to use his platform to make a statement. Pinnacle believes their group should stay out of the public debate and focus on the music. The conflict leads Peep One to create a new hip-hop track inspired by the shooting, and she grows more dedicated than ever to furthering her own career— with or without Pinnacle. Whose perspective do you agree with most? Finding and adding your own supporting evidence, write a piece that makes an argument for one of these perspectives.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-SHOW QUESTIONS

1. *Hype Man* is set in a rehearsal space where the characters create and practice their music. The playwright also describes some scenes that take place in a “liminal space.” “Liminal” means “in between,” not necessarily referring to something literal or realistic. Can you think of a movie or TV show that has a non-realistic setting? What do you expect a “liminal space” in a play to look like? How might it feel? What would it sound like?
2. In *Hype Man*, the characters explore how they feel and what they think about a racially motivated shooting of an unarmed black man. Conflict arises when the characters have different attitudes about their responsibility to speak out on the issue through their music. Based on your own experiences, what do you think your responsibility is when it comes to advocating against racism and discrimination? What could this type of advocacy look like in your own life?

POST-SHOW QUESTIONS

1. Throughout the play, the characters discuss the importance of an upcoming performance on *The Tonight Show*, and its implications for their careers. How do you think the performance affects the stakes of the play? What might be different if there were not a big performance to prepare for?
2. In *Hype Man*, hip-hop plays a significant role not only in the plot of the play, but also in how the story is told. How did the music in the play affect your experience as an audience member? Describe the difference between the hip-hop sections of the play and the moments that were just dialogue.