



LIT-HOP: Baba Brinkman offers *The Rap Canterbury Tales* as part of the Adelaide Fringe.

Classics rapped up

PATRICK McDONALD | Baba speaks out on literary hip-hop



THERE'S no doubt about it, says Baba Brinkman: Vanilla Ice set the cause of white rappers back by about a decade with his cheesy 1990 hit *Ice Ice Baby*. "It's a tough shadow to get out from under," says Brinkman, who is part of a new international and multiracial breed of hip-hop artists.

"He's a cautionary tale, right? Every white rapper says the goal is to be as little like Vanilla Ice as possible." Canadian born-and-based Brinkman is also part of a growing new school of rap nicknamed "lit-

hop", or literary hip-hop. He will visit Australia for the first time this month to perform his show, *The Rap Canterbury Tales*, at the Fringe.

In it, Brinkman reinterprets Geoffrey Chaucer's medieval masterpiece *The Canterbury Tales* as a lively hip-hop battle, where the characters compete to tell their stories as raps.

It will also be part of the Fringe's Youth and Education Program.

"That's really the flip side of the coin of what I do - it's entertainment but it's also somewhat educational," Brinkman says from his Vancouver home. The show began life as an offshoot of Brinkman's literature de-

gree. "I was working on *The Canterbury Tales* for my master's thesis, looking at some 14th century poetry competitions that Chaucer would have been aware of, and then comparing those to hip-hop freestyle battling and some contemporary urban poetry competitions," he says.

Brinkman, now 27, started out as a rap and hip-hop fan, "then I decided that I was going to be an artist". He has competed and performed since he was 19.

He says "sheer willpower" brings together the seemingly incongruous elements of a white guy, rap and medieval literature. "When I listen to rap songs, what I'm listening to is wordplay and rhyme patterns and storytelling techniques," he says.

In fact, he sees rap as the contemporary equivalent of Elizabethan poetry: "The focal point of the poetic energy of our generation is rap - it's not poetry any more. Poetry today is something that people publish to get recognised by academics and critics, but it's not really a popular entertainment form or a communal plaything like it was in Chaucer's and Shakespeare's time."

Brinkman says Chaucer designed *The Canterbury Tales* "around a contest, as well as a pilgrimage".

"All the rules that he designs for this contest and that govern the interactions of the pilgrims in this competitive sphere... are almost identical to the rules that govern freestyle battling," he says.

"In the Middle Ages, if you wanted to be paid for poetry you had to do a presentation piece and have an aristocrat or a monarch sponsor you as a poet. In the hip-hop world today, it's very similar, where you've got underground artists who are writing rhymes in a competitive, social communal sphere like a freestyle battle. That's where you prove yourself on the street level. Then the record companies are functioning like patrons, so you've got the artists

who are trying to get signed to a record deal." Brinkman has recorded a CD and been offered a book deal for *The Rap Canterbury Tales*, which will compare the original Chaucer with his rap translations.

While "gangsta rap" became the commercial face of the music form in the 1990s - "because sex and violence sell" - Brinkman says hip-hop began in New York's Bronx "as a substitute for gang fighting".

"They were using verbal and musical battles to substitute for real battles. Some of the first rap songs are very conscious, like *The Message* by Melle Mel. They are storytellers talking about social problems."

Brinkman says his perception of rap changed when he met some hip-hop artists "who weren't your stereotypical gangstas" from African-American backgrounds. "What it boiled down to was realising the phrase 'Keep it real' doesn't mean keep it real to some kind of street violence aesthetic; it means keep it real to yourself."

America's Eminem emerged as a new champion for white rappers. "Then it was predicted that this flood of white rappers would follow him and it never really happened. He kind of kicked the door open, and then stood in it."

Brinkman has been called "Baba" since birth, although technically he is named Dirk, like his father. "Supposedly when I was born I looked like a little Buddha, and that's the East Indian name for Buddha - a Baba."

He also incorporates environmental themes in his work. Brinkman was involved with the tree planting program for ten years and personally planted more than a million trees - up to 3000 a day.

"That's how I taught myself how to rhyme, to the rhythm of that very repetitive job."

Baba Brinkman performs *The Rap Canterbury Tales* in the Pillar Room, Freemasons Hall, from February 25 to March 19.

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