

Yo! A beard!

Baba Brinkman may be the only hip-hop MC with an MA in medieval literature, but he combines his two loves by rapping the wicked rhymes of the Canterbury Tales. Chaucer was the original street poet, he tells John Bailey.

You might remember Chaucer's 14th century *Canterbury Tales* as dry, dusty stories you were forced to read at school. You might also think that presenting them in the form of rap is an embarrassing attempt to make worthy literature hip for the kids — like dressing Macbeth as a homie.

"I'm not just doing this as a gimmick," says 28-year-old Canadian Baba Brinkman. Since the age of 19, he has been writing rhymes and competing in freestyle rap battles, releasing three LPs and establishing his own record label along the way. You can even buy his music on iTunes.

His participation in freestyle MC contests inspired the show: "These lyrical competitions — I've been competing in those for years so I know the ropes, how they work, the punchlines and audience interaction and stuff like that," he says.

Though he wrote his Masters thesis on the *Tales*, educating his audience doesn't top Brinkman's to-do list. His first aim is to make his audience laugh.

"That's the Chaucerian aesthetic, right? He really understood that you have to capture the audience's attention first with entertainment value before you can try to teach them anything. A lot of contemporary artists get that backwards and think people are supposed to enjoy it because they're being challenged, when there's not necessarily any enjoyment value there at all."

So he set the *Tales* on a tour bus, and its characters went from storytellers to rappers competing in one of those battles. The Miller, the Pardoner and the Wife of Bath snipe, brag and one-up each other — just as the author intended 600 years ago.

"There are pictures from the 14th century that show Chaucer reciting to the court as all the nobles and aristocrats and courtiers sit around listening, kind of like a 14th-century slam-poetry recital or hip-



Baba Brinkman: "Strip away the language and Chaucer's stories become entirely accessible."

hop show," says Brinkman.

The show is equally at home in literary surrounds — such as the Brisbane Writers' Festival — and hip-hop venues. Other rappers, especially, can be a hard market to win over.

"The reaction's usually curiosity and a little scepticism from the hip-hop world until they actually check it out and realise, 'Oh, that's actually lyrically on par with a lot of proper rap songs'. You can kind of tell that I've paid my dues when it comes to learning the artform once you hear it."

Strip away the language, says Brinkman, and Chaucer's stories become

entirely accessible to his generation.

"*The Pardoner's Tale* is about three young ruffians who are in a bar getting drunk and decide to go on a quest to find death and instead they find a bunch of money and scheme over that.

"Any culture that's got a bar, three drunken idiots and a bunch of money could have that tale happen."

Chaucer would be right at home in Melbourne.

The Rap Canterbury Tales to October 10, North Melbourne Town Hall. \$14/\$12. Tel. 8412 8777 or melbournefringe.com.au

NEVER-ENDING STORY

Another Fringe show merging a love of two very different forms is *Every Film Ever Made*, in which a trio of performers re-create, well, every film ever made.

Robby Lloyd, Tegan Higginbotham and Adam McKenzie first worked together in this year's Comedy Festival, turning their comic sights on a 1939 film version *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. They enjoyed their comic sojourn into the world of cinema so much that they decided to continue the journey.

"We wanted to do another one, but we couldn't decide on a film," says McKenzie. "So we thought, well, why don't we do them all?"

A century of cinema is a lot to cram into a one-hour show, surely?

"It's certainly a lot of films. More every day, I'm told. We're going to try to fit it all in."

If it sounds an impossible task, think again. Have you ever moaned about a film you felt you'd already seen a dozen times?

"That's the point. One of the things we look at is those archetypes. *Star Wars* is a great example. It's not even half a story. All it's got is about five of the best archetypes throughout storytelling: the wise old man, the young boy on a quest, the loveable rogue. Put them together and you've got a story. But that's the same as *The Seven Samurai*, *The Magnificent Seven*, you could list 10,000 films just by stating that one story."

Marrying comedy and film has been a labour of love for McKenzie, and he hopes the show conveys why it is we love to sit in darkened rooms watching dreams play out on a screen.

"What we've tried to do is have a look at why people love cinema. We're not acting out all of the *Police Academy* films. These are films that we really want to pay tribute to, rather than just sucking comedy out of them. This is three people who've loved film all their life."

John Bailey

Every Film Ever Made — to October 13, North Melbourne Town Hall. \$15. Tel. 8412 8777 or melbournefringe.com.au