

Arts & Culture

SHORT CUTS
PAUL KALINA

The Rapper's Tale: Chaucer gets the hip-hop treatment

FRINGE FESTIVAL
THE RAP CANTERBURY TALES
★★★★★

By Baba Brinkman, North Melbourne
Town Hall, October 2, Until October 13.

Running time: 60 minutes

Cameron Woodhead Reviewer

IT SMACKS of gimmickry, the idea of translating Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*

into rap. But when Baba Brinkman comes onstage and recites the opening stanzas of the general prologue in Middle English, you know he's no literary slouch.

Brinkman is a Canadian rap artist with a masters degree in medieval literature. And combining his passions isn't as outrageous as it might seem.

Chaucer did spark a revolution, after all, by proving that ver-

nacular English could sustain its own poetry. Medieval troubadours and contemporary hip-hop artists stand, however distantly, within the same oral tradition. Brinkman makes these points in a five-minute lecture rap that covers 100,000 years of linguistic evolution.

But the bulk of the show takes three of Chaucer's pilgrims and retells their tales in modern

idiom. It's brilliantly done. Riding a wave of surging metre and inventive rhyme, Brinkman updates the framing device while staying utterly faithful to Chaucer's stories, their satire and earthy humour.

Brinkman places the narrator as a stowaway on a bus full of rappers on tour. Their manager organises a rap battle to pass the time. Three contestants vie for

the prize. We get *The Pardoner's Tale*, a moral fable of greed and destruction; *The Miller's Tale*, a bawdy comedy of adultery, arse-kissing and red-hot poker that wouldn't be out of place on *Jerry Springer*; and *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, a story of romantic redemption with a hint of Oprah about it.

The show finishes with a freestyle rap that incorporates

random words given by the audience. But the real joy of *The Rap Canterbury Tales* is Chaucer's masterpiece — still entertaining after more than 600 years — which Brinkman renders accessible with unflagging energy and prodigious verbal skill.

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