

# Shakespeare to HipHop Engaged and Educated Audiences



Credit: TKphotographers.com

*Shakespeare to HipHop* is a 90-minute show that is appropriate for all ages and introduces attendees to William Shakespeare with a three-piece band, incredible beats and a brilliant comedy duo. For the last four years, the show has been touring Boston public schools as well as some private schools and libraries. Most recently, it performed on January 14 at the Southside Cultural Center as part of FUNDA Fest where it brought down the house (for more on FUNDA Fest, visit [motifri.com/funda-fest-2018](http://motifri.com/funda-fest-2018)). The piece uses both authentic, old-school Billy Shakespeare and cleverly written lyrics by Marlon Carey and Regie Gibson. The show finale involves audience members of all ages leaping from their seats and dancing to the beats onstage.

*Shakespeare to Hip Hop* is described by Carey and Gibson as "...The Bards of the Beat Drop/ Coming in with rhythms and/ slick literary what-nots/Kicking many lyrics and then/ rocking out in workshops/ Trying to make it known that/ literature is HOT."

WBUR 90.9 FM, NPR Radio Boston, reports that the show is aimed toward a younger audience, but the show is riveting and hilarious and appeals to all age groups. At the most recent performance, the youngest person in attendance was born in June 2016. There were also people there who may have gotten a senior discount ticket price.

The January 14 evening began with the legendary Raffini doing everything anyone would need to add a skip to their step and warmth to their heart. She sang, she hosted and she made magic with her ability to see and hear everything around her, mix it all up on stage and throw it all back at the audience without the audience even realizing that she was just giving them a taste of their own yummy medicine. Raffini introduced Vatic Kuumba, a poet and playwright who also runs AS220 Youth. Kuumba performed one of his polished pieces, "What Are You Waiting For? The War Is Raging Now."

Then Kuumba introduced Manami Braxton from the AS220 Youth. Braxton, a brilliant writer and performer, delivered "Give Me A Minute" and stunned and educated a house full of enthusiasts. Raffini quipped, "... spirits in the house, the table fell, the noise happened, we ain't doing libations." Raffini brought a wisdom to the room that did not escape a single soul.

By this point in the evening, the set-up was clear: It was the Academy Awards Night in Providence and the next presenter would be the biggest celebrity of all: Ramona Bass. Famous storyteller Valerie Tutson (and creator of FUNDA Fest) introduced Bass and her legacy as a pioneer of *Rites and Reason*, a part of the Africana Studies Department at Brown University. It was Bass' birthday. "I'm old enough to say I'm old enough," she said before explaining that she is a story wheeler, who keeps telling and sharing stories. Her story preceding *Shakespeare to Hip Hop* began, "... you know how it is when you live underwater? Not many people come to visit you." Bass earned a standing ovation and later, a birthday cake.

*Speak Easy* and *Shakespeare to Hip Hop* began with the band onstage: keyboards, drums and Alison Keslow on the bass. Then "Robin Hoodfellow" and "Horatio Everyman" listed endless idioms and metaphors to enlighten the audience that they were already "quoting Shakespeare." In one swell musical swoop, the audience learned Shakespeare was born in 1564, his name was spelled about six ways, his marriage license had some clerical errors and that he had eight children. They made Shakespeare seem like the coolest dude to ever exist.

Carey and Gibson might happen to be entertaining, but they also were talking about truth. And that made the performance really stinking funny. In fact, *Shakespeare to Hip Hop* is a full out lesson in literary appreciation. The show is a condensed, but not CliffsNotes, demystification of intimidating literature. Carey and Gibson's technique engages the audience, and when they discover that they understand Shakespeare, their confidence builds.

*Shakespeare to Hip Hop* is also philosophical. The MCs sing "Get Married and Have Kids Before You Die?" explaining how most parents would like their children to do certain things at a certain age. During the Shakespeare Smackdown, Oberon schools Nick Bottom for trying to steal his wife. The audience falls to pieces with laughter as the characters use words only to have full-out battle. It is a hilarious depiction of silly teenage drama.

Carey is a model for how the best actors are the reactors, and his nuanced onstage listening is a lesson for all performers. He sings, he rhymes, he performs, and his pure intention onstage is to keep the audience engaged.

Gibson asked the audience if anyone knew about unrequited love and what it was. Of course all knew, but not everyone admitted it. Just in case, he explained, "It's when you like someone but they can't stand you." He and Marlon Carey asked everyone to hold their phones up and show the light if they knew the feeling. Audience members participated. It was very funny.

In a quick interview with Carey's 10-year-old daughter Adelaide, after she watched the show for the first time, she said she noticed "happiness and joy" on the audience members' faces during the show. She noted that the audience was "engaged, entertained, and not bored." She was especially fond of how well *Shakespeare to Hip Hop* lured the audience in with "controversy."

*Excerpts from Shakespeare to Hip Hop were performed in Rhode Island at the Providence Fringe*

*Festival and the Wilbury Theatre Group at the Waterfire Arts Complex last July 2017. For more information and to learn about future performances, visit [shakespearetohiphop.com](http://shakespearetohiphop.com)*