AURORA FORUM AT STANFORD UNIVERSITY

Hip-Hop: The Spirit of an Arts Movement

Rennie Harris and Harry Elam, Jr. with Mark Gonnerman

Piggot Theater
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Mark Gonnerman: Good evening, and welcome to the Aurora Forum at Stanford University. I'm Mark Gonnerman, the Forum's director, and we're here for another conversation in our series with artists visiting campus, presented by Stanford Lively Arts. Tonight's conversation is called "Hip-Hop: The Spirit of an Arts Movement," and our guests tonight are Lorenzo Rennie Harris and Harry Elam, Jr.

Before I properly introduce our guests, I want to thank the staff of Stanford Lively Arts, the Stanford Institute for Creativity in the Arts, and the Office of the President and Provost for their ongoing support of the Aurora Forum.

Let me begin by introducing a man who, on this campus, really needs no introduction: Professor Harry Elam, Jr., who is the Olive H. Palmer Professor in the Humanities, the Robert and Ruth Halperin University Fellow for Undergraduate Education, director of the Committee on Performing Arts, and the university Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education.

Professor Elam was educated at Harvard and UC, Berkeley, where he received his PhD in 1984. His scholarly work focuses on contemporary American drama, particularly African-American and Chicano theater. In addition to his scholarly work, he has directed theater professionally for more than eighteen years. Most notably, he has directed several of August Wilson's plays. He is the author of *Taking It to the Streets*: *The Social Protest Theater of Luis Valdez and Amiri Baraka*, and is the coeditor of four books on theatrical art, in addition to many other publications. He is the winner of multiple teaching awards at Stanford, and he received the Betty Jones Award for Outstanding Teaching from the American Theater and Drama Society in 2006, which was the same year he was inducted into the College of Fellows of the American Theater. He has taught at Stanford since 1990 and is the former director of the Introduction to the Humanities Program. Professor Elam has, I think, more knowledge and experience in depth with the ongoing trajectory of humanistic education at Stanford than anyone else I could imagine. His younger brother, Keith, an artist known by his stage name Guru, a backronym for Gifted Unlimited Rhymes Universal, died early last year, and I hope we'll spend time this evening talking about *his* life and his work too.

Our guest tonight from Philadelphia is, as I said before, Lorenzo Rennie Harris who, at the age of forty-seven, has earned recognition as one of hip-hop's leading ambassadors.

In Philadelphia, he has been voted one of the most influential citizens of that city in the course of the past one hundred years. I recently ran into some students from Philadelphia and I said, "Do you know about Rennie Harris?" They said, "Oh, yeah, everybody knows about Rennie Harris." He's been compared to twentieth-century dance legends Alvin Ailey and Bob Fosse, and his list of honors is too long for me to recite them all here. He has received three Bessie Awards, an Alvin Ailey Black Choreographer Award, the coveted Philadelphia Rocky Prize, and was nominated for a Sir Lawrence Olivier Award in the UK. In just this past year, he received an honorary doctorate of fine arts from Bates College and a Guggenheim Fellowship.

As we will learn in the conversation tonight, Rennie Harris's approach to his art is rooted in a deep humanitarian vision that we will not overcome racial or ethnic barriers until we know, appreciate, and respect the particular and distinct cultural worlds from which each of us come. Dr. Harris has devoted his life to bringing hip-hop dance to all people in the belief that it expresses universal themes that transcend boundaries of race, religion, gender, and economic status, and that transcend boundaries that affect the generations. This is something I think we are going to be particularly interested in tonight, for his work encompasses the diverse and rich traditions of the past while simultaneously presenting the voice of a new generation through its ever-evolving interpretation of what it means to dance. In founding the Rennie Harris Puremovement Dance Company, which will perform here this Saturday afternoon at 3:00 and in the evening at 8:00, he embarked on a journey to excavate the global connections inherent in hip-hop as an American vernacular art movement. This quest has resulted in a highly original body of work that embraces the idea that what we share is greater than all those things that we think might keep us apart.

Please join me in welcoming our two guests to the Aurora Forum stage. [Applause]

I think a good place to begin, Rennie, here: you're an artist-in-residence at Stanford this winter, and you're teaching a course called Dance 121. What's that about?

Rennie Harris: It's a course on what I call "The Day Before Hip-Hop." It's partly lecture and partly technique, so half of the class is a lecture on the connection between hip-hop and traditional African culture and its lineage since we've been here in the Americas. The first question I asked the class was: Was slavery the beginning of black contemporary expression? So we begin to have this dialogue and debate about the effects that slavery had. For instance, African traditional rhythm now is being played on a tea kettle on the slave ship, so that changes the sound of the tradition, and this then becomes a contemporary expression in some way. This is where we start from, and we build from there. Hopefully, we move all the way up to today. Basically, I'm squeezing nine months into ten weeks.

Elam: How does that translate into the movement, in terms of the class?

Harris: The movement that I'm teaching is called "House," which falls under the hip-hop umbrella, and this House movement is really based on rhythms. There is a

percussive understanding of rhythm and the idea that rhythm is what teaches us how to move or how to learn. It gives us knowledge – our iambic pentameter. This is how we learn as humans – through rhythm and these sounds. Through House, we're revisiting the idea of traditional culture percussively as well as the dance.

Elam: So everybody has rhythm.

Harris: Oh, of course. If you feel you don't have rhythm, it's because you've convinced yourself that you don't, or you've been convinced.

Harry Elam: One of the things I think is interesting about this class and interesting about you as a performer/choreographer is this connection of history to hip-hop, meaning that hip-hop comes from a place and you're very, very interested in connecting it in terms of understanding it as a dance and as a movement.

Harris: I think one of the reasons I was interested was because when, as a child, I was a practitioner, prior to it becoming hip-hop (it becomes hip-hop in '81, but in the '70s there was no name), so I was younger and I was following what the older guys were doing. Once it gets onto this path…. (I heard so many negative things about what it wasn't: that's not real dance.) People told me, You will never do anything with this; you need to go to school and become a ballet dancer and take jazz. These things will make you live longer, blah, blah, blah. I remember feeling resentful. Again, as a young person, you're filled with all this energy, all this emotion, and you're resisting. Why would you tell a child that you will never succeed at dancing or doing this street dance, or whatever? It was like a green flag for me to go, I'm going to show you, and I'm going to tell you, point out its relevance and its connection to what you think you know. So, on some level, it was me wanting to get back at all the older people. I'm almost fifty years old and I'm a hip-hop dancer. It's not a youth thing. Popmaster Fabel from the Rock Steady Crew (and I may be misquoting him) once said that people confuse youth culture with urban culture, and they are two different things. When he said that, I said, You know, you're absolutely right. This has to do with youth culture. This was our voice, this was after the Vietnam War, this was after the Black Panthers. This was the continuation of resistance in American culture, and, in a way, picking up the baton from the revolutionaries of that time. When Afrika Bambaataa founded the Universal Zulu Nation, he said, I'm creating a cultural gang where you will learn about where you come from, your relevance, black, white, or indifferent. Anyone who is in the ghetto, quote-unquote, or who is poor, quote-unquote – anyone who is involved in that and was part of Zulu Nation, it didn't matter: you were part of that and you were going to learn about your history in this country. To me, that really was the beginning of hip-hop and is the foundation of it. The other day, we talked about the fifth element of hip-hop, which really, to me, should be the first element, which is knowledge.

Elam: Can you give the elements to the audience?

Harris: According to Afrika Bambaataa, who was the founder of Zulu Nation, the longest-running hip-hop organization and activist organization in the world, so to speak, he identified all the expressions and he called them the *four elements*. They were:

(1) the MC, either the microphone controller or master of ceremonies – the person who makes all the announcements originally (in the beginning that's what an emcee was);
(2) the dancers, which, at that time, they were specifically the B-boy or the B-girl breaking;
(3) the graffiti artists, which is the visual arts; and
(4) the DJ, which is the music and musicianship.

He coined MC and DJ and dance and graffiti as the four elements of hip-hop. Later, he came up with a fifth element and he understood that none of those things were relevant unless you had *knowledge*, and knowledge is the most important element of hip-hop culture. Hence, while there's always some sort of undertone or message or encoded thing that they're saying. Most people have no clue what's being said on the airwaves unless it's extremely direct and vulgar – then it's an issue – but there are things that went on the air when we were kids that we couldn't *believe* they would let on the air because they didn't know what they were actually saying.

Gonnerman: But that's about being hip, right? You knew.

Harris: Right. The idea was, again, a resistance – speaking on the radio and saying, Hey, we're all going to meet over here and we're going to march at so and so, but no one knew we were going to do it. We just knew it.

Elam: You know what it's like, too: It's a sense of what Henry Louis Gates calls "double voicedness." You take it back to slavery, where he talked about "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." It was both a song to the master but, on the other hand, it's about going north. That sense of a coded message, which is a tradition.

Harris: Right, which is a traditional connection in African dance and culture. We were just talking about this in class. We were talking about the gates, the actual black iron gates that are around churches and people's businesses in the country, and that the points on these gates…. Some of them come to a point this way and some of them actually have an arrow's head on them. This was a message to slaves nationally that they were going to rise up and regain their freedom again, so every time you saw an arrow, you knew that there was a faction that was in that area that understood that we were going to rebel. This encoded message is very much a tradition.

Elam: Thinking about that, you mentioned a word that Danny Hoch (this guy you know from hip-hop theater) … uses to define hip-hop theater: it's resistance. When I think of hip-hop, I think of another word related to it in terms of its origin, and also you dancing on the street: it was called survival, too. How do those words *resistance* and *survival* work for you, but then take it to now, and how do they figure in your work when you're doing it on a concert stage? Can it still be resistance? Is it still about survival?

Harris: Resistance and survival: I'm assuming we've all had this experience at some point in time at a very simple level. For instance, you're just upset with your parents (most of the time when we're upset, it's with our parents or a family member). So you're upset and whatever your thing is, that's where you're going to gravitate. If you collect stamps, if you dance, if you move, if you play basketball or baseball, you're going to move to that space. For us, it was the dance and it was hip-hop. That was resistance, and we would dance hard. We were going just like, I'm going to show you, and we would just go. At one point, there was a slang word "breaking." Now, this also was part of what contributed to the term as we know it, "breaking" or "break-boy" or "break-girl" or "B-boy" or "B-girl" or "break-dance," as the media called it. Breaking also meant … it was slang, it was a euphemism for, I was upset. For example: "Hey, Harry, what's going on? What's wrong with you?" Then he responds, "Yo, man, my mom was just breaking on me, man. I can't take it no more," meaning she was just going off, she was upset. So with a lot of guys, some of the terminology, when you asked what they were doing on the street or when they were dancing or in a club, they would say, "Man, we're breaking; we're just getting off, we're going off." I heard it personally so I knew it was used. That was one take of it. This idea of resistance…. When you go out to the club and you hear that music and the music is speaking to you and speaking to your soul, and the music is the only thing that understands you at that moment, that was the resistance for us.

On the other hand, the dance also was very celebratory, so there was always this positive and negative within hip-hop. While hip-hop artists could be very misogynistic in one album, they could come back and say, Lift your head up. Tupak would say, "Brenda, lift your head up." In the hip-hop community, we understand the duality in how these things work. In the commercial world, you get bombed for … Oh, you're not being P.C.; that's wrong, and blah, blah, blah. But what it is is that they're not realizing that the very gangster, the person who is talking about being a gangster, is also talking about educating yourself. So they're playing both sides of the fence, in a way – not being intentional about it in that way, but it's part of the culture to point out both sides all the time and to have that expression.

For me, ending up in how it's relative to me today: all this culminated into when I decided I'm going to do this in the theater. In the beginning, in 1991, in the first half hour of my hour-and-a-half show, ten rows of the audience would get up and walk out – ten – because we were doing some stuff that they didn't want to hear about. We were doing stuff on racism. We wanted to know where the n-word came from so we did a whole skit about the n-word. Where does this thing come from? They didn't want to hear it. We danced to the Last Poets. If you know the Last Poet's work, you either moved or you wanted to leave because it strikes you so hard about…

Elam: And the racism and the revolution.

Harris: …the fiber of this country. So, in the work, I was finding my resistance and I was dealing with my resistance within the choreography, which was really very relative to my life. As a child, I remember thinking, Oh, man, I wonder what it would be like to

be white. As a child, you always heard at that time – I'm not sure where the black community is on this right now – but I remember that you were always being compared. If it was a white guy, he would have done this. Why are you doing that? You always had this kind of comparison. So it was almost like: Well, are they better than us? Should I be that? So all these things were going on in my head as I was growing up, and when I got a chance by accidentto do something in the theater, to do whatever I wanted to do, I decided to approach it from hip-hop, from that perspective. The reason why I was able to do it from this raw perspective when I first started is because I was already tired. I had toured. I worked professionally throughout high school with rap artists before they even were touring, as in filling the coliseums, so when I left high school, I went right on the road with the Fresh Festival, which was my first major gig. It was Run DMC, Fatboys, Curtis Blow. LL Cool J was fifteen or fourteen years old; Jermaine Dupri was eight or ten years old at that time. When I finished touring, I was tired. I thought I had seen the world. I did, in my own way. Someone called and said, Hey, can you do some work in the theater? I thought it was a joke. They wanted to pay me a year in advance. I was, like, Dude, I'm … this was when they were still shooting on some of the rap tours … Dude, I might be dead. I don't know, I'm fighting the presenter for my money, that kind of thing – a promoter. Things were rough. We were in the middle of this crack war. We were in the middle and we were trying to figure out where we were going. Things were really raw in the late '80s or early '90s. Public Enemy was spewing their thing, and Black Power – we were moving forward as a people.

Gonnerman: You were in your early thirties then.

Harris: I was around 27, 28.

Gonnerman: So you get this call.

Harris: I get the call. He says, "I want you to make some work." I'm saying, "Oh, you want a routine?" We called choreography routines. I didn't even know what "work" meant. He said, "I'm going to commission you." I had never used the word "commission" in my vocabulary at that point in time. What you have to understand is that I came straight from the neighborhood right to the stage. I often say I have one foot in the street and one foot on the stage. So my whole world was flipped, and it was like I had a toy and this is where I began to make the connection and kind of come into the space where I am now. Even in that space, I was still going through a process that saved me and allowed me to move forward the way I should.

Gonnerman: Trial-and-error learning, right?

Harris: Right.

Gonnerman: You must have experimented a lot.

Harris: Oh, yeah. There was a lot of experimentation. Honestly, the hardest thing about choreographing hip-hop for theater, number one, is that everything is flat and you're in a

box. Number two: the first time we did this performance that I got commissioned to do for an audience, the audience was completely white. I had never…. The first time I even had friends who were white, I was in high school. Priests in my neighborhood were white. That's about it. We were shocked. Where are our people? Where's the hood? We get out there and we're just killing it, we're just going for it. They were quiet. Now we're like, "Man, you suck. Come on, we've got to dance harder. They're not doing anything," and we're arguing and arguing. We're arguing throughout the whole show, on stage. I don't know if people noticed; maybe they thought it was part of the act. We're arguing and I'm whispering to them, "Come on, man, you should have come to rehearsal." Of course, now, that's the clean version. We were actually literally cussing each other out on stage. So we do the last piece, we did "Students of the Asphalt Jungle," and you can hear a pin drop. We're lining up on the side to go out for the bow and, at this particular time, for whatever reason, we started out with five women and three guys – more women than guys. This particular time, there were no women in the company; it was just all men for this performance. So we were backstage making a decision that after this performance we were going to go outside and we were going to have a rumble. We were going to fight, like "Look, Bub, I'm not taking this. You're not going to talk to me like this. We were really having a very strong man moment, or young-man moment. As we're walking out for our bow, and you could still hear people in line saying, "You just wait 'til we get outside," like in high school: I'll get you after school – one of those things. The audience…. We heard this roar – "Roarrrrrr" – and they stood up. We were in shock. We could not believe. What did we do? The whole time, you didn't say anything. This was a complete culture shock to us. In our community, we were used to having affirmation. In our conversations, you have to go, Uh-huh, uh-huh, yeah, I know what you're talking about. Yup, you're absolutely right. You know what I mean? Yeah, I know what you're saying. You have to have affirmation in a conversation. You must have affirmation when you're expressing yourself: Oh, go ahead and do it! That's the thing: you get love from every point and attention from every point. This was a whole new experience for us, so the hardest part was having to refocus the hip-hop dances and not focus on the audience because that was going to mess us up. So we started, especially if we were having predominantly white audiences in the very, very beginning…. I started this thing that we were going to perform for *us*. So we started to create these little performances on stage like a cipher and build our own energy and do tricks and things. We would surprise each other. When we were dancing, one of the dancers would stop dancing in the middle of the thing and walk in front of the other dancer and do the choreography backwards just to see, Can you make it? Can you make it? Are you going to mess up? Gonna' mess up?" We're like cracking up on stage, or one dancer jumps to the edge and does a flip into the audience (it's completely black) not even knowing (he can't see, there's no light out there; he flips and no one sees the flip but we see the flip). They didn't know what happened. We cracked up. We thought it was the funniest thing. What I realized is that if you create the cipher – this cipher of energy that's like a pebble in pond, it's just going to ring out, and eventually, by the end of each performance, the audience was with us. They were like, "Yeah!!"

Elam: Regardless of race, they'd be interacting with it?

Harris: Yeah, eventually. [Laughter] Often, if you've known somebody for a while, we've also had disclaimers and announcements at the beginning that it's OK in traditional African culture to call and respond. You can yell and scream during our performance. Some people felt it was rude. Theater-goers were like, Oh!. [Laughter] But for us, it made us dance harder. So as the audience started to change, the younger people understood. We used to look at the audience and say, Oh, my God. You saw somebody's grandmom in the front like this [gestures], and a girl would yell, "AHHHHH" and we would peek out and say, "Oh, my God, did you see that?" So we started to create these sort of diverse audiences nationally when we performed. People would follow us – kids – the family came. It was sort of racy and edgy because, again, what we tend to forget about the artist who is sharing his or her work in theater (not necessarily Broadway theater, we're talking about), the fine art, or whatever you want to call it, it is their personal journey, and you're looking into their life. It's not about what you want to see. You're looking into what's going on in this person's head. You're like, Wow! It's like watching television and you see some crazy stuff and you go, Wow! What were they thinking? So that's the connection. That was the interesting part for me. Then slowly, as I got older, I kind of got less resistant. I'm still resistant, but in the work I'm very clear and I have a different focus now. OK, this is for kids, I'm going to push this, I'm going to push that, I'm going to push business, I'm going to push people to speak from a human place, to have it be from their heart, and to follow the three laws of hip-hop, which were *individuality*, *creativity*, and *innovation*. We must always be moving forward. We must always represent ourselves as individuals, and we always must be creative in how we do things. We can barely come out with the same clothes the next day. If I was in my neighborhood, I'd get talked about: That Rennie Harris, he had those pants on yesterday! My dancers talk about me now, but I don't care. That comes with age.

Gonnerman: Innovation day to day.

Harris: No, minute to minute. I had resistance in the company from dancers who didn't want to do choreography – a certain movement – because it was not current. I said, if you limit hip-hop that way, then, no, we cannot have hip-hop as a concert dance form because now you're shutting down the vocabulary. The vocabulary expands all the way from the Lindy Hop and from African dance all the way through – all these movements – and if you call that off and you just talk about, we're going to walk it out, how long can you do that? [Laughter] You're going to run through all the current dances in fifteen minutes. So you have to reach into the wealth of knowledge in history. That was important for me to go back and research because I couldn't move forward. No house can be built without a foundation.

Elam: Before going back, one thing about innovation. You talked about the fact that when you do choreography, it can change, so you allow the space. How does that work today?

Harris: Well, I think that's the key for hip-hop dance as concert dance. Today we've kind of painted this picture of hip-hop as sort of regimented, very lyrical, and very

structured, and that's jazz, that's isolation jazz; there's nothing hip-hop about it other than people's projected attitude. When you see a hip-hop dance company, hip-hop dancers are like jazz musicians. None of them are the same. They have different variations on top of variations, like tapestry. So when you watch them dance, we're all moving in the same rhythm but our applications are completely different. And when you allow that, you allow for brilliant moments to happen. So the work always has to breathe. A year or maybe a month will go by and I'll go back and say, "That's not the choreography." I'll pull it back and then they'll breathe it again and change it. I get upset, but the truth of the matter is, it has to breathe. If it doesn't breathe, then it's not hip-hop. If it doesn't change, then it's not hip-hop.

Gonnerman: Well, that's the individuality part, too.

Harris: Right. They have to contribute. That's their contribution to the work. If I was to say, I only want this and this and this here, that's a dictatorship, and that doesn't work for me and it doesn't work for hip-hop. In a way, I'm defining it, but on some level, this sort of definition of a structure is not…. It's structure with flexibility. We spoke about this earlier. Hip-hop understands that structure is not a God-line; it's a guideline. We can fall off the path. We may not get back on it. That may actually be OK. But the idea is that we would like to get back on the path and go straight.

Gonnerman: And you'll never get back on it in the same place.

Harris: Exactly, because no one does the same thing the same way any day. You think, that person does this the same way every day. No, he doesn't. No, she doesn't. We go to work differently. We may do the same things, but the application of how we do it is completely different. Our whole lives are improvisational. It surprises me when people say, Oh, I had this plan and it went out the window, and they're stressed out and they have a heart attack. It went out the window. Accept the fact. There's nothing you can do about it. It's gone. Get a new plan.

Gonnerman: I've never heard a life story that went according to plan.
Let's talk a little bit about your life story, Harry. You've been in the arts your whole life, and your brother became an artist, and this created a certain amount of concern for you when he was on the verge of this. He had been to Morehouse College, he was in graduate school at the Fashion Institute of Technology in Manhattan, and then he calls you up, or how do you hear that he's going to launch himself?

Elam: I think I was in New York. His path was not from the streets, but he became of the streets, which I think was a part of hip-hop for him and I think a part of hip-hop, period. My brother told me that he was in New York and he was dropping out of the Fashion Institute of Technology to become an emcee. I said "What are you, crazy? You can't do this. You've got to get a job. You've been to college, you need a graduate degree. Get a grip." What I learned from my brother was that same sense with you: that you can make a dream a reality and that if you've got this dream as an artist, that sense

that you have to follow it – that you literally have to be a junkie for this dream because you're going to make it work.

He had a hard time at first in terms of being an artist. At his memorial service in Boston, one of his early partners told two stories that were interesting in terms of my brother. The first one was that, basically, he was living with his partner, who was DJ Premier, and they were so poor they had nothing. My brother had a job but he had nothing to wear to the job, so he wore Premier's clothes. Premier was like three times larger than he was, so underneath his clothes he wore sweats so that he could wear Premier's clothes to work that day back in Boston. Later, back in Boston - my father was a judge in Boston and the first black director of the Boston Municipal Court and an important influence on all of us – my brother wanted to convince my father that this was the right career for him, so he and his partner had to put on a concert for my father and mother in the living room. Suge, who was telling this story, said, "He's performed all over the world but he's never been as nervous." My brother afterwards said, "Thank you, man." My parents actually are in a video of my brother's called *Ex Girl to Next Girl*, so seeing your parents on MTV was … it was very different. I guess, for me, back in '93, he played here. He played at Dinkelspiel. Before that, being known on campus as Professor Elam, I was just Guru's brother. As I walked into the space, "That's Guru's brother." That became my claim to fame, that I was related to him. He wasn't my little brother anymore. So I think that, like you, Rennie, he had a real sense and belief in the power of hip-hop and what it could do not just as a form of art but as a form of social change, movement, expression, dynamic, and nation-building, in a sense, all behind it.

Gonnerman: I read somewhere that he spent a little time as a social worker.

Elam: Yeah, that's when he dressed up in his roommate's clothing to get to work.

Gonnerman: So he had a real concern for educating people through his work.

Elam: And I think part of hip-hop has got to be the message and how you're delivering that message. For him, part of that influence was that he claimed New York as home rather than Boston, and part of that was his experience and the hardness he faced in terms of the streets of New York. At the same time, part of it also for him was the fact that when he decided to do this, our mother was the head of the libraries, and the School of Boston gave him a book of poetry and rhymes. So that sense of being connected to a history – a black history, a history of what it meant in terms of struggle, resistance, survival – and all of those things were important to him in terms of creating music in and around what he did.

Harris: When was the turning point for you with regard to him and for your mom and your pop?

Elam: That's a good question. Before I taught at Stanford, in the '80s I was teaching at the University of Maryland in College Park, and he came down there to me and played some of his stuff. I was directing a play and he had done this demo at that point, and we

put it on at this cast party. People were jamming to his music. It's like, I'm dancing to my brother! [Laughter] That's a turning point. The sense that he was doing something that had a sound and also the realization for me that hip-hop wasn't going anywhere, or rap wasn't, as a form. Then *Jazzmatazz* happened soon thereafter. If you've ever seen the movie *Mo' Better Blues*, Spike Lee's movie, there's a song at the end called "Jazz Thing," and that was my brother's song at the end, and that sort of launched things. Then I see him doing rap music on the *Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. It was kind of cool. All of these things, and seeing him perform all over the world, basically. One of the things I was going to ask you, in thinking about that: Why do you think hip-hop has had this kind of global growth? What made it so that people in Latvia would be…?

Harris: Well, let me first say that his brother is an icon in hip-hop, basically, so if you don't know about him, look him up. I'm interested in the story of that connection. My brothers look at me and go like, "So what are you doing? You're not dancing in the video?" They can't get that I have a company and I dance for myself and people come and see us, so they still don't really kind of get it. So for me, I'm interested in that story of the realization that this is real – these moments, and what have you.

But the "why" part: I believe that it is the same spirit with a different name and that rhythm and blues, rock and roll, jazz, bebop – all these different genres of music – represented a specific generation of youth, and they felt freedom and they felt alive. So this spirit comes back in the music, and I say music because sound, to me, is the voice of God, in many ways. So, the music, the sound, this voice of God, continues to tell us in each generation that you have freedom, that you have choice, and that you have options. You have your soul to be an individual. You can do all these things and not be limited. So I think it feels like the same spirit for each generation – a different style that ignites the youth into resistance, into feeling alive, and to moving forward. Historically, if you go back and you research rock and roll, there were riots. People were killed over rock and roll, they were killed over rhythm and blues – it was all the devil's music; they were killed over jazz – jazz meant to fornicate. Rock and roll meant to fornicate back in the day. That was the original euphemism that was used for it. So, in regards to hip-hop, hip-hop was no different from rock and roll. It was just a new generation with the same spirit saying, You're free, you have choice, you're not limited. And then it comes back. Not only does it come back and say this internally to the youth, but it says this as a movement. The term "hip" has been defined as being derived from the word "hippie." Dr. Geneva Smitherman, who wrote the book *Black Talk*, defines this word "hippie" as coming from a language spoken in West Africa called Wolof, which means to open your eyes or to reopen your eyes. So the idea of hip means to be knowledgeable, to know who you are, and to know who you are as a spirit on this planet, to know why you are here – that you're here to learn how to love, because basically it's all about loving each other. Everything we do is about loving each other. We lie to people because we want them to think of us being great all the time so they can love us all the time. We lie to people because we don't want to hurt anybody's feelings so that they can treat us mean and then they don't love us anymore. Everything we do – everything we do that involves another person – is based around some form of wanting to be loved, and because we're here and there's this path of how to figure out and get back to, the actual, ultimate love in that

way. I think hip-hop is an extension of all those different genres. And even if we're talking about Mozart or Shakespeare, people of those times were this at some point, too. Shakespeare, too: they were sort of feeling this. He was writing his stuff in a bar, in this little lounge, with his homeys and stuff, you know what I mean? So he innovated the language. When I was reading Shakespeare, I was like, Man, this is like a gangster rapper. He was saying some stuff. I was like, "Whoa!" You know, strumpets and all kinds of…. I was like, "What???"

So, we go through each genre with this … of course, we get older and then all of a sudden we forget that we were young. We forget that we were rebelling. We forget these things for whatever reason, so part of my thing is to make sure that we don't forget. I think that's what it is. And I think that's why this thing has become global in the way jazz became global and the way rock and roll became global, because these were like: I'm not going to let you forget that you're free, that you have choice. That's my personal belief from a spiritual place that that is why it has moved across and, affected so many…. I mean, you've seen it, I've seen it. The first time we went overseas and saw Japanese lockers and poppers and rappers with locks…. You know, it's amazing.

So I'm interested, too, in that process for youth as it grows and becomes this global thing, especially when you say, "OK, make me understand this. Why would you want to do this?" And then that process….

Elam: With regard to this sense of the global reach: I was teaching for Stanford and Oxford, and my brother was in London, and I went here and there to see him record, and seeing that sense of, yes, people reacting to the music, getting into it, as you said. And in his passing, the Internet being what it is and people being able to find me at Stanford, I've heard from people all over the world about something else you mentioned, and that is the sense of spirit – the sense that his music touched them, in a way, and impacted their lives and changed them. And that they felt that they had to share this with me was heartwarming for me, for my family, who I shared them with, and that sense that you talked about: yes, art can have that power in people's lives to impact them in ways that it changes them. There's the connection, as you said, to youth, to that power. The idea of it as a movement has been interesting for me, too, being an academic, because now I've written about and studied hip-hop as a scholar and have been to conferences in Europe where people are talking about Polish hip-hop, people are talking about hip-hop in Germany. And that sense that I mentioned before of resistance – that it's a way to give voice to the voiceless in a variety of different ways remains, so you see, regardless, that people find that hip-hop has that power to do that. Yeah, you can say that rap has been co-opted in ways and commercialized, and I'd love to hear what you think about that.

Gonnerman: Let's talk about the commercialization of dissent by going back to this experience that you were just talking about. So hip-hop is just starting out in your neighborhood. This movement just takes off and soon you can find it everywhere. Where is that spirit now? Is it here in the United States? Where is hip-hop really happening now? I was thinking that the spirit moves and it takes on the characteristics of the local culture in each place. You might say that the local culture in the United States

is: Get rich or die trying. And if hip-hop seems to reflect that spirit, is that where we are right now?

Harris: Well, you know, there's a two-fold thing. Remember, we talked about the negative and positive. One thing about this specifically, say hip-hop in the black community, is that from my experience, in the black community there's always this sense of the idea that we live one day at a time. We all hear that, but it's in the language of black folk: "How're you doing, man?" "Oh, man, I'm just trying to make it to the end of the day." Everything they say is always about that particular moment. So the idea of hip-hop: hip-hop really is about living within the moment that exists. So for them, I have $100,000 and I'm going to go out there and buy myself a big-ass chain and I'm going to live now. My mom didn't understand why I had on $5 jeans and $100 shoes, and why I was spending $100 on my shoes when I was fifteen years old, because I needed to have it now. So the idea of, I'm going to live now because tomorrow is not promised to us is, in a way, very spiritual to me. Now, I'm not saying that this is an excuse for what's happening today, because some of the artists are just out of their minds, you know what I mean? But on some level, I understand it as well because that's what the community was very much like – it was about living for today and not worrying about tomorrow because when you're poor, you're living day by day. When you're poor, you go to the store and that day you get the food that you're going to cook that night, and then you use it. We didn't have a refrigerator. We didn't have furniture. We had crates in my house. My mom put stuff on them and people thought we had a funky house, but it was crates under there. (They made milk crates out of iron at that time.) In the summertime, we made the food for that day and we ate. In the wintertime, the food went out on the back step. So the idea of living day to day was, for me, I think, the jump-off point of connection with hip-hop, or at least the idea of it, and the bling-bling. But today's hip-hop, like you say, has been co-opted….

Elam: Do you differentiate hip-hop from rap … I mean, the commercialization?

Harris: No, actually, I don't. When someone said that to me, "What do you think about rap and hip-hop? Which one do you like?" I was like "Huh?" I was at UCLA and I was teaching, and I was like "Huh? Is this a trick question?" Well, I said, "No, it's like the same thing to me." It's like hip-hop is the culture. MCing and rapping are, I think…. Actually, if you say there's a difference between MCing and rapping, that's clearer to me because an MC is about the party – getting everybody involved: "Throw your hands in the air/Wave 'em like you just don't care." The rapper is the modern-day griot – the jolly, as they say in Africa: the person who tells the story of the people, the person who remembers the history of the people, the person who always sees everything. That's the rapper; he's the storyteller, to me. Then there's the MC. But when you say hip-hop and rapper, it's one and the same to me.

But today, it's a whole new, different brand of hip-hop, very new. And I often…. I had to stop myself from talking down about it and realize that I was doing the very thing I was fighting. I was saying, "Oh, that's not hip-hop. You go to the hip-hop jail!" [Laughter] And then I realized, and once I realized this, it became very clear that in the

United States, black, white, or indifferent, we are very elitist about our hip-hop. We want to see it how we understand it. We want to see it because it's a street dance; therefore, it belongs in the street. We want to see people flipping over the top of each other's heads, we want to see the rapper hands, the pants down to our kneecaps. Everywhere else, they're pushing the envelope, in the places that I've seen. I'm not saying that it's not happening here, because it is happening in the States, but I'm saying, in general, if you're not flipping over someone or doing a super-fast rhyme, or if the rhyme is not about sex, or if the rhyme is not about killing someone, then it's not hip-hop. And that, my friend, is not what I remember as being hip-hop from the very beginning.

Hip-hop was inclusive of everything. It may have had a little sex appeal, had a little man moment in there sometimes, but it was very much about acknowledging self and being proud of self: I'm the best, I'm confident – being very confident about what you do and how amazing you are, and no one loves you but you. Again, when you're coming from poverty, that's all you have is your confidence. "I'm the best. Sure I can do it." So that's the foundation of hip-hop, and I think today we've moved away from that. Now, it's a product.

I'll finish with this, a crazy thing. In a dollar store in L.A., I turn around, walking down the aisle (actually, my girlfriend likes to go to these dollar stores for whatever reason; I didn't need to tell you that – that's too much information), so basically, I'm bored. I don't like to shop, but she says, "Come shopping!" So I'm walking around and my feet hurt and my back hurts, and I say, "Are you done?" That's another story. I could do a whole lecture on men and shopping. [Laughter] There are some things, women, you might want to know. So I turned around and at that moment it was like, "All right, I'm hot; I need to go." Now, I look over and there was a packet of pink tights and it had a ballet dancer on it, and in bold black it said, "Hip-Hop Tights." [Laughter] There's a ballet dancer with a tutu and she's doing this [gestures], and I was like, "You *have* to be kidding me! Are you kidding me?" Like, you stamp it "hip-hop" and they will come. [Laughter] By virtue of me drinking this water, this is now hip-hop water, and I ask you all to buy this. We've sort of eased into the idea. In some way, I remember capitalism was an extremely bad word. Now it's completely the fiber of this country. I mean, it's always been, but we've sort of accepted it as American culture.

Elam: Could you put your dancers in hip-hop tights?

Harris: Ewww….. [Laughter] Well, I'll tell you one thing. Let me tell you how conditioned I was at some level from the dance part. One time I attempted to have the dancers go…. I said, "We're going to take our shoes off." Modern dancers had bare feet, so we were going to do hip-hop with bare feet. Those dancers were like, "Rennie, you are tripping. We are not." Their feet were hurting so bad. There was a guy sitting there saying, "We have hip-hop feet, dude. Hip-hop feet have to be protected. We're not like these other cats." And then, at that moment, I was like, oh man, I was becoming assimilated. When I was in the theater, I was trying to be like everyone else, and I caught myself: Oh, I have to keep this hip-hop, and how can I do it tastefully? How can I do it for us in a way that creates some sort of methodology of how to create for the theater in

that way, so I watch myself when I start to feel that moment, because I'm a musical baby. I like musicals and Ziegfield Follies. I grew up late at night like this, looking at television, so I can move into that space very easily because of that, but I think we as a culture have kind of moved there now, and now this sort of Broadway culture – this television program *So You Think You Can Dance*, this television culture – has kind of defined how we see hip-hop now, how we see anything that is street from the skate boarders to whatever. They grab it, they take it, they repackage it, they put it back out. I just find it interesting that the word media begins with "med," for medicinal. I think that's what's really happening with our culture.

Gonnerman: Let's talk a little bit about that before we open up to audience questions. We'll talk a little bit more about this point just made, but think about your questions and then we'll have time.

So how to you subvert the media?

Elam: I used to write letters. [Laughter]

Gonnerman: What are you going to do as an artist next to subvert this? Haven't the media taken control of hip-hop, and can hip-hop take it back?

Elam: A related question to that, too: has your choreography changed?

Harris: Oh, I think my choreography has changed dramatically in just the way that I think about it. I think about it from a more complex place. When I first started, it was about simple movement and it was about the aesthetic. And all my original dancers … their spirit and their characters that they created on stage are what drove the work. Now it's like the choreography itself is driving the work, not just the dancer pushing it.

I'm interested as I'm doing the work I'm working on. It's a piece called *Heaven* premiering in Philadelphia. They're calling it a B-girl ballet, using predominantly all female – three boys and the rest all female – breakers. It's based loosely off of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. I wrote the story that I made up about a grandfather and a grandmother. A young woman is telling the story of the grandmother and the grandfather and how the grandfather was so obsessed with going to heaven that the grandmother killed him so he could go. This is sort of: do not try this at home. [Laughter] The underbelly of the story is our men, our obsession with sex. Like, what is that? What is this relationship? And how we separate the two things. The relationship and the sex are two different things. From my experience from my relationships, the relationship and sex are always intertwined. So if I messed up the relationship, sex was not happening. So this is all based on relationships and this idea of heaven – this obsession. What is going on? So basically that's the undercurrent of it. She kills him so that he can actually experience it.

I know that's kind of crazy, but that's some stuff I was thinking, Oh, this will be hot! Again, remember, you look into the minds of the artists when you go to see work in this

fashion. The other work I'm working on is called *100 Naked Locks* about the last one hundred humans in the universe. The world blows up, of course, and then there are three people left – father, son, and their….

Elam: So it's kind of sci-fi.

Harris: Yes, it's hip-hop sci-fi. The three people who are left are Afrika Bambaataa**,** DJ Kool Herc**,** and Grandmaster Flash, and they become celestial beings, and they run the whole universe. Then Nas is running for president and he's fighting with Jayzee, so the universe of hip-hop, and all the different planets of hip-hop begin to fight each other. The trinity decides … they had 1,000 years of peace, and they're making the decision: What do we do? How do we get peace again? Then someone makes the decision: We need to basically kill everybody and start all over again.

So, quick story: I'm making a hip-hop sci-fi based on the madness and craziness in the hip-hop world, sort of like just a play on the hip-hop world and what's happening with the infighting and the murder and Biggie and Tupac are the two icons, and the two factions in this universe are sided with Biggie and Tupac. So I'm working on that.

So, in my work I feel like I'm not just telling my story. My work originally was telling my personal story about my family, my life, and those things. Now I feel like I'm just looking outside of myself and looking a little bit more universal, in a way, and looking for those inspirations. Whether they become great pieces, or what have you…. I'm not necessarily worried about it other than…. This is the one that thing I actually have fun at: the creation part. Everything else, I don't necessarily like but I like the actual creation part. The last thing I heard you thinking over here: I'm doing a full-night, or 45-minute piece, to all of Queen's work that I like, so I'm creating what I call a dance-musical, where they're not singing, but Queen's music was like they were storytelling. They were telling these amazing…. You could visually see this stuff. So I'm connecting different songs so that it actually begins to tell this longer story throughout the night.

So those are the three works I'm currently working on.

Elam: Your dancers come from a certain tradition, right? What has it been like to put dance on like other companies, like Alvin Ailey? What was it like to bring your dance to them?

Harris: It was a learning experience for me. I had a chance to work with a few dancers with Alvin Ailey, DCDC, Memphis Ballet, and in all these dance companies, what was interesting to me is that – and here's where maybe you can ask me or tell me what your thoughts are – I'm a hip-hop dancer and I know no ballet. I mean, I know terms to make connections, but I haven't taken any classes in ballet to say I'm a ballet dancer or a modern dancer or even an African dancer, or even Lindy Hop. So as a hip-hop dancer, and you're a ballet dancer or a modern dancer, I give you this hip-hop movement and what happens is that your language dominates my language, so it's like speaking Spanish with an English grammatical structure. So my job then becomes to get rid of your accent.

Elam: Is it possible?

Harris: It's possible if you took a language course when you were (my daughter took language when she was three and four) and then you remember it years later. So if you had the experience, you've seen it and been around it at some level and just walked around it, you may actually resource it subconsciously and bring it back up and make the connection. But what happens, especially with the dancers who are trained in modern ballet, their muscle memory, their muscles are speaking the language of the language they've been trained in for years, so if I tell them to do this, they're doing this, and I'm like, "Do that," and they're like [gestures]. Their response is, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that." [Laughter] So, it's having to teach them another language in a very, very short time. So that part is interesting for me. The result becomes something else. I don't necessarily know if it's a hip-hop piece. After I'm done, it may just be a piece by Rennie Harris rather than hip-hop-inspired, because their language is going to dominate it so much that you're really just going to see a lot of their language and a little bit of … and I become the accent.

Gonnerman: Other questions?

Question from the Audience: This question is directed to both speakers on the stage. I know you both have a lot of background in academia and hip-hop and whatnot, and I was just wondering, as a dancer myself who has tried to document breaking, it's really hard to get an objective view because when I start talking, they say, "No, no, no, that's wrong because so-and-so said this." How do you record or document a culture where it's so politicized, and is there a way to go about it questioning the integrity of the dancer: their views, your views, and making it work for the audience as well?

Harris: I've documented, and most of the pioneers that I know who come to work with me who have come to Philadelphia – we always document on videotape. Because I teach it and I lecture about it, what I've found is the easiest way as a documenter to get this information is tell the information of that particular person. So, for instance, if Rock Steady says, "Actually, the windmill was created by Crazy Legs because of x, y, or z," OK, boom. Then you have New York City Breaker say, "Well, actually, no. The windmill actually…. I think it was this guy." Tell both of the stories.

When you're looking at hip-hop, you shouldn't look at hip-hop in a linear way because there is no linear. It's all these other complexities and languages, and it's very complex and they're all layered. When you think about it, hip-hop is indigenous to its person, its place, its thing. So, if we stayed here in this theater, we'd become the hip-hop crew from Stanford right here at the Aurora Forum. This is the Forum hip-hop group. If we stay here for two months, we'll create our own movement, our own style, our own talk. Hip-hop is regional, so most people have their own story about how it went down. If you're trying to find out the actual person, that's like trying to find the first guy who put on taps and said, OK, this is tapping. You may not find that, but what you want to do is draw out the innovators, draw out the history as we know it at large, and all those other stories that

just come out, and just let it be, because their voice and their version of it is important. What's going to happen is that when you put all of those stories together, you'll start to see this line. A lot of times they're telling you stuff but they're forgetting to tell you this other thing, which is connected to this, which may be connected to New York City Breakers. And the reason why someone in New York City Breakers actually danced in the Rock Steady Crew, and the Rock Steady Crew dancers – a lot of them danced in the New York City Breakers. Now, these dancers were going back and forth from the Ghetto Originals to the Crazy Commanders, and what have you, so you have all of them sort of dancing for each other throughout history. So all these stories are slightly different, but you will find those that are the same. I think Raphael, one of our alumni dancers, who is also here (I'm putting you on the spot), can tell you some stuff about that because you're going to hear different stories. But I always felt it was safe to say that breaking, B-boying, really originated from the gang culture. That's the truth. Nobody can say they didn't. B-Boy Spy, the man with a thousand moves, was the one who really innovated the vocabulary of breaking, so most of the vocabulary in the beginning came from the Crazy Commanders, which he was a part of. Let all the little stories happen, and that's why it is easier for me not to try to get the truth but to get their truth.

Elam: I really don't have anything to add. I would just say that from the first time I heard Rennie talk about the history of hip-hop dancing, I loved hearing him talk about that history, because what you have done is given it structure – the moves and legitimacy that people have denied, in a sense, but it has that, and you undoubtedly know that as a dancer. But I also love your point that it's not a linear history. There were explosions at different points at different places. I think scholars, critics, and people talking about that history have to realize. We often try to put it in a neat narrative that this happened, which led to this and happened to that, but I think thinking of that sense of those explosions happening differently and feeding each other – yes, in ways, but also, yes, developing separately, is what makes it such an incredible form.

Harris: And the other part to it is, attempt to think of it … don't think of it from a Western point of view, a Eurocentric point of view, where there's a history that's written down. This is not that. Our story is this whole other story of many cultures, but if you're following, like, OK, we're going to write the history, remember, the history is always "his story," so you're still following. That thing is going to come out. Raphael, could you say something about that – about those stories being different? Raphael's done a little bit himself.

Raphael I have an interesting dynamic on it because I know a lot of those guys personally. So I hear what one person says and I'm like, Yeah, but that doesn't work for this person. One of the most important things Rennie says all the time is, "Don't listen to me and take my word for it. Find out what it is for yourself and define it." I think that's one of the most profound things for anyone in hip-hop because that's when it makes sense. None of this stuff now makes sense until you make sense for yourself.

Harris: Drawing on that story, what is it you want to say? Then figure that out because you're telling the history. You can get that and figure that out, but what's your take on

it? Think of it as your thesis. What's your view?

Question from the Audience: What are your thoughts on contemporary black gospel music as that has taken hold of rap as a vehicle? I'm thinking of Richard Righteous and Mary Mary Superfriend.

Elam: You can go back to the earlier two. What's his name? Kirk Franklin?

Audience question (continued): That is an area of innovation in hip-hop music because that's what gets my attention. The stuff my kids is into is so lame, I can't stand it. I need something fresh. I want choices, and I'm hearing it and finding it in the contemporary black spiritual music.

Elam: For me (just a quick comment), I think that's great. I would connect it, actually, back and think about jazz blues in relationship to black spiritual music then. There's this wonderful scene in *The Great Debaters* at the beginning of the movie that Denzel Washington directed, and there's a song that's playing, and it plays both in this bar and in a revival meeting. That's the sense that music had that kind of duality in black life from, I would say, basically from the beginning, and how people understood it and even that practice now, going through the years of what instruments people allowed in church. They said, no, you can't do that. So, this, to me, is the next evolution of that, to see how hip-hop sound is coming into the church.

Harris: I loved it. It was great. I remember when they didn't want it in the church. I remember when they told us to forget the hippity-hoppity stuff. You go to church and they didn't want it. I remember. I said, "What are you talking about? This is the most spiritual thing you ever want to hear. You ought to listen to these people rap. Listen to this guy say what he's saying. At that time, people were rapping, rhyming about God. People were rhyming about life and struggle, and this, to me, was the church, from my perspective of it. So I think this is amazing, and I'm like, yes, finally, like this gospel hip-hip, this gospel rap. You know what it is? The changing of the guards also happened. The younger kids who became preachers from my generation – a lot of my cats who were pioneers in Philadelphia are preachers now, and they get up and pop for their congregations while they're preaching, and the young kids love it. And it's just a tool to say, Listen, we're all children of God, no matter what type of music you listen to, whatever you listen to: Philip Glass, or whatever your thing is. That, to me, is … music is always God speaking on whatever level, so I think it's amazing and I think it's great. I'm waiting for, and I often … they're going to kill me – not really kill me … but I thought about having a gospel dance company to dance only to gospel, for hip-hop, though. I have too many projects. I'm looking at my manager over here, and he's like, "Oh, man!"

I think it's amazing and it needs it because hip-hop was always, and is, spiritual to me. I'm going to give you a little sample of why I say this because I felt like there was always an encoded message from the first rap song they got on the air from Rapper's Delight, and it said, "From the hip to the hop, you don't stop rocking." To the hip people in the

know, that hop, the dancing … the hip people – you don't stop rocking. Rocking was a euphemism for having sex. Don't stop procreating. So, "the hip to the hop, you don't stop the rock it to the bang bang boogie say up jumped the boogie to the rhythm of the boogie, the beat." So "Up jumped a boogie," the boogie being the spirit of God. Boogie Boogalosa means spook, but it's really spirit. So "Up jumped the boogie to the bang bang (meaning the drum) to the boogie, to the beat," to the spirit that exists. On some level, there was sort of an encoded message from the first hip-hop song that hit the airwaves: this is about God.

Gonnerman: That's a really beautiful place to end. Thank you very much, Professor Elam and Dr. Harris. We'll see you at the performances on Saturday. Thanks. [Applause]

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Rennie Harris
Artistic Director and Choreographer
of Rennie Harris Puremovement in Philadelphia

Rennie Harris is well versed in the vernacular of hip-hop which includes the various techniques of B-boy (misnomer "breakdancing"), house dancing, stepping and other styles that have emerged spontaneously from the urban, inner cities of America like the North Philadelphia community in which he was raised. He has brought these "social" dances to the "concert" stage, creating a cohesive dance style that finds a cogent voice in the theater. He is a powerful spokesperson for the significance of "street" origins in any dance style. Intrigued by the universality of hip-hop, he seeks inspiration from other forms and performance art.

Since the age of 15, he has taught workshops and classes at many schools and universities including University of the Arts, UCLA, Columbia College and Bates College. He is a 1996 recipient of the Pew Fellowship in the Arts for Choreography and has received awards from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, a Pew Repertory Development Initiative grant, the City of Philadelphia Cultural Fund and 1996 Philadelphia Dance Projects commission. Harris was voted one of the most influential people in the last one hundred years of Philadelphia history and has been compared to twentieth-century dance legend Alvin Ailey and Bob Fosse. He was also nominated for the Laurence Olivier Award and has been recently awarded the Herb Alpert Award in the Arts. His group of dancers and their infectious brand of movement have toured around the globe.

Harry J. Elam, Jr.
Olive H. Palmer Professor in the Humanities, the Robert and Ruth Halperin University Fellow for Undergraduate Education, Director of the Committee on Black Performing Arts, and Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education.

Professor Harry Elam's scholarly work focuses on contemporary American drama, particularly African American and Chicano theater. In addition to his scholarly work, he has directed theatre professionally for more than eighteen years. Most notably, he has

directed several of August Wilson's plays, including *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Two Trains Running*, and *Fences*, the latter of which won eight Bay Area "Choice" Awards. He is the author of *Taking it to the Streets: The Social Protest Theater of Luis Valdez and Amiri Baraka*; *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson* (winner of the 2005 Errol Hill Award from the American Society of Theatre Research); and co-editor of four books on theatrical arts. He is the outgoing editor of *Theatre Journal* and on the editorial boards of *Atlantic Studies*, *Journal of American Drama and Theatre*, and *Modern Drama*.

Winner of multiple teaching awards at Stanford, he also received the Betty Jones Award for Outstanding Teaching from the American Theatre and Drama Society in 2006, the same year that he was inducted into the College of Fellows of the American Theatre in April 2006. He has taught at Stanford since 1990, and is the former director of the Introduction to the Humanities program. His younger brother, Keith, a rap artist known by his stage name, Guru (a backronym for Gifted Unlimited Rhymes Universal), died early in 2010.

Mark Gonnerman is founding director of the Aurora Forum.

Comments?

We welcome your comments and suggestions via email to auroraforum@stanford.edu

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