



Mention *The Canterbury Tales* to Baba Brinkman and he has a tale of his own to tell.

Hip-hop hit *Canterbury* when Brinkman, a young Victoria rap artist fresh out of academe, showed up in the English cathedral town in 2000 for commemorations marking the 600th anniversary of the death of Geoffrey Chaucer. Scholarly analysis of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* was about to be turned on its head as Brinkman tried to present his hip-hop adaptation of *The Knight's Tale*, generally seen as the first of the collection's 24 stories.

"Basically, they wanted to run me out of town," says Brinkman. "They don't like it at all."

Thanks to a bureaucratic cock-up, nobody knew he was coming and no

one wanted anything to do with Brinkman or his adaptation. This despite the fact the 24-year-old artist earned his MA at UVic in medieval and Renaissance English literature, and can be ranked as a Chaucer fanatic.

"Shakespeare's always hogging the spotlight," Brinkman complains. "This is really a tribute to Chaucer, because rap is such an animated way of telling a story."

Chaucer's premise had pilgrims to *Canterbury* trying to outdo each other telling tales in a competition. That struck Brinkman as analogous to freestyle storytelling contests by

today's rap artists, and he set to work filtering Chaucer's original Middle English into modern street vernacular. Here's how he describes the process:

"For my formal guidelines and inspiration I looked to contemporary artists such as Nas, Eminem, Slick Rick, Common, KRS-One, Gift of Gab, Talib Kweli and many others who use intricate polysyllabic rhyme combinations in their lyrics to tell stories, entertain and educate. Thus, Chaucer's iambic pentameter couplets become four-stress lines with dense internal rhyme schemes, while its narratives remain essentially the same, though abridged."

If the process sounds dry and academic, the result is not. Brinkman has presented his version of *The Knight's Tale* in a 20-minute rap to classes at schools and colleges in the Victoria area, and teachers report back that students have

greater interest in and better appreciation of Chaucer after hearing his often-bawdy tales told in hip-hop style.

Over the last six months Brinkman added *The Miller's Tale* and *The Pardoner's Tale* to the mix, and closes by taking the parody of Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas* and turning it on himself — "Me, a little fly-on-the-wall white boy, with something different to say at each performance."

Brinkman presents *The (Rap) Canterbury Tales* at Vancouver's Fringe Festival, with at least one show every day from Sept. 4 to 14 at Third Avenue Gallery, 1725 W. Third. After this debut he hopes to hit the full fringe-fest circuit next year, but notes that there are other fish to fry as well.

"This is not my only aspiration lyrically," Brinkman says.

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