

# Rennie Harris – *Nuttin' But A Word*

## Flynn Student Matinee Series Study Guide



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## About the Artists

*"Movement is the last manifestation of your reality. It's not what you say  
but what you do that confirms who you are."*

--Rennie Harris



*Rennie Harris (present)*

One of hip-hop's leading ambassadors, Rennie Harris is a dancer, choreographer, and educator who began performing publicly as a teenager. He grew up in North Philadelphia and was voted one of the most influential citizens in Philadelphia of the past 100 years. He's 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. His approach to his art is rooted in a humanitarian vision: that we will not overcome racial or ethnic barriers until we know, appreciate, and respect the distinct cultural worlds from which each of us come.

In 1992 he founded the Rennie Harris Puremovement (RHPM) dance company, dedicated to preserving and

sharing Hip-hop aesthetics and Street Dance culture through workshops, classes, lecture demonstrations, residencies, mentoring programs, and public performances. The mission of the company is to re-educate the public about Hip-hop culture and Street Dance through its artistic work, embodying the diverse and rich African Diasporic traditions of the past while evolving a new voice through dance. Rather than the commercially exploited stereotypes of Street Dance that media often portrays, Rennie Harris is devoted to bringing audiences into a sincere view of the essence and spirit of Street Dance. As Rennie says, it was Hip-hop that taught him honesty, humility, and purity. RHPM has performed all over the world, including in France, South Africa, West Africa, Brazil, Mexico, Japan, Kazakhstan, Congo, New Zealand, and many other countries. The company

members were ambassadors for the US as part of President Obama's cultural exchange program, [Dance Motion USA](#). Harris and his company have received numerous awards including three



*The Scanner Boys, the crew Rennie first danced with in the early '80s (top left)*



An image from *Rome & Jewels*

RHPM is a piece called *Rome & Jewels*, which riffs on Shakespeare's *Romeo & Juliet*, fusing classical text with contemporary slang and mixing Hip-hop, rock, modern, and classical music. It is the longest touring Hip-hop dance theater work in American history. Learn more about Rennie's journey in [this video from KQED](#).

### About the Show

As Rennie Harris describes it, "The work's title, *Nuttin' But A Word*, was taken from a cultural phrase used amongst Blacks in the United States. The complete phrase is, 'You ain't said nothing but a word'; loosely translated, it means, 'Your words mean nothing — pay close attention because what I do next will trump anything you have to say.'"

The show premiered in 2016 and is made up of a series of dances interspersed with short video segments, in which Harris shares some of his philosophy on Hip-hop dance and culture. The music in the show is eclectic, including ambient, orchestral, jazz, funk, and more. This ties into part of the intention of the show, which is to challenge the expectations and stereotypes of what Hip-hop and Street Dance are and can be. The show is centered on Rennie Harris' [three laws of hip-hop](#): individuality, creativity, and innovation. "It serves as a reminder that without individuality, creativity, and innovation there cannot be progression of life as we know it," says Harris.

Bessie Awards, the Alvin Ailey Black Choreographers' Award, the Philadelphia Rocky Prize, and a nomination for an Olivier Award in the UK.

RHPM was the first company to bridge the divide between street dance and theater, and its influence can be seen in many contemporary companies and productions today. RHPM creates narrative-driven pieces exploring racism, sexism, and other cultural issues through Street Dance movement and original music and writing.

The most well-known work of



Rennie Harris Pure Movement



## Hip-Hop & Street Dance on Stage

*"I have one foot on the street and one foot on the stage."*

--Rennie Harris

Hip-hop developed in the 1970s in the Bronx. This was a time when the optimism of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s had faded and Black and brown folks living in low-income areas in NYC – the Bronx especially – were facing extreme poverty as city officials slashed basic services, school funding, and job training programs. Hip-hop was born out of this environment as a form of expression in which young people experimented with new styles of poetry, music, and dance as a way to share their thoughts and feelings.

Afrika Bambaataa, a DJ and artist often described as one of the “godfathers” of hip-hop, is the founder of Universal Zulu Nation, a hip-hop and activism organization. Bambaataa identified [five elements of hip-hop](#), each of which connects to a different mode of art and expression: the MC (spoken or sung expression), the dancer (physical artistic expression), graffiti artist (visual art), DJ (music and musicianship). After first identifying these four, he later he came out with the fifth element, saying none of those elements are relevant unless you have knowledge.



*DJ Kool Herc, a founder of hip-hop*

*Nuttin' But A Word* features Hip-hop and Street Dance movement. Rennie Harris [distinguishes between the two forms](#), defining hip-hop as nationwide social dances that anyone can do, like the [cabbage patch](#), [soldier boy](#), or [nae nae](#); and Street Dance as city-specific genres with their own techniques, like **house**, **popping**, **locking**, and **breaking**.



*A poster for the 10th Hip-Hop Theatre Festival, in 2010*

As Harris says, “I used to believe ‘street’ gave it a lower connotation. Then I realized it was a lower thing according to white dance and Western culture standards. However, it’s not coming from that. Because of its Africanness, it stands alone. ‘Street’ is a slang term for community.”

In the 1990s, artists began exploring the emerging genre of “[hip-hop theatre](#),” a style that fuses theater performance with the elements of hip-hop. Danny Hoch, an artist who co-founded the NYC Hip-Hop Theater Festival, describes the form in an [essay](#):

“Hip-hop theatre must fit into the realm of theatrical performance, and it must be by, about and for the hip-hop generation, participants in hip-hop culture, or both.”

As Rennie Harris explains it, “the hardest thing about choreographing hip-hop for theater is that it’s flat. You’re in a box.” Recalling the first time he performed in a theater, for a theater audience, Harris described culture shock. The audience was entirely white, and stayed silent throughout the performance – until they rose for a roaring standing ovation at the end. When RHPM performed their first show in 1991, rows full of audience members would consistently walk out of the theater.

As Harris recalls in an [interview](#), “we were doing some stuff that [the audience] didn’t want to hear about. We were doing stuff on racism, we wanted to know where the n-word came from... they didn’t want to hear it... In the work I was finding my resistance and dealing with resistance in my choreography.”

Harris also realized that dancers – used to performing in their communities or for hip-hop crowds – were getting messed up by expecting the audience to engage with them throughout performances set in a theater space. This led him to refocus the dancers to keep their attention on each other instead, finding surprise and affirmation from each other throughout the performance rather than expecting that from an audience. “If you create this **cypher** of energy, like a pebble in a pond it’s going to ring out. And eventually by the end of the performance, the audience was with us.”

While RHPM’s performances are tightly choreographed, there is always room for experimentation and improvisation as well – staying true to the laws of individuality, creation, and innovation that Harris believes in.



*"Nuttin' But A Word" performing in Brooklyn, NY*

“Hip-hop dancers are like jazz musicians,” says Harris. “None of them are the same. They will have different variations on top of variations... So when you watch them dance, we’re all moving in the same rhythm but our application is completely different. And when you allow that, you allow for brilliant moments to happen. So the work always has to breathe... if it doesn’t breathe, if it doesn’t change, it’s not hip-hop.”

## Glossary

Learn about some of the moves and terms you'll experience during *Nuttin' But A Word!* For more, check out [The Breaks](#), an online encyclopedia about breaking and hip-hop dance, or The Kennedy Center's interactive site [Hip-Hop: A Culture of Vision and Voice](#).

**Breaking:** a style of dance that features a competitive display of physical and imaginative virtuosity, which can be defined in terms of its movements (including many listed below) as well as its spirit of flaunting personal inventiveness. DJ Kool Herc, one of the founders of hip-hop, [shares](#), "[The term] didn't come from breaks on the record. It come from – this man, he broke. He went to a point of – a breaking point. You understand? So we just used an exaggeration of that term to the dancing."

**B-boy / B-girl:** a dancer who breaks.

**Popping:** fluid movements of the limbs, such as moving arms like an ocean wave, that emphasize contractions of isolated muscles.

**Locking:** snapping arms or legs into held positions, often at sharp angles, to accent a musical rhythm.

**Top-rocking:** fancy footwork performed upright.

**Down-rocking:** dance moves performed on or close to the ground.

**Up-rocking:** martial arts strikes, kicks and sweeps built into the dance steps often with the intent of "burning" an opponent.

**Power moves:** acrobatic spins and flares requiring speed, strength, and agility.

**Freeze:** sudden halt of a dance step to hold a pose, often while balanced on a hand, shoulder, or head.

**Cypher:** group of b-boys/b-girls taking turns in the center of the dance floor.



*The Rock Steady crew, one of the first breaking crews in the '80s*



**House:** a style of street dance that originated in the late '70s and early '80s club scenes, and was influenced by many types of movement including tap, African dance, Latin dance, and martial arts. The style highlights improvisation and freedom of expression.

**GQ:** a street dance style that originated in Philadelphia, which finds its origins in a Latin social dance, the cha-cha. Rennie Harris explains more about the dance's history in [this article](#).



*B-Girl Ami, from Japan, won gold at the 2024 Olympics. It was the first year breaking was included as an Olympic event*

### **Reflection Questions:**

*Here are some example questions to prompt deeper engagement from your students, both before and after the show:*

#### **Before the Show:**

- Have you ever been to a theater before? What are some ways an audience is expected to behave in a theater that are different from how you behave in other places you go for entertainment, like a movie theater?
- When you think about Hip-hop and Street Dance, what comes to mind?
- What do you think dance can make you think or feel? How does dance tell a story?

#### **After the Show:**

- How did the show make you feel? Was there a specific moment when it caused an emotional reaction in you? How did it do that? What did the show make you think about?
- If you were to write a review of the show, what would you say? What stood out to you? Would you recommend it to other people? Why?
- Was there a kind of movement you saw, or a pairing of music and dance, that you were surprised by? What was surprising about it?
- Rennie Harris describes the three laws of Hip-hop as individuality, creativity, and innovation. How did you see this play out in the performance?

### **Resources:**

- [Rennie Harris Puremovement Website](#)
- [Hip Hop Dance Legend Rennie Harris Shares Five Major Moments \(KQED Arts\)](#)
- [A Conversation with Rennie Harris on Hip Hop Choreography \(Stanford University\)](#)
- [Rennie Harris Bridges the Past and Future \(Dance Magazine\)](#)
- [Hip Hop: A Culture of Vision and Voice \(Kennedy Center Resource Page\)](#)
- [The Five Pillars of Hip Hop \(Harlem Gallery of Science\)](#)
- [Hip-Hop Theatre: Traversing Commercialization and Culture](#)
- [Towards a Hip-Hop Aesthetic: A Manifesto for the Hip-Hop Arts Movement](#)
- [The Breaks: A Breaking Encyclopedia](#)