

Poetic pyrotechnics drive intense urban tour

REVIEW: Universes' style as electric as the third rail.

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(Published: March 13, 2004)

"Slanguage" transcends the boundaries of its origins. Performed by Universes, an ensemble of five, the show presents an exciting free romp through a lexicon of urban expression that twists and turns and zooms us along on a lightning-paced journey into the soul of its poet creators.

From the moment the group took the stage at Out North Contemporary Art House on Thursday night, the audience was bewitched by a rhythmic pulse and expressive vitality that didn't quit until the show's screeching conclusion. Using music, dance, songs and the percussive qualities of the two black boxes that comprised their set, the group intensely physicalized their poetic pyrotechnics, seeming to leave few linguistic stones unturned.

With an unremitting athletic urgency, the performers ripped through a kaleidoscopic tour of urban street language as it was, is and might be. The show's structure is a cross between Dante's "Divine Comedy" and a sketch comedy cabaret revue, seamlessly morphing from section to section with each part focusing on another aspect of ghetto life, where every block has a different rhythm. As the players take us on a subway ride from Brooklyn to Harlem and finally to the South Bronx, the birthplace of the global sensibility known as hip-hop, we encounter the highs and lows of life in the Big Apple, from the beat poetry clubs of the Lower East Side to the Spanglish stoops uptown.

It's a wild, rattling ride, spilling over with humor, passion, insight and political awareness, with the occasional shuttle to pathos, lest we forget that ghetto life ain't all fun and games. Using formidable powers of poetic persuasion, the quintet slams together a variety of ingenious parodies, fusing fairy tales, television news and classical literature into their collective crazy quilt, brimming with pop references, fierce wordplay and the unexpected zigzags of the urban experience.

Playing off a dense cultural collage with heroic models such as Lord Buckley, Richard Pryor, Melle Mel and Muhammad Ali, the ensemble invokes the inspirational sign posts that led the way toward their artistic realization. One section, a send up of Dr. Seusses' "Sneeches," described a legendary battle between "Willie Bobos" and "Willie What the Dealies," representing a verbal showdown between the old and new styles of jive expression. Another outstanding section featured an extended meditation on the significance of Bruce Lee's kung fu impact on the culture. Gamal Abdel Chasten explained the shift from the common methods of self-defense to the benefits of a more Zen-based approach, all the while demonstrating his impressive martial arts movements. As with so much of the material that preceded it, the piece was funny, incisive and theatrically compelling.

"Slanguage," impeccably directed by Jo Bonny with an incredibly detailed and nuanced sound design, is a powerful and entertaining work that defies comparison and includes some of the best spoken-word performance I have seen. If you like words and the magical sparks they can make when slammed together just right, don't miss this show.