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‘Slanguage’ offers insightful vignettes

by Bob Nesti

They may not appear to have much in common — one, after all, is a 400-year-old Shakespeare tragedy, while the other is a plotless entertainment so original as to push the envelope of what theater can be; but think again.

“Hamlet,” as presented by the Commonwealth Shakespeare Company on the Common, offers a startlingly modern twist on this Medieval tale of revenge; while “Slanguage,” at the BCA, the New York performance group Universes — with their dazzling display of linguistic fireworks — make Def Poetry Jam seem like a meeting of the Dead Poet’s Society.

Not surprisingly Universes comes to town under the auspices of Company One, the socially conscious theater company that has presented the plays of Stephen Adly Guirgis (most memorably their Elliot Norton Award-winning “Jesus Hopped the A-Train?” and “Den of Thieves”) and the recent premiere of Boston playwright Kirsten Greenidge’s “One Hundred and Three Within the Veil.”

As its title suggests, “Slanguage” offers an amalgam of styles — 50’s doo-wop, 90’s hip-hop, jazz, poetry slam, salsa, gospel — that converge in a dazzling display of verbal virtuosity. While the material has the raw, anxious beat of urban life, the style is as sophisticated as a Bach fugue. That might seem an odd analogy, but the genius of Universes comes with their precise, musical delivery. “Slanguage” is as much about the power of musical expression as it is about the words themselves.

The loose premise has the quintet riding an express train from Brooklyn to the Bronx; en route they pause to tell stories and anecdotes, many drawn from their own experiences living in New York City, that burst with fresh insights. One of the best bits chronicles a battle between street gangs told in the manner of a Dr. Seuss story. In another bit the influence of kung-fu giant Bruce Lee is celebrated; and, as something of an anchor point, the A-B-C’s of “Slanguage” are brilliantly expressed in verse in a tongue-twisting manner by the multi-talented Steven Sapp, one of the group’s co-founders who acts as their leader.

Collectively and individually, the members of the group shine throughout. Mildred Ruiz, another of the group’s co-founders, is something of their “Earth Mother,” rooting their energy with her booming vocal expression. Gamal Abdel-Chasten has a street-smart charm while Ninja supplies some rich vocal support as does newcomer Denise Delacruz.

As shaped and staged by Jo Bonney, the stories flow with seamless skills, as do the cleverly interpolated musical interludes where pop songs are sampled to clever effect. Their take on the ‘50s hit “Rockin’ Robin” is especially funny. With “Slanguage” Universes bring the poetry slam into the 21st century.