



STAGE REVIEW

## 'Slanguage' benefits from word of mouth

By Sandy MacDonald, Globe Correspondent | July 23, 2005

Slang can be a slippery thing -- one minute a social passkey, the next the embodiment of passe. Steven Sapp, ringleader of Universes, a performance group spawned nine years ago by the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in New York, sacrifices a shred of street cred in promising spectators at "Slanguage" that they can impress teenagers by knowing enough to pronounce "All right" as "Ah-iiiiight." So rapid is the assimilation of slang in today's media-saturated culture that even old fogies far removed from the inner-urban loop are likely to have heard that one before.

But that's just one tiny misstep in a headlong explosion of poetry, percussion, and multi-culti musical exploration that absolutely demands to be seen -- if not for the textual aspect (much of the verbiage comes across contrived rather than inspired), then for the electric, kinetic performances.

Mildred Ruiz has the kind of powerhouse contralto voice that can fill stadiums and set nearby bodies to thrumming. Also a captivating orator, she acts out a Seussian tale of two rival gangs who come to realize that the real enemy is not each other, but the culture vultures co-opting, commodifying, and cashing in on their signature styles. (Alliteration, which can be catching, is the central device of the poem that frames the 90-minute set, loosely structured as an imaginary subway ride from Brooklyn to the Bronx.)

The caveat about exploitation is a lesson one wishes that Universes took more to heart, because way too much of the material consists of references and homages to name-brand cultural icons -- LeRoi Jones, "Langston and Lorca," Sonia Sanchez, Miguel Pinero, Lord Buckley, Allen Ginsberg, Ali . . . These figures do help to create a common language, but the strongest scenes don't need any such reinforcement; they manage to make a visceral connection without the random riffing -- a great deal of which is, in any case, over-amped to the point of unintelligibility.

Highlights include Gamal Abdel Chasten as a young black man enthralled with Asian martial arts and getting flak for forsaking his roots. Choreographed to kung fu moves, the monologue is a brilliant example of verbal and physical integration -- plus, it's funny.

Also effective is Ninja, a new member of the company who resembles Jack Black and projects a similar air of barely contained, half-comic menace. Playing a prisoner facing his "first day on the inside," he assembles a collage of family photos "to remind me of the me I'm supposed to be," while gearing up to project a tough-guy persona.

As for Sapp, he perhaps doesn't allow himself enough solo stage time, beyond emceeing and narrating a Beat rap toward the end. Throughout the show you get glimpses of how instantly he can climb into character -- a junkie nodding out on the subway, say -- but he exudes so much intelligence and vitality that you're left yearning for a deeper, longer look.

Director Jo Bonney, who has helped to shape the solo shows of her husband, performance artist Eric Bogosian, is credited with having channeled the diverse talents of the Universes principals into a cohesive show. They've got a salable entity now that travels and translates well. Several of the members are so outstanding, though, that one can't help wishing them ever broader avenues of expression.