

West

Southern CA May 12, 2004

Slanguage

Reviewed By Travis Michael Holder

It may be impossible to reinvent the wheel, but one of the true glories of art is that reinvention is constantly possible. With homage paid to Kerouac, Baldwin, Lorca, Langston Hughes, and other brave wordsmiths vehemently unfettered by rules and restrictions, the New York street artists known collectively as Universes (creators Mildred Ruiz, Steven Sapp, Gamal Abdel Chasten, Flaco Navaja, and Lemon; performers Ruiz, Sapp, Chasten, Dominic Colon, and Ninja) turn the King's English upside down, redefining theatre, redefining musicals, wielding words like weapons as they fiercely insist "there ain't no artistic affirmative action here."

After seeing them in performance, Taper Too's Director of New Play Development Luis Alfaro made it his mission to bring these Afro-Latino-hip-hoppin' voices to Los Angeles and, thankfully for our culturally thirsty community, he finally convinced the right people to produce. We are treated to an amazing verbal assault of crossbred mongrel languages that define a new age. As rough and gritty as Slanguage is, the foundation is respect for the wonder of words, and the result is hardcore street slang in iambic pentameter bred from a place where "every block's got a rhythm all its own and your walk's gotta shout it loud and clear."

Ruiz, with a voice blending the earthy foggiess of Etta James and the battered soul of Joplin, is a first generation Puerto Rican "trying not to get lost in translation." She wryly recalls the difficulties of not only learning English but also passing Spanish 101. "See, Spanish comes from Spain," she says, "and I speak a different flavor." Sapp is riveting in an angry standup routine, "told like an artist from the projects like J.J. from Good Times," eloquently revealing his belief that you can't be a poet if you can't read someone else's poetry without getting a tear in your eye and admitting "you don't know shit." Chasten is physical eloquence doing graceful Bruce Lee moves, ready to fight any call to go back to Africa by standing up for his "100 percent Cherokee" roots that go back for centuries. Colon is a modern inner-city Genet as he talks about starting a poem his first day in prison to remind himself of "the me that was supposed to be me" and is also hilarious in a turn with Ninja as two homies sitting on a front stoop dissing a stranger who has made the unfortunate decision to step onto their turf.

Snapped together by savvy director Jo Bonney on Yael Pardess' simple but effective set that allows for striking projections of bleak city landscapes, Slanguage is without a doubt theatre to test new boundaries and break new rules, drunk with the dreams of a vibrant and viable new generation of artists.

" Slanguage "

presented by the Center Theatre Group/Mark Taper Forum's Taper Too at the Ivy Substation, 9070 Venice Blvd., Culver City. Tue. -Thu. 8 p.m., Fri. & Sat. 7 & 10 p.m. Sun. 8 p.m. May 2-23. \$12-30. (213) 628-2772.