

Universes riffs on words to illuminate the worlds of these language artists

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As the five polymorphously prodigious linguists who comprise the cast of "Slanguage" told their audience early in their performance at the Museum of Contemporary Art Theatre this past weekend: "We don't gang bang, we bang slang." They were underselling themselves by at least a light-year's worth of lexicons. For what these brilliant wordsmiths really do -- and do with the kind of verbal and musical facility old Bill Shakespeare engaged in when modern English itself was in its earliest stages of development -- is nothing short of reinventing the multiplicity of mother tongues in which they negotiate their world on a daily basis.

Just consider the heady mix of dictionaries that feed them: English, Spanish, Spanglish, ebonics, Fifties hipster-speak, Nineties hip-hop jargon, television mind-muddling, jazz riffs, rock remix, salsa spin, sidewalk salesmanship and subway mantras. And that's just the tip of the very proverbial iceberg. In fact, Universes (the name by which this troupe of oral artists orbits) has compiled its own new millennium edition of words and phrases, rhythms and derivations. And they have turned it into a piece of riveting, thought-provoking theater. In the process, they've also left their cliché-ridden cousins of "Russell Simmons' Def Jam Poetry" looking like so many copywriters for cereal boxes.

Directed, developed and shaped with an uncanny musical rightness by Jo Bonney (who just happens to be married to Eric Bogosian, an actor and writer who has long had his ear tuned to an alternative radio dial), "Slanguage" creates so many hot spots that it's difficult to catalog them all. But if you start with King Pleasure (that enchanting vocalese master of the 1950s who set familiar tunes on their head with jazzy words) and make your way through Cole Porter (with the beat, beat, beat of the tomtom in "Night and Day") and add nursery rhymes, urban jump-rope chants, English as a Second Language exercises, subway conductors' warnings, church sermons, the enticements of three-card monte players, the laws of Bruce Lee's martial arts, the promises of a pimp named Mr. McDollar and the now-dimmed poetics of Muhammad Ali, you're on track.

Of course, you've got to add "the language of Langston [as in Hughes] and Lorca" and the Noo Yorican poets' society, too. And that's just for starters. Maybe, these jangled harmonizers (who seem capable of layering far more than five lines of thought and rhythm at any given moment) suggest, there has been "too much ado about this microphone minstrel movement," too much attention paid to the "verbal vandals from the underground university." But in suggesting this, they are simply pulling your leg, or rattling your satellite dish. There is tremendous substance here, as well as prodigious syllable-izing and bravura ventriloquizing. And as you hop the subway with these multi-culti troubadours for a journey through New York that runs from Greenwich Village to Harlem, and then on to the Grand Concourse in the Bronx (where at least some of these artists came of age before moving on to college and careers in theater), you are reminded of the grand global gumbo that is our language now.

The performers, all charismatic in their particular way and yet in perfect synchrony, included three of the show's original five writers: Steven Sapp, an altogether mesmerizing actor, Gamal Chasten, who does a remarkable Miles Davis-like verbal riff, and Mildred Ruiz, with a volcanic singing voice but somewhat screechy speaking voice. Joining them were Marlyn Matias (as the whirlwind Latina) and Ninja (as the prison poet). Arriving in Chicago this weekend just days after the death of Jacques Derrida, the granddaddy of linguistic deconstruction (which one headline writer called "the man who could take the world apart"), these "Slanguage" masters demonstrated that high-minded theory begins at the token booth.

One final note: Attendance at the three Museum of Contemporary Art performances of the show was not what it should have been. The production needs a different venue and hipper marketing. Had it been staged at one of the city colleges, or at the University of Illinois at Chicago, or at the Riviera in Uptown or HotHouse, audiences would have come in droves. Of course it's not too late to bring it back. The museum should be praised for having had the original vision, as it often does; now it's time to make the turnstiles spin.

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