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Review: 'Slanguage' speaks to raw, vibrant language of theater

By Jeff Favre

It's clear that any play with a program that includes a "hip-hop to English" glossary is going to feel a little foreign to anyone who doesn't enter already knowing what "bling-bling" or "aaight" means. Universes, a New York-based company that combines poetry, song and theater, openly courts younger nontheatergoers who use such words, which can be heard on rap records and city street corners.

That fact might frighten older or more conservative audiences from attending the ensemble's 90-minute piece, "Slanguage," at the Ivy Substation in Culver City. But they would be missing an intelligent, uncompromising, vibrant experience of creativity in its rawest sense.

Universes, under the direction of Jo Bonney, weaves a musical, lyrical pastiche of New York life, in particular for Latinos and blacks.

For this West Coast premiere, three of the company's five original members (Steven Sapp, Mildred Ruiz and Gamal Abdel Chasten) have joined with Dominic Colon and Ninja to perform more than 30 vignettes, accompanied only by a few sound effects, the percussion of hand against wood boxes, and five distinct and powerful voices.

Sapp serves as a de facto leader, urging the audience to shout and cheer as if this was a rap concert or a poetry slam. His "Alliteration," a poem that exploits the poetic device for each letter of the alphabet, sets a blistering pace that is maintained for much of the show. His inclusion of dozens of images -- from Jesus to rapper Tupac -- into each stanza shows a remarkable grasp of history and sociology. And his phrasing and tempo turn the spoken word into jazz, much like the best of the beat poets.

Each scene is a snapshot of New York. There are "Uptown Train #2" sections, in which we hear a vocal collage of vendors, beggars, conductors and others riding the subway. We learn about the importance of the right "walk" needed to fit into your neighborhood. There's an ode to boxer/poet Muhammad Ali, and even a hip-hop spoof on Dr. Seuss.

Universes doesn't shy away from keeping it real, which includes a healthy dose of swearing. There are references to murders, child abuse and other atrocities. But the group also shows, without preaching and with a healthy dose of humor, that anyone can use creativity and education to turn negatives into positives.

Ruiz, the lone female, has a remarkably soulful voice. Chasten's comic timing is impeccable. Ninja can turn himself into a human beat box and Colon displays an intensity that is palpable. Together, their talents merge into one force that few Los Angeles performances have equaled in the last few seasons.

Theater companies often claim they are trying to expand the age and cultural background of their audiences, but Universes is paying more than lip service to that mission. With "Slanguage" the company has proved that the same concepts can connect with a teenager from South Central Los Angeles and a middle-age suburbanite from Manhattan Beach, as long as it's honest and well-crafted.

And it's exciting to see a diverse audience share this experience.

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