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THEATER REVIEW

'Slanguage' speaks of urban experience

By EVERETT EVANS

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Wearing its streetwise spirit like a badge of honor, *Slanguage* assembles poetry, song and movement into a theatrical collage depicting the contemporary urban landscape.

From subway trains to tenement crime scenes, the locales are conjured with immediacy and authenticity.

The Bronx-born troupe Universes created and performs the show, making its Texas debut through tonight at DiverseWorks.

Slanguage has much in common with *Russell Simmons' Def Poetry Jam*, the showcase of hip-hop performance poets currently on Broadway. Indeed, Lemon, one of the five core Universes members who created *Slanguage*, is not performing the show here because he's on Broadway in *Def Poetry Jam*. Indio Melendez has stepped in for this tour, joining co-creators Steven Sapp, Mildred Ruiz, Gamal-Abdel Chasten and Flaco Navaja.

In solo turns or the more frequent joint endeavors, each participant contributes mightily to this ingenious, high-energy performance. Fresh and frank, displaying plenty of attitude, *Slanguage* is invigorating.

In contrast to the wide-ranging material of *Def Poetry Jam*, *Slanguage* casts a narrower net, focusing on a particular aspect of urban experience.

Yet like the cast of *Def Poetry Jam*, the *Slanguage* team revels in language. They are eager to stake their claim to a tradition that extends from John Milton to John Keats to Langston Hughes (among the many poets mentioned), but with their own stamp and style.

One sequence refers to Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven*, while the style of Dr. Seuss is (sporadically) evoked in a rhymed tale about rival gangs.

The joy of wordplay can come in sly substitutions, as in a line referring to the quintet's a capella singing as "Acapulco singing." More prominent is Sapp's solo "alphabet" of alliterative phrases, spanning A to Z with such lines as "grateful for this ghetto gift of gab." A later scene is specifically a paean to beat poets and their legacy.

One scene creates a vivid picture of a subway train in motion, using onomatopoeic words, the slapping or stomping sounds of the performers and the addition of sound effects and flashing lights. The scene typifies director Jo Bonney's simple but effective staging.

Another highlight is a round of fairy tales and nursery rhymes, retold in modern urban terms.

"Humpty was a brother who fell off 'cause he put himself above everybody else. ... "

"Mother Goose was a single mother with nine kids. ... "

"Cindy didn't put out on the first date. ... "

The final scenes are especially strong, beginning with a subway song about the "million different stories on the train," followed by scenes of domestic violence and the plague of urban indifference, neighbors striving to remain uninvolved.

Overall, *Slanguage* could be better shaped and structured. There are spots where the writing of individual sequences could be sharpened, the delivery clarified (some parts are lost in the whirl of sound effects and overlapping voices).

Some of the show's best moments and ideas are not fully exploited. For instance, the nursery tales and the "stories on the train" song could profitably be extended and further developed. These sequences are so good one wants more of them before the cast moves to the next piece.

Nonetheless, when the show connects, which is pretty frequently, it speaks a potent *Slanguage* everyone can understand.

Slanguage

When: 8 tonight

Where: DiverseWorks, 1117 East Freeway

Tickets: \$20; 713-335-3445