



[Home](#) » [Arts & Entertainment](#) » [Theater](#)

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Universes Poetic Theater Ensemble's compelling mash-ups sample urban poets and songwriters

Spoken street opera

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Universes



Kenan Theater

UNC-CH

Closed April 29

Urgent memo to both hands theater company and the public that first fell in love with them—particularly for the complex spoken, broken polyrhythms that made works like *Imaginary Numbers* and the first incarnation of *Brooms (a play about saying yes)* seem a cross between Gertrude Stein and early Steve Reich: There's some folks you've got to see and (particularly) hear.



Awake and sing: The hip-hop dramatic performance of Universes Poetic Theater Ensemble

Photo courtesy of Playmakers Rep

I'll wait here while you do it. No, really. Go ahead, put the paper down; dial up another browser tab. Enter the following phrase in the search box on YouTube.com: universes don't front (for those particularly into alphanumeric, here's the Web address: www.youtube.com/watch?v=E2vZgBQB1Dg).

The first word abbreviates the company's name, Universes Poetic Theater Ensemble. Their appearance at Kenan Theater last week signaled another step in Playmakers Rep's recently redoubled efforts to diversify the programming they present to the public.

In the clip, lifted from a 2002 performance on *Russell Simmons' Def Poetry Jam*, Mildred Ruiz's gospel-and-blues-inflected vocals and fist-slap, foot-stamp, heartbeat percussion forms the rhythmic matrix that company co-founders Gamal Abdel Chasten and Steven Sapp kite, flow and interrogate above, scissoring words on top of words. After all three delineate and demonstrate the kind of walk it takes to negotiate the urban checkpoints of tough East Side streets, Sapp sharply traces its cultural etymology, "before the signifying monkey stepped on the elephant's feet/ and got tangled up in brothers working on the chain gang/ and were stepping and fetching that cakewalk/ way before the black and white movies discovered us."

The metaphor and reality of the long walk was key in several sequences on Saturday night. Another of Ruiz's characters complains that her feet hurt, though the path toward justice was nowhere near its end. The on-stage human rhythm section signaled a sensual stroll in places; elsewhere, a run for your life.

As compelling as it is, the snippet doesn't tell the whole tale of what we saw last week. Not with two other vocalists/ speakers/ human percussionists named Irene Shaikly and Ninja adding to the complexity of the real-time, decidedly non-digital multi-tracking. Plus it only hints at the sophistication of the braiding in an extended narrative dealing with Hurricane Katrina.

As Chasten changed the lyrics to the African-American work song "Let the Hammer Ring," and Ruiz inserted a line in the midst about Noah's ark from the Sunday school song "Rise and Shine," Sapp's character, a postal worker, asks if anyone has seen his mother. The rhythm changes ominously as the ensemble intones the words "Boom, Papa, Papa." The darkness intensifies following "Papa Was," a shared narrative about a hero who drowned while saving others improbably set to a mash-up of "Papa Was a Rolling Stone" interspersed with lines from "Proud Mary" and Grandmaster Flash.

Ultimately, the objects that are rolling on that post-Katrina river are bodies. After Air Force One's photo opportunity and the opportunism of the media, the rhythm section punctuates the silence of the final part with ragged gasps, and nothing more. At the end, the tag line come from Tom Waits. Katrina's final, all but whispered, lesson: "Misery is the river of the world. Everybody row."

Elsewhere, the quintet freely weaves sampled songs and poets into a tapestry of urban life both rich and strange. An exuberant opening section juxtaposes Gil Scott-Heron with Nikki Giovanni, Nuyorican poet Reg E. Gaines, T.S. Eliot and Stevie Wonder, plus many more. Later, Ruiz's eerie voice keens through the Eurythmics' "The City Never Sleeps"—of all things—to ground a multi-scene story about a child killed by his parents, and the case's unsatisfactory aftermath in the justice system.

Intricate rhythms and intricate stories, told by artists who have to be as adept at polyrhythmic musical composition as they are at acting. The only things that could improve on what we saw would be a two-week run, preferably of one of their award-winning full-length works, instead of the greatest-hits showcase we saw last weekend. Not only is the region ready for it, it's been ready for some time now.

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