

Bridge-building 'Slanguage' educates as it entertains

By Judith Egerton • September 17, 2004

jegerton@courier-journal.com
The Courier-Journal

"Get ready for a little grease and a little ghetto" and "see how much we respect the First Amendment," say the actors in "Slanguage" as they embark on 100 minutes of uncensored poetry, patois and percussion mixed with jazz and hip-hop-influenced music.

"Slanguage," at Actors Theatre of Louisville, isn't a play; it's a collaborative performance by five members of the New York-based troupe Universes, which evolved from the city's urban poetry scene and the Nuyorican Poet's Cafe.

The show is a collage of scenes with wordplay and songs aimed at bridging racial and generational gaps. The idea is that the audience is traveling along with the performers as they ride the Uptown No. 2 subway train from Brooklyn to the Bronx. Along the way, there are stops for a variety of verbal duels, humorous monologues and riffs on cultural influences, including a sparring, shadow-boxing homage to Louisville's own poet-prizefighter, Muhammad Ali. If you close your eyes, the mix of sounds and music created by the actors' voices, hands and feet sounds just like the cacophonous streets of New York.

Grown-ups who have never heard of Kool Keith or KRS-1 (definition: old school rappers) get tips on how to communicate with their hip-hop-loving offspring from Steven Sapp, founding member of Universes and a man so slick-tongued he can reel off a complicated string of A-to-Z alliterative poetry without tripping over a single word.

For A: "This is another autobiography from at-risk agitators, assaulting and assembling articulation and alliteration ... " For B: "Big-head bowlegged B-Boy brothers, build in front of Boogie Down Bronx Bodegas, bragging 'bout Bambaataa's blessings, and the beats of Bobbito the barber, while Brooklyn bohemians break bread at breakfast, rebirthing boilerplate blues." Try saying that really fast. Or better yet, take Sapp's advice. Say "A yo" to your teen or answer "Aiiiiight" when he or she greets you.

Slang offers a common ground between young and old, urban and rural, white and ethnic. "Slanguage" makes the cast's verbal art — and the cast members themselves — visible to audiences who typically would not see or hear them. And that's a good thing.

Besides Sapp, the "Slanguage" cast includes the bluesy-throated Mildred Ruiz, the physically dynamic Gamal Abdel Chasten, the comedic Marlyn Matias and Ninja, who perfectly captures the disembodied voice of a subway conductor. The show's energy and appeal stem partly from its contrasts: from discordant to harmonic, from angry to playful, from destructive to instructive.

The show, directed and developed by Jo Bonney, features sound designed by Darron L. West, an Elizabethtown, Ky., native who directed "Kid-Simple" at this year's Humana Festival of New American Plays.

Hip-hop music is something I listen to only when I'm a passenger in my son's car or driving next to someone who is blasting it to the world at large. For those of us unschooled in hip-hop, "Slanguage" is a welcome introduction to that cultural experience.

But it's more than that. It's a fast-talking fusion of gospel, Spanish bolero tunes, pop, rap, poetry, jazz and hip-hop — a quick-witted, multicultural slice of the big city where it was born.

Next performances: 7:30 p.m. today, 2:30 and 7:30 p.m. tomorrow and 2:30 and 7 p.m. Sunday in the Victor Jory Theatre at Actors Theatre of Louisville, 316 W. Main St. Through Sept. 26. (502) 584-1205.