

Arts & Leisure

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Mildred Ruiz, left, Steven Sapp and Gamal Abdel Chasten will perform in Universes' "Slanguage" at Actors Theatre of Louisville. By Leslie Lyons

Play at Actors teaches culture as it entertains

By Marty Rosen
Special to The Courier-Journal

In America's culture wars, language is both a battleground and a weapon.

Dictionary editors struggle with shifts in popular usage (like the shrinking difference between, say, infer and imply). In courtrooms, employers and employees battle over "English-only policies."

Among educators and policy pundits, the mere mention of "Ebonics" is enough to start a fiery debate about the best way to educate children.

For Steven Sapp and his colleagues in the performing

ensemble Universes, those battles are the stuff of drama.

Their play "Slanguage," which runs the next two weeks at Actors Theatre of Louisville, is a bold attempt to stake a claim for urban poetry and the rhymes, rhythms and movement of hip-hop and jazz as part of the continuum in the development of English.

"Slanguage," first produced at the New York Theater workshop in 2001, has earned rave reviews as it's toured the country — and it's been touring constantly the last three years.

The play's form is as familiar as "The Canterbury Tales" or "The Odyssey."

It's set on a subway trip from Brooklyn to the Bronx on the No. 2 line. New characters pop up at each stop, each with new approaches to language.

"It's a cornucopia of different voices and styles," said Sapp, Universes' artistic director, as well as a writer and performer in the production. "And it's sort of a look at how we learn language, from childhood games and nursery rhymes all the way to the beat poets, Jack Kerouac, and points between and beyond."

For Sapp, the politics of language have a direct, per-

See 'SLANGUAGE', I-3, col. 1

IF YOU GO

When

► "Slanguage" previews Tuesday at 7:30 p.m. and opens Wednesday at 7:30 p.m. in the Victor Jory Theatre at Actors Theatre of Louisville, 316 W. Main St. The show runs through Sept. 26.

Tickets

► \$25 and \$28 Sunday-Thursday; \$30 and \$35 Friday and Saturday. Call (502) 584-1205 to order.

ON TV

► Universes will perform on "Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry" at 11 tonight on HBO.

'SLANGUAGE'

Continued from I-1

sonal meaning.

"I'm from the South Bronx. But I didn't just learn the English language in the Bronx. In order to adapt to American society, I've had to learn and embrace other things. I went to Bard College, and in order to be taken seriously as a human being, and not just as some ghetto kid, I had to become what I would call bilingual.

He continued, "It's not that standard American English isn't spoken in the South Bronx — it's not just everybody walking around saying 'Yo, man, what up?' — but the thing you have to learn is that the world is bigger than just your block. In order for me to grow up and become a well-rounded adult, I had to know that the world was bigger than my block, and learning to understand other people is part of that."

Sapp is convinced that the rest of America can benefit from the same kind of stretch, by coming to understand the language spoken on that block.

"The language of the street is part of the fabric of American culture and language.

Universes will present entertaining and educational production at Actors

"... If people from other regions of the country allow themselves to hear and learn from other cultures, it can open up a whole new world. What we try to do with the play is draw people into the language in a way that defuses it, that helps them understand how the language arises, that there's a method to the madness and it's not all just profanity and anger. They see us sort of grow up in front of their eyes as we take fairy tales and games and, as we would say, 'flip it.' It's a very human play about how language evolves."

Responses have been gratifying, he said.

A glowing New York Times review described the play as "exuberant, insightful entertainment." A Los Angeles Times review described it as "'STOMP' for the larynx." But the best testimonial of all may have come from an audience member.

"We've had some shows in places where you would think people would not really care what we have to say, that people would sort of dismiss us as a hip-hop show. But after one show, a woman came up to us and said —

and she didn't really mean this the way it comes across — 'You guys are much smarter than I thought you'd be; there's real structure in this show.'"

During the company's early existence, Sapp recalled, the group often confronted misguided expectations.

"Our first couple years, that's what the hook was, that we were just a group that sprung up on the corner, that we didn't have structure, that we didn't have an aesthetic. It — me off, to be honest, because we are very much trying to show craft, and if you can get past the fact that there's some profanity, and some hip-hop-tinged flavor, and allow yourself to sink into the work, you'll find that it does have structure and craft and there's quite a bit in it."

He continued, "Because we have studied in theater, and because it's built as a theater piece, all of the theatrical elements — arc of a story, lighting and so on — are there, but we've made an effort to make sure that all our audiences will be able to get this, not just kids from the 'hood.

"We're well-rounded artists, and we've tried to make the show well-rounded as well, so that it's not dumbed down, and it doesn't just speak to inner-city kids — it's bigger than that."