

THEATER

Crusading troupe sees trouble in 'Ameriville'

BY JAVACIA N. HARRIS • THE COURIER-JOURNAL • MARCH 3, 2009

The New York-based ensemble Universes mixes poetry, storytelling, original songs and adaptations of popular tunes to create a unique theater experience that the group hopes will not only capture the attention of audiences, but will also drive folks to make a difference in the world around them.

In "Ameriville," part of this year's Humana Festival of New American Plays at Actors Theatre of Louisville, Universes uses the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the city of New Orleans to shed light on issues of race, poverty and politics in America.

As you listen to Mildred Ruiz, a founding member of Universes, sing, "The Lord told Noah to build him an arky, arky," you may get lost in the power of her voice or in nostalgia, remembering how you sang that song in church as a child.

But as soon as you've let your guard down, Ruiz hits you with the line, "But where was Noah when the levees started breaking." In an instant, Ruiz has morphed a playful children's song into a heartbreaking hymn about an American tragedy.

"America feels like it's over," said Ruiz, who got her start in music and performance by singing in choirs as a child. "We just came back from New Orleans, and a lot of areas are still the same. Some houses are still collapsed onto the ground. People are still not home. Some people won't come back home."

The title "Ameriville" was Ruiz's idea and stems from the notion of America being an interconnected village, not a sprawling nation of people with no ties to one another.

"We should look at ourselves as a village, and a village takes care of its own," Ruiz said. "They say it takes a village to raise a child. Well, we got a child dying in New Orleans."

Universes, which started about 12 years ago, grew out of a band of New York poets who got bored with traditional poetry readings, said founding member Steven Sapp, a former street dancer who studied writing and theater at Bard College. They decided to try out group performances, blending poetry, song and even movement, and soon got the attention of the theater world.

The members of Universes aren't strangers to Louisville. Universes led a group of performance art poets in creating the piece "Rhythmicity," which was featured in the 2003 Humana Festival of New Plays. It also has worked with the Actors Theatre apprentice program, teaching young actors how to create unique theatrical pieces of their own.

Universes also counts Louisville's own legend Muhammad Ali as an inspiration.

"Ali was a major influence for me, and I'm not just saying that because I'm in Louisville," Universes member Gamal Abdel Chasten said.

One of the first and best poems they say they've ever heard was, "Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee."

With the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Sapp said, "The bad things you thought about America really just blew up in your face."

But Universes doesn't want audiences to leave Actors Theatre only to wallow in thoughts of a not-so-pretty piece of American history.

"What we're looking to do with the piece is place responsibility in people's laps and ask them, 'What are you going to do now?'" Chasten said.

But the group also doesn't want people to come to the show expecting to leave with solutions for racism, poverty and other issues hurting our nation.

"It's not to say we got the answer. We got the question, and we ask it well," said William "Ninja" Ruiz, a Universes member who got his start in performance as a rap artist. "All we can do is maybe spark something in somebody who might have the answer."

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