

THEATER

'Ameriville' is a snapshot of us

BY JUDITH EGERTON • JEGERTON@COURIER-JOURNAL.COM • MARCH 6, 2009

Using their hands and feet as percussion instruments to accompany their songs and poetry, the four creators of "Ameriville" tell the good, bad and ugly about our nation in an intense, kinetic performance.

With raps, riffs, vaudevillian turns and a Greek chorus effect, the first new work of the 33rd annual Humana Festival of New American Plays, "Ameriville," is a 90-minute musical tapestry of social commentary.

Directed by Chay Yew, the play in the round Bingham Theatre features four New York poets collectively called Universes and individually named Gamal Abdel Chasten, Mildred Ruiz, William Ruiz (aka Ninja) and Steven Sapp.

The show blends poetry and theatrical elements with a variety of musical genres, including jazz, blues, hip-hop and Spanish bolero. Together for a dozen years, these four performers play easily with each other, their movements and voices marvelously synchronized.

Beginning with Hurricane Katrina's catastrophic impact on the people of New Orleans, the ensemble uses the storm and flood as the touchstone for its look at other failings within our society.

The ensemble's previous work, "Slanguage," which it performed at Actors Theatre and other theaters in this country and abroad, captured the rhythms of New York's neighborhoods and ethnic cultures. This more expansive piece takes in the country as a whole. It stumbles by trying to cover too much ground as the poets touch on the collapsing economy, poverty and homelessness, racism, sexism, urban renewal, the health-care crisis, even global warming.

The show is best when the scenes and raps are personal rather than general, notably when Sapp portrays a man searching for his missing mother after Hurricane Katrina, when Mildred Ruiz's throaty alto sings of an immigrant woman's hardships and sorrow and when Chasten plays a New Orleans resident suffering post traumatic stress.

Within "Ameriville" is anger at the country's failings and a desire to find a new, shared path out of the destruction. Whether one agrees with everything these earnest poets say is beside the point. There is beauty and humor, as well as a challenging toughness, in how they express themselves.

They evoke a vivid picture imagining Uncle Tom and Uncle Sam as pallbearers at the burial of an America weakened by apathy, hypocrisy and hatred.

We can't learn from the past if we bury it, but according to Universes, from this death, a new country called "Ameriville" can rise, a place where freedom of speech, tolerance and compassion form the ethos.

The festival of new American plays, supported by the Humana Foundation, continues through April 11.

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