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THEATER REVIEW | 'SLANGUAGE'

The City's Beat, With an Iambic Heat

By LAWRENCE VAN GELDER

Anyone who habitually enfolds New York in a loving embrace — not just its Gold Coast and its midwinter galas but its pockets of poverty and its packed and pounding subways in midsummer rush hours — is likely to warm to the exuberant, insightful entertainment titled "Slanguage."

Here, out of the mouths and clapping hands and dancing feet of five multitalented performers known collectively as Universes, comes the poetry of the city, minted in the urban furnace where the flint of real life strikes the sparks of creation from concrete pavement and steel tracks.



Sara Krulwich/The New York TimesLemon, left, Flaco Navaja, Mildred Ruiz and Gamal Abdel Chasten

Expressed in rap and riffs and gospel and bluesy laments, among other poetic forms, this intermissionless, roughly 95-minute roller coaster of rhythm at New York Theater Workshop takes the listener by the ear. The show travels from the underground rattlers, where the beggar, the battery seller and the religious rile the riders; to the streets, where walking is attitude; and to the tenements, where domestic disputes leave babies dead.

But God is here, too, and Ali and Jack Kerouac and the great Puerto Rican migration and Dr. Seuss; so along with the politics of dislocation and the problems of assimilation and richer and poorer and neighborhoods and classrooms come fun and a feverish joy of language. The program for "Slanguage" includes an educational and laughter-inducing glossary. If someone hasn't heard the latest bochinche, or gossip, from someone dressed in a bubblegoose, or puffy down jacket, about some Mumia, or prisoner on death row, it is possible to front, or act as if one has. Here is the place, as the words of a scene called "Alphabet City A-Z Cafe" put it, "where a variety of verbal vandals' voices evolve the vernacular verbatim."

Directed and developed by Jo Bonney, whose credits include "References to Salvador Dali Make Me Hot" and "Stop Kiss," this show, which opened on Monday night, is presented in some 30 swift scenes in which Universes, out of the South Bronx, display their talents solo and in various combinations. These praiseworthy performers include the lyricist and percussionist Gamal Abdel Chasten; the spoken-word aficionado who carries only the name Lemon; Flaco Navaja, a Latino poet; Mildred Ruiz, a noteworthy singer; and Steven Sapp, whose gifts run to poetry, playwriting, acting and directing.

Aided and abetted by the sound design of Darron L. West, the scenic design of Scott Pask, the lighting of James Vermeulen and the evocative projection design of Batwin & Robin Productions, they have created something special, a work of heart and soul that distills the essence of the city.