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Slanguage

(Ivy Substation, Los Angeles; 99 seats; \$30 top)

A Center Theater Group/Mark Taper Forum Taper, Too, presentation, in association with the New York Theater Workshop, of a performance piece in one act by Universes (Mildred Ruiz, Steven Sapp, Gamal Abdel Chasten, Flaco Navaja and Lemon), developed and directed by Jo Bonney.

Performers: Mildred Ruiz, Steven Sapp, Gamal Abdel Chasten, Dominic Colon, Ninja.

By [JULIO MARTINEZ](#)

The well-honed individual talents of five New York-based spoken-word virtuosos have been molded by helmer Jo Bonney into a seamless, undulating force of razor-edged, big-city social commentary. Performing as the collective Universes, performance artists Mildred Ruiz, Steven Sapp, Gamal Abdel Chasten, Flaco Navaja and Lemon burst onto the Gotham scene in 2001 at New York Theater Workshop. For this local preem, under the auspices of the Center Theater Group's visionary Taper, Too, Navaja and Lemon have been replaced by word conjurers Dominic Colon and Ninja, but the group has lost none of its infectious, cohesive energy.

Underscored and enhanced by the integrated production design of Yael Pardess (sets/projections), Christopher Akerlind (lights) and Darron L. West (sounds), "Slanguage" is an audiovisual collage of words, movement, music and rhythm that impresses with its originality and unity of execution.

The group's musical sophistication is especially surprising. Blasting through the fractured syntax of New York urban culture, the quintet exhibits the melodic veracity of a seasoned doo-wop group and the contrapuntal percussion of an adroit rhythm section.

The throughline of "Slanguage" is a surrealistic subway ride that begins in Brooklyn and makes its way to the Bronx. Along the way, the ensemble darts in and out of alleyways of sight and sound, layering and overlapping their verbal jousts and philosophical, street-smart observations.

The production is imbued with references to the myriad influences that have invaded their psyches, from kung-fu movies to Beat poets to Dr. Seuss.

As well as they meld together as an ensemble, each of the five also stands out as an individual artist. Co-founding member Ruiz is the earth mother of the group. Her womanly, no-nonsense presence offers a staunch stability to the often macho preening of her male counterparts. Ruiz's full-throated vocals also supply the musical foundation for the others to build on, as showcased to memorable effect when the ensemble rips through a unique rendition of "Rockin' Robin" that celebrates the wonders of sexual self-gratification.

Sapp, the elder statesman of the group, acts as emcee, leading and instructing the audience in the correct manner of appreciating the group's offerings. A soulful manipulator of "freelance

figure of speech," Sapp exudes a captivating presence in his solo turn on "Original Beat," celebrating such word liberators of the past as Jack Kerouac, Lenny Bruce, Allen Ginsberg and Amiri Baraka.

Chasten moves about the stage with a physical grace that's captivating on its own. His tribute to Bruce Lee is a beautifully executed amalgam of word imagery and ballet-like martial arts movement.

The newest members of the ensemble, Colon and Ninja, evoke a pulsating Latino presence within the group. They lead the ensemble into a joyful examination of "Nuyoricanism" with all its linguistic variations. The ensemble offers a hilarious but telling re-creation of a bilingual education class where the children are linguistically and culturally torn asunder. In solo turns, Ninja offers a hilarious confrontation between two gangs waging a "war of slang"; Colon is memorable as he conjures up the image of life-stifling confinement "within the joint," where the only solace is the occasional "cooling breeze" from the free world.

As a fitting summary to the evening, Sapp describes the efforts of Universes as "another autobiography from at-risk agitators, assaulting and assembling articulation and alliteration, from Allah to 'Amos 'n' Andy.' "

Sets and projections, Yael Pardess; lights, Christopher Akerlind; sounds, Darron L. West. Opened and reviewed May 7, 2004; runs through May 23. Running time: 90 MIN.

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