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'Ameriville' captures soul, humanity post-Katrina



Universes quartet performs "Ameriville" at the Paramount Theatre. (Astrid Liium Photo)

Jacquinn Williams

The foot stomping and harmonizing quartet, Universes, took theatergoers on a wild ride through some of the nation's most daunting social ills in "Ameriville" last week at the Paramount Theatre.

Presented by ArtsEmerson, Universes, comprised of Mildred Ruiz-Sapp, William "Ninja" Ruiz, Gamal Abdel Chasten and Steven Sapp, started off the show gaily singing renditions of popular American songs such as "Papa was a Rolling Stone," "Buffalo Soldier" and "Rolling on a River." Suddenly, they thrust the audience into a much darker place.

The play uses FEMA's slow response to hurricane Katrina as a lens through which to view issues of race, being poor in America, homosexuality and religion. They sing, "right there was a house" and point out where houses stood prior to Katrina and give snapshots of the people who lived there.

One story is about a young man who remembers watching his father getting ready for Mardi Gras. His recalls his daddy dancing in full regalia with feathers flowing and how magical it all was. But after the storm his happy memories are as muddled as what's left of his old house.

Another poignant tale was about an old man who wakes up every night at 11:11p.m. unable to find rest since the storm tore apart the city. Images of large clocks behind him spin out of control. He tells the crowd that with all the bodies and stagnant water, "it smells worse than regular death."

Universes begs audiences to look a little closer at the things that separate us. Ruiz-Sapp shined when she sang the song of a poor immigrant mother who works

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The MFA's closer look at African American Art

The Museum of Fine Art's recently launched self-guided tour of African American art allows museumgoers a glimpse into the lives of black artists from the 19th century until today.

The multimedia tour highlights 10 major works with an introduction of the art and the artist. Edmund Barry Gaither, executive director of the National Center of Afro American Artists lends his voice and expertise to the Views and Voices section for each piece. Gaither provides insight into the chosen works, as well as historical context.

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Saul William's new album 'Volcanic Sunlight'

Poet and actor Saul Williams is a gifted storyteller who expertly mixes rhymes and rhythms on his newest album "Volcanic Sunlight."

The New York native rose through the ranks of poetry fame when he was crowned the Nuyorican Poets

two jobs to provide for her family. She works and works, but doesn't seem to be getting anywhere. "Is this what I came here for," she laments.



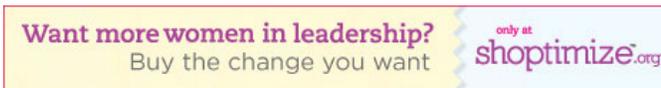
At the end of her beautiful ballad she decides to put on her uniform and smile. As her song winds down a statistic pops up above her head that claims illegal immigrants pay \$7.2 million dollars in federal taxes each year.

Sapp and Chasten touch on stereotypes with black jokes, Ruiz recites a poem about the twisting up of religion and the whole quartet performs a moving piece on handguns in the form of a commercial. The nation's callousness about the death of urban teenagers is explored and the commercial urges people to call 1-800-shoot.

FEMA faux pas and a homeless former entrepreneur are just the tip of the iceberg in "Ameriville." Urban Renewal is depicted with the "Choke a Nigga Out Investment Group" knocking on inner-city doors and urging city dwellers to sell their houses for much less than it's worth. Over time, those who weren't willing to sell are pushed out in the name of gentrification.

"Ameriville" found a way to talk about the most uncomfortable issues in America without being preachy. The performances elicited laughs, and dismayed sighs with a perfectly placed musical modulation or a harrowing statistic underscored by silence.

They revealed the story behind each situation, which made the characters human, not just black, white, gay, old or homeless. It's their humanity that the performers urged theatergoers to see.



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Café Grand Slam champion in 1996. Later he co-wrote and starred in the Cannes and Sundance award winning film "Slam."

The wordsmith was also featured in the documentaries "Slam Nation," "Underground Voices" and "I'll Make Me a World."

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'The Nutcracker' comes to the Strand

The Jose Mateo Ballet Theatre (JMBT) is coming full circle this holiday season. Founded in 1986, the company whose repertory is full of original ballets is performing the classic "Nutcracker" at the Strand Theater Dec. 22-24.

Through a partnership with the city of Boston, Mateo's "Nutcracker" is part of JMBT's Dance for World Community, a project that builds local and global networks to expand the role of dance.

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The Bay State Banner
23 Drydock Avenue
Boston, MA 02210

Phone: 617 261-4600
Melvin B. Miller
Editor & Publisher
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