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## A Rainbow of Poets Who Rhyme From Life

By ROBIN POGREBIN

Much has been said by critics about the raw candor that courses through "Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam on Broadway." It is this rage, humor and openness, coming unfiltered from the lives of the nine poets who perform their own work, that make audiences leap to their feet at the end and tell their friends about it later; that keep other people away out of fear of what to expect or assumptions about what they don't want to see.

The experience of watching "Def Poetry Jam" is new territory for traditional theatergoers. The form -- poetry performed onstage interspersed with bits of music scratched out by a D.J. -- falls somewhere between rap and recited verse and has never before been featured on a Broadway stage. The audience includes many blacks and Latinos, which is rare for mostly white mainstream theater. The curtain times are unorthodox -- shows at 5 and 9 p.m. on Saturdays, for example, and no Wednesday or Saturday matinees. Even the ticket prices are different, starting at a low of \$26.25 -- compared with the typical low of \$45 -- to bring in a young audience. A few student rush tickets are \$16.25.

Critics welcomed "Def Poetry" when it opened on Nov. 14. Reviewing it in The New York Times, Ben Brantley called the show "the most singular offering in mainstream New York theater these days."

Yet the production has been struggling at the box office. Over the last four weeks the Longacre Theatre has been only 29 to 38 percent full.

In part, the tough winter and the war could be to blame. But preconceptions seem to be the main obstacle.

"People write it off as a black show with a lot of angry people onstage ranting about their condition," said Stan Lathan, the show's director. "They think this is some kind of hip-hop, ethnic experience that they don't want to be exposed to."

To be sure, because the show was created by the hip-hop entrepreneur Russell Simmons and Mr. Lathan, who produced Mr. Simmons's HBO poetry and comedy specials, many traditional theatergoers expect an urban rap show that will not speak to them. They expect to be preached at, to feel uncomfortable.

To counteract such misperceptions, the producers recently developed a new, more user-friendly

advertising campaign with the slogan "Party With Words." Otherwise, they can only hope that the enthusiastic audiences who do see the show will spread the word. "That's why we are taking that hit," Mr. Lathan said. "Because we believe it's just a matter of time before it catches on."

As the lead producer, Mr. Simmons is the one taking the biggest hit, but he said he would continue to support the show "till I run out of money." Mr. Simmons, who created Def Jam Recordings, Def Pictures and the Phat Farm clothing line, is used to uphill battles. "No one would put a nickel in this thing; no one would put a nickel in a rap record; no one would put a nickel in a hip-hop clothing company," he said. "Broadway's just a little bit tougher."

But Broadway needs "Def Poetry," Mr. Simmons said, to reach younger, more varied audiences. "It's an explosion of diversity that's necessary," he said. "Broadway ought to give me the money because they can't survive without stuff like this. They're going to die of old age."

He and Mr. Lathan say they believe in the show's lasting potential because of the reactions from people who see it. "I've never worked on a project where I got such overwhelming positive feedback," Mr. Lathan said. "I've got people coming to me in tears. People are so grateful for the experience. People talk about their lives being changed."

Audiences respond that way because "Def Poetry" is not a bunch of self-righteous poets shouting their grievances. They are nine distinct individuals of vastly different backgrounds who share an innate theatricality and have something important to say.

"These people represent a lot of people," Mr. Simmons said. "Their heart became the drumbeat. Their words matter."

Selling Drugs, to Eat

This poem is as priceless as a carton of cigarettes

and a brand-new pair of creased greens

This is a toast

to freedom

just cause you locked up

don't mean you can't be free

Lemon's real name is Andrew Anderson. He is 27 and was born in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. "After that, I just became a rolling stone," he said.

His white father and Hispanic mother were heroin addicts who died of AIDS within a year of each other. Lemon was barely a teenager when he lost them, but he was hardly the only one of his friends to grow up alone. "All our parents shot up and got sick together," he said. "I'm scared of needles. I can't

go to the doctor to get a shot. I go crazy."

Predictably, perhaps, Lemon started selling drugs on the street. He says he did it for practical reasons. "I wasn't getting in trouble to look good," he said. "I just wanted to eat."

Lemon, who wears his baseball cap sideways and sounds like the street, spent his teen-age years in and out of jail. In prison Lemon kept to himself. With no family, he did not have much choice, but it was also a self-protective isolation. "I was such a loner I didn't have anyone to call," he said, adding: "Not letting anyone know who you are, they won't have any reason to come at you."

Lemon started reading aloud to his fellow inmates. After prison he enrolled in a military program for parolees, even though he wasn't on parole. "I went in there to kill time and learned about discipline," he said. "They taught me how to get up in the morning and enjoy the sun, not burn the day."

Before long he was "caught up again" in the drug trade, and soon there was a warrant for his arrest in Columbus, Ohio. But by then he had started working at El Puente, a community center in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, that emphasized the arts. The people at the center wrote letters of support and helped get Lemon another chance. "They didn't give up on me," he said. "I just kept growing from there."

Since then Lemon has made a name for himself as a poet and now has a 2-year-old daughter with his live-in girlfriend in Williamsburg. "Now I can really provide and be like everybody else," he said. "Have an account, have an accountant."

He is writing a musical called "The Notoriously B.I.G. Musical." "It's what the young generation is going to pay \$75 for," Lemon said. He is also thinking of writing a screenplay about his experiences, "When Life Gives You Lemon."

"It's the story of my life," he said. "But I feel like I'm not done with it yet."

Freedom to Be Gay

and long long after our mothers no longer weep

we will still be here

still gay, still black, still human

still surviving in the face of this blatant bigotry

that will one day force us to lace arms

so we can all strike back.

Staceyann Chin, 30, came to New York because she is gay and it is difficult to be a lesbian in her native Jamaica. That is why the United States has always been a haven for her, a place where "I can have a

lover and bring her into a room and say, 'This is my lover,' " Ms. Chin said. "That freedom has always meant so much to me."

She was born to "a Chinese gentleman and a poor black woman" who soon left. She was raised by her deaf and illiterate maternal grandmother until she was 9, and then jumped from relative to relative to boarding school. Keeping a journal was one way to survive her lack of moorings. "I was moving around so much I never got close to anybody," she said. "I guess I began crafting my own world. Writing made me feel in charge of it."

Ms. Chin, a wiry woman, said she was grateful to be on Broadway and to be able to afford an apartment in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, rather than her former studio apartment in Far Rockaway, Queens, where she said she ate lots of "add water and you have soup."

But Ms. Chin would not go so far as to call herself happy. "I think happiness is more a journey than a place," she said. "I'm on my way there."

Getting In With Humor

It's not fair, I already have

French fries I have to deal with,

now this!

I must forever fight the temptation,

of the creation of the perfect fattening donut . . .

Krispy Kreme!

More than anyone else in "Def Poetry Jam," the man who calls himself Poetri but is really Devin Smith is the comic relief. His poems talk about the ruinous temptation of doughnuts, aspiring to be Michael Jackson, feeling abandoned by money, wanting to date himself.

Poetri, a large man with an endearing playfulness, said he keeps it light for a reason. "I like to put it that way to ease into people's minds the message that I'm sending," he said. "Laughter makes everybody listen."

That is not to say that Poetri has not had his share of rough patches. Until 10th grade he was one of the few black children at his school in Muskegon, Mich. He didn't fit in with his white classmates or with his black peers who lived literally across the tracks. That's part of why he decided to attend largely black Knoxville College in Tennessee. "I felt I got a great education and wanted to get more black culture," he said. "This gave me the best of both."

A would-be actor and poet since he was 11, Poetri, now 28, started out trying to be a rap star but didn't get far. "I guess because I wasn't that good," he said. "Plus I wasn't willing to do, 'I'll kill your mother

and your sister and your turtle and then I'll kill your ant farm.' "

After Poetri stepped up to an open mike at a poetry reading, something clicked. Now he runs the Poetry Lounge -- the "it" place to go on Tuesday nights in Los Angeles to hear leading poets read their work. And he is still trying to get used to the degree to which being on Broadway has made him a bit of a celebrity. "The response we've been getting from the audience is just crazy," he said. "To be walking down the street and have people saying, 'Aren't you that poet?' "

A War Protest

Don't wanna be your exotic

Women everywhere look just

like me some taller darker

nicer than me but like me

On a recent day of pouring rain, Suheir Hammad probably should have been taking it easy to prepare for the evening's performance. Instead she was marching in the cold, wet streets to protest the war in Iraq. For Ms. Hammad, who is Palestinian, the political is deeply personal. "I feel crushed," she said. "I worry about the fate of our nation. Americans don't realize that in Baghdad 46 percent of the population is under the age of 16, and that number is chilling to me."

Ms. Hammad, 29, a luminous presence with penetrating eyes, was born in a refugee camp in Amman, Jordan, and grew up in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. Both her parents are Palestinian, her father a grocer, her mother a homemaker.

It is perhaps no wonder, then, that Ms. Hammad's pieces in "Def Poetry" are among the most overtly activist. Indeed, she sees the show itself as a sign of something radical, if only because it includes people of so many different shades.

"It's already changed the face of poetry," Ms. Hammad said. "It's changed the face of Broadway."

"I don't know if what we've done is revolutionary," she added. "I think we've opened the door that they cannot close now."

A Son in 'Trouble' at 5

Talkin' about

"Daddy where you been?"

and just then

my mind began

sinking back

thinking back

to those

Saturday seldom show up days

Those

Seems like my father don't wanna bother

helping me grow up days

Ask Black Ice to describe his father and he says: "He was like Superman. The perfect mesh of street dude and blue-collar dude slash black activist slash black nationalist slash Black Panther." He also described him as a hustler. But hustlers were different 20 years ago.

"Hustlers back then had 9-to-5 jobs," Black Ice said. His father's was installing windows on high-rise buildings. His mother is in federal prison for embezzlement. Black Ice said she did it to give him and his brothers a better life. "My two younger brothers are brilliant," he said. "To nurture these characteristics takes money, and she didn't have it."

Raised in Philadelphia, Black Ice -- real name Lamar Mason -- started cutting hair after high school. "Flat-tops, squares, parts -- I could do all that artistic stuff," he said.

He also started writing poetry, mostly to impress girls. But Black Ice, a tough-looking, articulate man, also became a hustler. As a drug dealer, he used to make \$6,000 a week. Now, at 31, as a poet, he makes \$200 to \$600. But he still tries to provide for his children: an 11-year-old stepson, an 8-year-old daughter and a 5-year-old son. There is one more child on the way.

During an interview in Black Ice's dressing room, his 5-year-old called, having just received another report of bad behavior at school. Black Ice gently but firmly instructed him over the phone. "The girl you like in school cannot interfere with your schoolwork," he told his son. "You've gotten four sad faces in a row. That's unacceptable. There's no need to cry. I didn't yell at you. You're a handsome dude. There'll be plenty of girls. I love you."

Fast Track From Chicago

I can't check myself into a box

I'd be ignoring mami's straight and papi's nappy

locks in me

the chi-town Midwest windy city me

the be-bop

hip-hop

non-stop

salsa con sabor

queen of soul in me

Mayda del Valle graduated from Williams College in Massachusetts in the spring of 2000, moved to New York in the fall and started performing in poetry slams at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, where she was discovered for Mr. Simmons's HBO series; she started rehearsals for "Def Poetry Jam" the next summer.

"Fast," she said.

Ms. del Valle, 24, was born on Chicago's South Side to Puerto Rican parents; her mother was a baby sitter, her father a forklift operator. Her older sister and brother are Chicago police officers. "Telling my parents I was going to move to New York to be an artist didn't exactly excite them," she said.

In the show, Ms. del Valle, who now lives in Elmhurst, Queens, talks about her frustration in having to explain herself constantly. "I dream America for the day I won't have to hyphenate my identity," she says in the play.

But she is grateful for the chance to deal with these issues onstage in front of audiences that may be hearing this kind of wrestling for the first time. "You're performing for lots of people who have never been exposed to it," Ms. del Valle said. "Some have never been to a Broadway show. People are trained to respond differently. Black and Latino audiences sometimes shout. When the audience is a little more white, they're just quiet. They're just listening. They're just kind of taking it all in."

White Amid the Blacks

I'm going to Paris

Because they killed democracy in Florida

Quick call the coroner

Steve Colman is the only white poet in the show, but he says that doesn't make him feel out of place. He has earned his poetry stripes in clubs and contests around the world, just like the rest of the cast. And Mr. Colman, 33, who has a boyish energy, grew up attending a predominantly black school in Englewood, N.J., where the Sugar Hill Gang produced the first rap hit and Mr. Colman started writing rhymes.

"School and my neighborhood and friendships were all from an early age rooted in black culture," Mr.

Colman said. "It's the music that I listened to, it's the language I absorbed and it just kind of shaped me. And rather than fight that, I just embraced it."

Although poetry resembles rap, Mr. Colman said, the literary standards are higher. "You could turn your rap into poetry, but when you take the music away you have to say something a little more profound," he said.

"When you take the music away, the only thing people are listening to is your words," he continued. "So you have to make them matter."

Much of Mr. Colman's work in the show is critical of the United States government, poetry that has an eerily prescient resonance now. One of his poems in the show is titled "Terrorist Threat."

"What did George Orwell say? 'In times of deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act,' " Mr. Colman said. "I kind of feel like that's what this show does."

The Easiest Outlet

I know that at times I may get knocked down or even

doubt my ability

But I'll look in the mirror and say I'm wonderful

With humility

Now we're supposed to respect everyone with

Different choices beliefs and hues

But who gives a damn about a fat girl's blues

Georgia Me used to stutter, but that didn't stop her from talking a lot. "All my life I talked," she said. "I would finish my work fast, I got good grades, so I could talk." As a youngster, Georgia Me -- real name Tamika Harper -- won oratorical contests, was involved in the model United Nations and the debate team and wrote poetry, which became her easiest outlet.

She read poems aloud in parks, barbershops, seminars, on the radio. "I would write poems to leave on people's answering machines," she said.

Soon she was performing poems competitively. "I already won before I hit the stage because my message was going to deliver somebody," she said. "I just have this belief: you never fail when you try."

Georgia Me, 27, a large woman with a broad smile who talks about body image in "Def Poetry Jam," wasn't always so confident. She started liking herself only a few years ago. Before that, she wanted to hide. "I use to wear jeans that were six times too big, which was really hard to find, big as I was," she



said.

She grew up on the west side of Atlanta in what she described as "one of the worst areas." Her cousin was gunned down; her uncle beat his wife; her friend was slammed into a glass table by her ex right in front of her. "I've just seen so much," she said.

She's determined to give her own 3-year-old boy a better view, even though she is raising him without a father. "His name is Wisdom," she said. "And he teaches me all the time."

No Distraction of Happiness

Oh yeah, now it's cool to like these Asian people

as long as they're being Asian on the big screen

and you set it in Asia, and it's a long time ago

and they're speaking in Asian (Thank God for subtitles)

who cares if they're kissing?

As long as they're only kissing other Asians

you have nothing to worry about right

Beau Sia wanted to be a comic book artist. Growing up in Oklahoma City, he started poetry in junior high school to impress a girl and realized he liked writing better than drawing. "It was easier to express myself writing poems," he said. "I could say what was bothering me."

"All the misery and pain of Oklahoma allowed me to have time to write," he continued. "Thank God for that. Thank God I didn't have the distraction of happiness."

Mr. Sia felt stuck in a kind of immigrant's no man's land between his Chinese parents and his American peers. "I used to say that I was white on the inside," he said. "I didn't like who I was."

Nevertheless, Mr. Sia spent much of his youth trying to live up to his parents' expectations. He strove to be famous as a performer, not simply to be good. "I was a little bit too focused on the success of it because I wanted them to be proud of me," he said. "It makes one miserable, chasing that."

"I wanted to be on TV," he added, "to show my parents I wasn't an embarrassment to them."

Mr. Sia, 26, who exudes a kinetic energy, hasn't completely given up on visual art. All over the walls of his dressing room are colorful drawings that he scribbles in his spare time.

Several have phrases inscribed on them: "Free my heart from negativity and sadness"; "Distracted by anger and contempt."

If anyone ever decides to write his biography, Mr. Sia says, it will be boring. "Between 1995 and 1999 I wrote poems," he said. "And I kept writing poems till the day I died. The end."

## Poetry Unposed

"Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam on Broadway" is at the Longacre Theater, 220 West 48th Street, (212) 239-6200. Performances: Tuesdays at 7 p.m.; Wednesdays through Fridays at 8 p.m.; Saturdays at 5 and 9 p.m.; Sundays at 3 and 7 p.m. Tickets: \$26.25 to \$76.25, with a limited number of \$16.25 student rush tickets available on the day of show.

Photos: Poets on Broadway, from left: Steve Colman, Georgia Me, Lemon, Mayda del Valle, Black Ice, Suheir Hammad, Staceyann Chin, Beau Sia and Poetri. (Sara Krulwich/The New York Times)(pg. E1); Lemon, 27, no parents as a teenager.; Black Ice, 31, the high school barber.; Steve Colman, 33, a higher form of rap.; Suheir Hammad, 29, activist Palestinian.; Mayda del Valle, 24, two-edged heritage.; Beau Sia, 26, no distracting happiness. (Photographs by Sara Krulwich/The New York Times)(pg. E8)