

Posted on Sun, Feb. 19, 2006

'Beats on the Streets'

Theater program gives at-risk students a voice

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The anguish on her face and the tremor in her voice were real.

"The world stopped spinning the minute they pulled the trigger," rapped LilAllante "Candy" Timmons, 18, of Palmetto. "I tasted his fear."

Her poem "Not Long Now" - about watching her boyfriend being shot to death on the streets of Bradenton - was graphic, powerful and gut-wrenching. A casual viewer not familiar with the backstory might think it was fiction.

"I experienced my boyfriend get murdered right in front of me," said Timmons, a slight, pretty girl with a strong, confident voice after a run-through of "Beats on the Streets of Life or Death" at Richard Milburn Academy

in Bradenton.

"I wouldn't wish it on anyone," she said. "He died right there in front of me."

Like Terrence Howard's going-nowhere pimp character in "Hustle & Flow," Timmons took her inner frustration and directed it outward into art. It was an epiphany, a purging of pent-up feelings that simmered too long in her mind and heart.

Timmons' story is one of a series of poems, hip-hop songs and anthems woven into "Beats on the Streets of Life or Death," an original production of the theater program at Richard Milburn Academy, a public charter school for at-risk students - students who have been suspended from other schools, have had problems with the law, who may have been or are homeless, who may have difficult home lives or who have failed academically.

Eleven students ages 14-18 collaborated on the hour-long show with theater teacher Gabriel Ortiz, musical director Gregg Edwards and security officer Ernest Lovely, who built the basic black-and-white, graffiti-tinged streetscape set. Much of the material is original with a few borrowed songs thrown in - "The Black National Anthem," "You're All I Need to Get By" and "Amazing Grace."

The play is bold, sassy, breathtaking, some might even say outlandish or, at times, outrageous. But, to see this kind of chutzpah and genuine emotion erupt out of a group of "disadvantaged" high school students is refreshing, rewarding and, it can renew one's faith in mankind.

"This is a group of kids that other people have written off," said Ortiz, a professional actor who started working with the students last year as an artist-in-residence. He is now a full-time faculty member at the academy.

The autobiographical musical/drama/comedy is visceral, soulful, sad, funny, sometimes amateurish and sometimes hard to understand (these are kids just to beginning to learn how to project and articulate on stage).

But, it is a wide-open forum for a bunch of kids, many of whom last year were afraid to even utter a word on stage, to sing and shout their hearts out about life, love, family, murder, death, even the political oppression they already see at a tender age.

In the opening scene, they stand at the front of the stage, singing the "Black National Anthem," harmonizing a capella in loud, forceful voices: *"Lift every voice and sing. 'Til heaven and earth ring with the harmonies of liberty."*

Then, boldly and without apology, they "pledge allegiance to the hip-hop generation, born between 1980 and 1989" - themselves, that is, children who have "forgotten their pasts, are lost in the present and are struggling against an unknown future."

They rap about one nation of different faces and different races - blacks, whites, Latinos, Jamaicans and Jews. They speak of life in prison, living in the projects, impossible dreams, freedom of expression, asking for kindness and crying out to be noticed, no matter what their gender, their race or their socio-economic status.

A scene about teenage love isn't syrupy, but direct and honest, with girls winning the upper hand, their searing dialogue about lies and promises made and broken spoken assertively, even aggressively, to boys who let them down.

"Thank you for your inconsideration . . . my heart, my mind, my spirit is still the biggest part of me . . . thank you for your stupidity," chimed Tabitha Rhodes, 18, Palmetto, a whiff of bittersweet victory in her delivery.

The short scene echoing the murder of Timmons' boyfriend, complete with real-life sirens and "voice of authority" sound effects had student Jovon Johnson, 17, of Sarasota, hunched down in the spotlight as invisible "police" came after him,

a "suspect."

Students harmonized beautifully on "Amazing Grace" at the "funeral procession," did an interesting tribute/put-down on the joys and disappointments of fathers and father-figures, and two girls engaged in a rap contest, in the style of "8 Mile."

Most startling was their full-blast, blistering indictment of the current presidential administration, with a shouted chorus of "four more years."

"Saddam Hussein, he ain't the issue. Watch gas prices rise while poor people in New Orleans struggle to survive," rhymed Wondria Saunders, 18, of Ellenton.

Timmons echoed her sentiments about "living in a fear-based nation that condones, sexism, racism and ageism."

Stepping to the front of the stage near the conclusion, the students called out, one-by-one: "Free."

It's powerful stuff. And, the kids credit Ortiz for giving them a voice, when it often seems like no one else wants to listen.

"Before Gabe came to this school, I didn't care about school," Timmons said. "I used to want to just get by and be able to feed myself. Now, I want you all to one day see me on TV."

For Janay Scott, 17, of Palmetto, the class is one of the best things that has happened in her academic life.

"I send out a message through my singing. I cherish this. I love this class," she said.

"He taught me some things that in a million years you could never pay for," Wondria Saunders added.

Edna Bailey, area school director for Richard Milburn Academies, is eternally grateful to Ortiz, calling him "our gift. It's amazing that he can reach a child and get him or her to perform at this level."

"Beats on the Streets of Life of Death" will be performed at 7 p.m. every Wednesday Feb. 22 through March 22 at The Backlot Theatre, 2208 Industrial Blvd., Sarasota. Tickets are \$5. Part of the proceeds will help Ortiz take the production on the road to other schools, churches and community centers in Florida.

Go and support these talented kids. You won't be disappointed.

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