

Oregon
Shakespeare
Festival.

illuminations

A Guide to the 2012 Plays



Notes by Eliza Bent
and Catherine Foster



PARTY PEOPLE

WORLD PREMIERE

UNIVERSES
(Steven Sapp, Mildred Ruiz Sapp
and William Ruiz, a.k.a. Ninja)

Directed by Liesl Tommy

Amira

Blue's wife and former Black Panther Party member. Protects Blue and his eccentricities.

Donna

Widow of a murdered police officer.

Maruca

Former Young Lords Party member. Both ruthless and romantic, she is not well accepted by others who have doubts about her past indiscretions.

Marcus

A former young activist affiliated with Fred Hampton's Rainbow Coalition in Chicago. A collector of memorabilia.

Jazz

Former Black Panther Party member. Went into exile after being accused of killing a Black Panther who was suspected of being an informant.

Omar

Former Black Panther Party member and Army war veteran. Seeks a public apology for having been tortured when others thought he was an informant.

Solias

COINTELPRO agent provocateur for the Black Panther Party.

Roger

COINTELPRO agent. Teaches informants how to infiltrate.

Chorus

All cast members are the chorus.

Who's Who

Jimmy "Primo"

A new media/visual/performing artist, he is organizing an exhibit/installation/performance inspired by the activities of the Black Panthers and the Young Lords. He's invited members of both groups to the event. Tito's nephew.

Malik

A Panther Cub, helping Jimmy coordinate the exhibit. He is trying to maintain a relationship with his father, who is in prison.

Tito

Primo's uncle, a former Young Lords Party member. Retired but still involved in union organizing and a prison reentry program. Was once in a relationship with Helita.

Helita

Former Young Lords Party member. A meticulous collector of Young Lords historical documents. Clara's godmother.

Clara

Daughter of Young Lords' members. Co-raised by Helita. Now successful, she wants nothing to do with a revolution that robbed her of her parents.

Blue

Former Black Panther Party member. Though ultimately proved not guilty, incarcerated for involvement in a shootout that left a police officer dead.

The Story

An opening at an art gallery of works inspired by the 1960s and '70s activities of the Black Panthers and the Young Lords presents a unique opportunity for members of both groups to gather and reflect on the past and present. As those from younger generations confront party members, they wrestle with how the ideals of yesterday are reflected in the present.

Old lovers reconnect, and friends who haven't spoken to each other in 25 to 30 years reunite. Meanwhile, former frenemies—and informants, too—meet and catch up. As the evening proceeds, however, certain facts that were taken as truths come into question. Songs and poetic monologues flare up to reveal the inner thoughts of party leaders as well as rank and file who had contributed to the party's cause. By evening's end, history does not seem as black and white as it sometimes reads in history books.

The Faces of Revolution

While both the Black Panthers and the Young Lords Parties are most known for their political activism—and sometimes violence—there was a humanitarian side to their activities, which UNIVERSES explores in *Party People*. The groups, which were active in the 1960s and 1970s across the United States, sought to improve the lives of poor people in the inner cities.

The Black Panthers

The Black Panthers was a black revolutionary party, started in 1966 in Oakland by Bobby Seale and Huey Newton as a defensive organization to protect black people from police brutality. They drafted a 10-Point Program, which laid out the group's demands. While they were working on changing laws and policies, they also developed a strong community service wing. During its 16 years, the Black Panthers launched 65 social initiatives, including the popular Free Breakfast for Children program, a clothing program, programs for teens, geriatric health care, police patrol, home maintenance, free ambulance service, disabled person transport and free dental care.

By 1968, chapters had formed in New York City, Newark, Washington, DC, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Boston, Cleveland,

Chicago, Detroit, Kansas City, Omaha, New Orleans, Dallas, Denver, San Diego, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Seattle. Membership peaked at 10,000 by 1969, and the Party's newspaper, *The Black Panther*, with Eldridge Cleaver as editor, had a circulation of 250,000.

But this group, which worked with other marginalized groups both here and overseas and preached liberation and self-sufficiency, alarmed the government. The incoming U.S. Attorney General John Mitchell, in a *Newsweek* article, vowed to “destroy the Panthers by the end of 1969.” And FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover put all the resources of his vast anti-Communist Counter Intelligence Program, or COINTELPRO, against them. Hoover deemed the Panthers “the most dangerous group in America.” Agents began to illegally monitor and infiltrate the groups; they sent falsely signed letters, made threats, tapped phones and pitted the Panthers against other groups. Some of its strongest leaders, like 21-year-old Fred Hampton, who linked other activist groups in the Rainbow Coalition, were killed.

Members were on tenterhooks, suspecting those around them of being informants or infiltrators. Violence and death often resulted. The FBI's efforts destroyed marriages and shattered families, cost people their jobs. The Black Panther Party was largely defunct by the early 1980s, although members continue to keep the social programs alive.

The Young Lords

The Young Lords Organization was founded in Chicago, first as a Puerto Rican gang in 1965. But after Young Lords member José “Cha Cha” Jimenez met Black Panther leader Fred Hampton in jail, he got a new vision. When he was released, Jimenez persuaded gang members to adopt the social programs the Panthers were starting. He was successful, and the Young Lords Organization changed their focus. In 1969, a group in New York City started the first chapter of the Young Lords Party there. Soon, it spread to six other states.

Like the Panthers, the Young Lords were infuriated by police brutality, but they also witnessed urban renewal projects that evicted members of their families and community. Made up of primarily young working class people, the Young Lords organized in Latin communities. They set forth a

MINING THE MEMORIES

When OSF's *American Revolutions: the United States History Cycle* commissioned UNIVERSES to create a play about a revolutionary moment in U.S. history, UNIVERSES members Mildred Ruiz Sapp, Steven Sapp and William Ruiz (a.k.a. Ninja) knew right away what interested them.

“Some of the greatest revolutionary moments for communities of color in America—and America in general—were the movements of the '60s and '70s, and more specifically the movements of the Black Panthers and Young Lords,” says Ruiz Sapp.

In creating *Party People*, UNIVERSES drew on personal experience. They grew up on the Lower East Side of Manhattan and the Bronx, where the Young Lords, a group of primarily Puerto Rican activists, ran social programs similar to those of the Black Panthers. UNIVERSES' families had been the beneficiaries of those programs, including the free breakfasts.

UNIVERSES realized they'd have to interview original members of both groups, who are now in their 50s, 60s and 70s. Because some of this material is still painful, they needed to

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establish trust. That meant conducting in-person interviews in seven U.S. cities as well as in Puerto Rico. Sapp said, “You have to go and get blessings from people and let them know this is real, out of respect. This is what you do for an elder.”

That was going to be financially difficult, particularly because the members of UNIVERSES were split between New York City and Puerto Rico. But OSF and three other theatres around the country played crucial roles in its progress.

OSF gave the group an initial commission fee and ongoing support for the artists to work together. UNIVERSES facilitated contact with PlayMakers Repertory Company in North Carolina, Center Theatre Group in Los Angeles, and Berkeley Repertory Theatre, who offered housing or travel support. The New England Foundation for the Arts gave a large grant for development and production.

The group members interviewed more than 20 people at all levels of both parties. They gleaned stories and anecdotes, as well as some people’s desires to come together with other members as adults to say things that can only now be said.

13-point program, protested slum conditions, ran social programs and started a newspaper, *Palante*, and a radio station with the same name.

Like the Black Panthers, the Young Lords held political education classes for children. They focused on community issues, such as the lack of decent housing, police brutality, lack of garbage pickup. They organized door-to-door health testing for tuberculosis and lead poisoning. They took over churches to house their free breakfast programs. They also staged dramatic takeovers of prominent institutions, like Lincoln and Gouverneur Hospitals, bringing media and public attention to the plight of Puerto Ricans and Latinos.

In the 1970s, the New York City health department sent trucks and medical personnel into neighborhoods to test residents for tuberculosis and provide medication. But the trucks weren’t going to Spanish Harlem. So members of the Young Lords figured out one truck’s route.

“One day they ran into the truck and told the technicians, ‘We’re not taking you hostage, we just want to ‘liberate’ the truck to a different neighborhood,’ ” explains Ruiz Sapp, adding that the group had brought sandwiches for the truck’s doctors and technicians. Sure enough, more than 100 cases of TB were discovered that day.

But the Young Lords also felt the effects of COINTELPRO. By 1973, the party’s strength had weakened. Still, many members from Young Lords went on to fight for Puerto Rican independence and neighborhood empowerment, although more covertly.

As UNIVERSES conducted their interviews for *Party People*, they said it was an illuminating experience for the participants involved. Others discovered that an old friend was actually an informant. The cases of mistaken identity, forgery and conspiracy can seem to have an epic, almost larger than life, quality about them—yet it is all based on historical fact.

The movements of the ’60s and ’70s were indeed revolutionary. “We were definitely at war—it just wasn’t called one,” says Ruiz Sapp.

Further Reading

- Mumia Abu-Jamal. *We Want Freedom: A Life in the Black Panther Party*.
- Michael Abramson, photographs; text by the Young Lords Party. *Palante: Voices and Photographs of the Young Lords, 1969–1971*.
- www.itsabouttimebpp.com. A website promoting the Black Panther Party legacy and alumni.



Black Panthers march at a Free Huey rally in deFremery Park, Oakland, in 1968. From *The Black Panthers* (Aperture).

©1968, STEPHEN SHAMES/POLARIS

A Ferocious, Fresh Voice

Every theatre company has its own distinctive history. Some form when friends from college graduate and decide to strike out on their own, others start when artists decide to combine their shared professional interests and aesthetics. For UNIVERSES, a Bronx-based ensemble founded in 1995, formation was almost happenstance.

“When the company came together, we were individual artists in the New York City poetry scene doing open mics,” says Steven Sapp, a founding member of UNIVERSES, who met his wife and fellow founding member Mildred Ruiz Sapp, while the two were still in college.

In the early days of performing poetry—and often music, too—alongside such poets as Reg E. Gaines, Sandra María Esteves and Pedro Pietri, UNIVERSES and fellow newcomers to the scene rued the fact that most open mics offered young poets only two minutes of stage time. UNIVERSES realized that if they worked together they could get eight consecutive minutes. The strategy worked, but UNIVERSES didn’t have designs on becoming a theatre group. Performing together was just for fun. “We only named ourselves when a presenter who booked us as a group wanted us to have a name,” Sapp says with a laugh.

UNIVERSES from the Bronx Side, as they were originally called, started performing together at various poetry and jazz clubs around the city—sometimes driving between boroughs to catch multiple gigs in one night. As their reputation grew, they began getting invited to attend political rallies. “Our work was always politically minded,” explains Sapp, “but at rallies we were like the entertainment.”

A multiplicity of styles

Entertaining how? Just what is work by UNIVERSES like? Imagine a visual art collage that draws from disparate mediums, styles and color palettes—UNIVERSES does that for theatre. In a review for *Slanguage*, a 2001 play by UNIVERSES, Lawrence Van Gelder of *The New York Times* wrote, “Expressed in rap and riffs and gospel and bluesy laments, among other poetic forms, *Slanguage* is a roller coaster of rhythm that takes the listener by the ear.” Taking in a UNIVERSES performance is indeed an aural experience, as songs morph into spoken word and spoken word melts into dramatic monologue.

UNIVERSES sums up their aesthetic on their website describing themselves as “a National International Ensemble Company of multi-disciplined writers and performers who fuse Poetry, Theater, Jazz, Hip-Hop, Politics, Down Home Blues and Spanish Boleros to create moving, challenging and entertaining theatrical works.”

The leap from poetry evenings and appearances at political rallies to full-fledged theatre performances was fortuitous. In 1998, Sapp was producing a theatre festival at his theatre, Live from the Edge, at The Point CDC, a nonprofit organization dedicated to youth development through the arts and the cultural and economic revitalization of the Hunts Point section of the Bronx, which he also cofounded with Ruiz Sapp in 1993. Sapp invited Mark Russell, then artistic director of downtown Manhattan’s Performance Space 122, to speak on a panel during the festival.

Russell obliged and was impressed not only by the expansiveness of The Point (it is a whopping 12,000 square foot space), but also by its economic model: Much of The Point’s real estate was utilized to help develop local businesses, which in turn rented the spaces that generated income for the arts center. Sapp invited Russell to attend a UNIVERSES performance the following evening.

“It was just 60 minutes of our work; it didn’t really have a through line,” says Sapp, but a special relationship was forged from those meetings.

“Meeting UNIVERSES was a gift,” Russell said by phone. “Here was this crew of poets with a theatrical and musical bent, blessed with a ferocious, fresh voice. They were open and ready to try new things, see where this form—they were inventing as they went along—took them. They knew where they came from and were able to keep it real.”

Russell booked UNIVERSES at PS 122 and the previously borough-hopping group found yet another artistic home. “We became a theatre company overnight,” Sapp says.

What was not overnight, however, was the characteristic kaleidoscopic style of the group. While often labeled as hip-hop theatre, Sapp believes the UNIVERSES aesthetic is broader than that.

SERVING THE STORY

Theatre has so many stripes and shades, the assortment can at times be dizzying. There’s musical, straight, classical, hip hop, spoken word, experimental, devised, nonnarrative and dance theatre. The list goes on.

Labels can, of course serve as great identifiers—especially to those who are unfamiliar with a group’s work. But labels can also limit. “Once you call it one thing, then you lessen everything else,” says *Party People* director Liesl Tommy.

UNIVERSES, it seems, has a complicated relationship with the label by which they are often marked.

“The UNIVERSES form has been called many things,” explains group member Steven Sapp, “from poetic theatre to hip-hop theatre.”

For UNIVERSES, art-making is not about applying a preferred or select rule or aesthetic at all times. On the contrary. “For us, there are no rules,” Sapp asserts. “The group dabbles in whatever genre will serve the story best at that particular point of the play. You have to yodel here? Fine. We have prided ourselves on doing a little bit of everything. It is

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poetry. It is traditional theatre. It is musical theatre.”

Director Tommy elaborates on UNIVERSES’ work: “It’s hip-hop. It’s blues. It’s jazz. It’s dance. It is anything and everything that people want to call it.”

For Sapp, calling the work by a myriad of names opens up the possibilities of what the work can be. Speaking of a previous piece, *Ameriville*, Sapp says, “We used a lot of different styles to cover the topic of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. To tell the story of the Black Panthers and the Young Lords he says that UNIVERSES asks, “Do we want to tell it as a monologue? Do we want to tell it as a poem? A song? Maybe we could have all of those things.”

To see the ensemble go from poetry clubs and community centers and move to performance spaces, colleges, Off-Broadway and regional theatres is a testament to the evolution of the work.

For UNIVERSES, theatre can be an unlimited act of revolution.



UNIVERSES: From left, William Ruiz (aka Ninja), Mildred Ruiz Sapp and Steven Sapp perform at a 2009 OSF Green Show.

“We draw on the talents of whoever is in the rehearsal room,” says Sapp. Aside from Sapp and Ruiz-Sapp, UNIVERSES’ membership has always been revolving with the longest-standing core members being Gamal A. Chasten and William Ruiz (a.k.a. Ninja). “I often joke that if we had a yodeler in the group, we’d be yodeling,” he says. Sapp points out that members of UNIVERSES are currently black and Latino and utilize the artistic influences at which they excel. Says Sapp, “Mildred might start doing a flamenco song in Spanish. One of us might add a beat box to underscore it—does that necessarily make it hip-hop?” Semantics aside, it is fair to say that poetry, music, dramatic text and four-part harmony are just some of the ingredients UNIVERSES uses to tell their stories.

As for what kind of tales UNIVERSES tells, says Sapp, “We try to give voice to the people who don’t have one—or whose stories don’t often get told in theatre.” *Slanguage*, directed by Jo Bonney (*American Night*, 2010) at New York Theatre Workshop, was, according to Sapp “the way we learn language in our communities.” Their next ensemble-created work was *Ameriville*, a critical examination of American society told through the lens of Hurricane Katrina. Chay Yew (*Our Town*, 2008) directed the premiere at the Humana Festival in 2009, and it bowed again at New York City’s Under the Radar festival in 2011.

Making connections

Party People takes on the fraught history of the Black Panther Party and the Young Lords. UNIVERSES has been talking to legends of the movements, along with everyday people who contributed to the party. Like UNIVERSES’ previous shows, *Party People* is expected to tour around the United States, yet UNIVERSES always strives to make local connections wherever they go. For *Party People*, UNIVERSES is hosting national salons, where Black Panthers and Young Lords will be invited to speak and engage in community dialogue pre- and post-performance talks. A grant from the New England Foundation for the Arts has helped UNIVERSES further develop the show and will aid theatres around the country in producing it. As William Ruiz lives in Puerto Rico, rehearsing can be hard and often gets scheduled while the group is on tour.

UNIVERSES has been around for 16 years. What will the next 16 years be like? Sapp hopes to continue to develop the UNIVERSES brand as well as the next crop of emerging artists (Jadele McPherson has recently been added to the UNIVERSES roster).

“There are a lot of ensemble companies out there,” says Sapp, citing groups like the Wooster Group, Rude Mechs and Elevator Repair Service. “But in terms of ensemble companies of color, from our generation, who have thus far withstood the test of time, there’s just us. I don’t want to seem arrogant—that’s what we are and that’s what we have to continue to be in a great way.”