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# A new language for a new American theater

By **JOHN MOORE** | The Denver Post

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As many theater companies retrench into the economic safety of familiar seasonal fare, Curious Theatre ventures forth into the thrill of the unknown.

While more than 30 area companies are readying safe, holiday-themed plays, Curious on Saturday opens “Ameriville,” a form-bending, socially conscious new fusion of spoken-word poetry, hip-hop, jazz, comedy and politics.

“When theater loses the pulse of what its community really needs, that’s when I think it has failed,” said Chay Yew, who is directing this piece written and performed by the nationally regarded Bronx-based ensemble Universes.

And while there is certainly a place for “A Christmas Carol” in every town, Yew added, that’s just not the place everyone in town wants to be.

“I think especially in a time of economic downturn, you need to hold firm to your mission,” said Curious artistic director Chip Walton, whose company has never staged any work previously performed in Denver. “A show like ‘Ameriville’ is, in every way, what we started Curious to do.”

“Ameriville” is a theatrical exploration of the state of the union. It uses Hurricane Katrina as a launching pad to ask important questions about what binds and defines the nation, and every community within it. Like: What would happen if Denver’s version of Katrina descended upon us out of the blue? How would we respond? Not just to the disaster, but as a community?

Heady terrain, especially given the time of year. And that, said Yew, is how it should be.

“People in Denver should demand a lot from their theater, and that’s not to just show them things that have already been done a lot,” he said. “Theaters need to understand that they are the pulse of society. But for theater to have the important place in society that it deserves, it needs to be almost a town hall — a place where people come for ideas, to converse, to be angry and sometimes to be comforted.

“Community is so much at the heart of this play. To me, the question is always relevance: Are you really speaking to the people of Denver?”

Give people nothing but what they already know, he said, “and theater becomes a mall.”

Universes is a four-person troupe not unknown to Curious audiences. Steven Sapp and Mildred Ruiz contributed to Curious’ collective “War Anthology” project in 2005, and the pair wrote the company’s 2008 piece on homelessness, “The Denver Project.”

Universes also offered a late-night slice of “Ameriville” at Curious during the 2008 Democratic National Convention. The place was packed with young, ethnically diverse and rowdy denizens, many seeing the inside of Curious for the first time.

That’s just one reason “Ameriville,” running through Dec. 5, already has moved nearly three times the typical number of advance single tickets sold.

That’s because what might scare off traditional theatergoers — terms like “slam poetry” and “slanguage” — is exactly what appeals to newer, younger audiences.

“I feel old enough to be one of those people who say, ‘Wow, what is this?’ ” said Yew.

Spoken word is an emerging, polarizing and easily maligned art form often dismissed as pontification in rhyme. But, Yew said, “I know teenagers all the way up to 40-year-olds who gravitate toward this new and exciting way of communicating.

“For theaters to remain relevant, immediate and urgent, they should be asking, ‘Now, what is *their* language?’ ”

Yew’s primary task, he said, has been to help Universes move its message from the coffee shop to the theater.

“Anyone can take spoken word for 10 minutes. But for 90? You can’t,” said Yew. “So the question is, how do you make it into an accessible, ideologically engaging and recognizable night of theater?”

The answer: Develop a three-act narrative structure, with recurring characters and themes, and add production values like music and video to form what Yew calls “a hodgepodge pastiche of everything Universes does.”

Whether the audience agrees with the politics of the piece, he added, “is another thing altogether.”

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, and the government’s bungling of it, Universes set out to do a play about fear in America. Yew convinced them to expand their vision to a national perspective.

The levees that broke in New Orleans thus become the central metaphor for much larger issues.

“When you start to look at all metaphorical levees that need to be fixed in this country, then you realize this is really all about race, health care, gender issues,” Yew said.

Walton swears “Ameriville” is not an agenda-driven propaganda piece. “It just tells you, ‘Here’s the problem,’ ” Walton said. “Now . . . what do *you* think?”

But the play is, of course, inherently political, Yew said. “All art is political because it has a point of view.

“The great tradition of American political theater has always shown you the individual human being going up against society, and asking, ‘How can we make things better? Can we change things?’ ”

We can, he said, if we stop waiting around for someone else to do it for us.

Katrina, and the transfer of the presidency, are evidence enough that no one politician is capable of fixing everything, Yew said. “But I don’t see a lot of us picking up the brooms and the shovels — not even the liberals.

“We’re just trying to strike the consciousness of all audience members by saying we have to fix the levees ourselves. We need to change the system in which we live.”

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## “Ameriville”

**Cross-disciplinary fusion.** Performed by Universes at Curious Theatre, 1080 Acoma St. Directed by Chay Yew. Starring Steven Sapp, Gamal Chasten, William Ruiz and Mildred Ruiz. Through Dec. 5. 8 p.m. Wednesdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays except Nov. 15. \$18-\$42. 303-623-0524 or [curioustheatre.org](http://curioustheatre.org)

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## This weekend’s other theater