



Griot:

He Who Speaks the Sweet Word

By Becky London

Griot: He Who Speaks the Sweet Word is titled "a choreopoem," written and performed by Al Letson, with David Girard and Larry Knight. Barbara Colaciello Williams is credited as the director and producer. Letson, Girard, and Knight are all spoken word poets. The actors are writers, dancers, singers and poets; the director is a developer—this is a collaboration of artists which mixes all these forms of expression into a riveting and moving evening in the theatre.

The griot was originally a storyteller in the ancient Mali Empire. The notion of the griot, the voice used to pass experience from generation to generation, is used as the main image to travel through the amazing wealth of African American voices from African shores all the way to hip-hop.

With only three muslin backdrops—briefly and stunningly used for backlit shadow images—a few props and costume elements, Griot swirls from one era to another through tiny vignettes of very specific lives. Sounds, voices, and music, both familiar and new (original music by Zane) whirl us along on the trip. And along the way there are some stunning moments. A work gang rounds up listeners to get an old man to tell a story, and

when he does, it features Anansi the Spider, the clever hero of African tales. We hear Malcolm X's phrases from various speeches fade in and out, followed by Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, as the actors dance to the music of the time; cheery, sparkingly tight Motown formations (choreographed by Stacie Letson). The '68 Olympians' Black Power salute suddenly forms before our eyes, as the actors powerfully perform Gil Scott Heron's "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised." Miles Davis saunters on-stage, suddenly and uncannily embodied by David Girard.

The actors speak the poetry of Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, Gwendolyn Brooks, and others. They speak this poetry with great passion and love; the poetry comes directly from their hearts, and their admiration for the poets and deep feeling for the poetry is electric. Letson's own poetry is moving and powerful, with thrilling, aching imagery. He does not suffer in comparison to the giants he includes in his choreopoem. All three actors are masters of the spoken word and a privilege to hear.

There are minor quibbles: I found a nipple ring on an African father defending his son from a slave trader to be disconcerting. Some of the vignettes are more successful than others in structure and pace. And occasionally the piece moves onto the next era like an obligatory history lesson.

But these problems are minor in comparison to the amazing riches the the piece delivers. This is a FringeNYC evening worth seeing and definitely worth hearing.

