

Kuntu Play Dramatizes The Life Of Rival Street Gangs

By ANN MORRIS
Courier Staff Writer

Both the audience and the cast wore hunter green and golden yellow at Kuntu Repertory Theater's premiere of "Killin' and Chillin' in the Hood."

The play dramatizes the life of rival street gangs—the Loot and the Mobsters—who choose green and yellow as their "colors." The characters were an extension of the life experience of many in the audience.

How well did playwrights Lee Kiburi and Rob Penny capture the process of an African-American community's effort to understand and stop the killing? And how well did co-directors Vernell Lillie and Jason Alan Carvell transform the facts into theater?

From interviews and data compiled after the 1994 gang truce in several Pittsburgh neighborhoods, Kuntu developed characters who were composites of a community—parents whose children have been shot, gang members who have been sentenced to prison, outreach workers, law enforcement officers, politicians, activists and bystanders.

Kiburi sat with the audience on

opening night and observed their reaction to the images before them as if they were in a church service.

In the play, Skip, who loves television shows like "Cops" and "NYPD Blue" because they're "so real," discovers his 11-year-old son, Darnell, is selling drugs.

He asked, "How can you live in the same home with your own child and not know what he's doing?"

The audience responded, "You better pay attention."

A drug dealer who goes by the name of Santa Clam offers Darnell a well-paid job "slinging," this is his business.

The audience responded, "You've got that right."

Another character, Brenda, lost one son to gang violence and is on the brink of losing a second son, C-Note. C-Note carries a gun and identifies with the Loot Gang.

Brenda says, "The kids everybody was afraid of became my protectors. I felt powerful. I wanted the gang to kill for me, to avenge the death of my son."

"She lost her mind" was the response from the audience.

Assata, in the tradition of the Black liberation movement of the

'60s, opens her home to the community and teaches that money is not the measure of a man's success.

She tells another character, Robbie, "Have I ever told you how much it turns me on that you struggle for your people? I wish there were more brothers like you."

This strikes a chord of hope throughout the audience who respond with a heart-felt, "Amen! People are opening their homes. There is hope."

In another scene, the Mobsters recall "back in the day" when the "Posse" fought with their fists and gradually progressed to knives and then guns. Now the community—once the only place one could feel safe—is as confining as a coffin.

Later, Mobster's member, Beans, discovers that a rival gang member who he was secretly collaborating with on a recording project, was driving a car whose occupants tried to gun him down in the streets.

The play continued, depicting the events that preceded the '94 gang truce for almost 2½ hours. The playwrights, eager to include a variety of real-life stories and

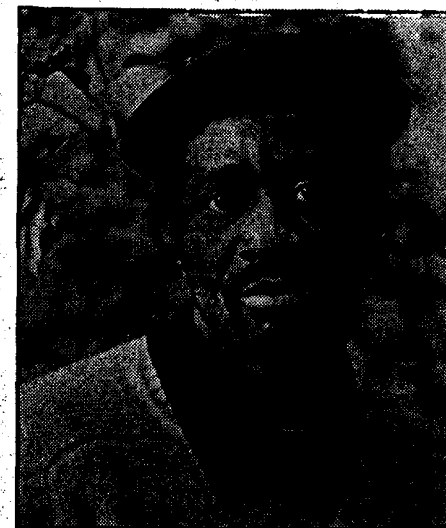


VERNELL LILLIE

quotes, may have sacrificed impact to repetition.

However, the talent of the dancers, rappers and poets in the play was refreshing as themes were woven together with movement and sound.

One short poem: "Tonight, it



ROB PENNY

rains on me. Home, hold it! Spread it! Shut up!" regards street violence as natural as rain.

Another strong visual image is one of the young male characters stepping into a circle of dancers—a young boy is trying to find his

footing in the quick dance of life.

A break from violent portrayals of life in the inner-city, "Killin' and Chillin' in the Hood" runs Thursday through Sunday until Feb. 10. Tickets are available at Ticketmaster.