

THEATER REVIEW

Untamed Poetry, Loose Onstage

By **BEN BRANTLEY**

Does Con Edison know about the fast of "Def Poetry Jam"? The performers on the stage of the Longacre Theater, where the show opened last night, are giving off enough electric current to keep Manhattan in air-conditioning for a century of summers. The hard-working choruses of musicals like "Thoroughly Modern Millie" and "42nd Street" can dance until their shoes lose their taps, but they still won't generate the energy found in this gathering of angry young poets.

"Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam on Broadway," to use the production's full brand-name-wearing title, is the most singular offering in mainstream New York theater these days, even in a season that has seen such anomalies as "Movin' Out," Twyla Tharp's all-fencing, no-talking pop musical, and the short-lived French bagatelle called "Amour."

Produced by the eponymous Mr. Simmons, the mighty rap recording emperor, "Def Poetry" is basically something more than nine people stand-

ing onstage reciting poems they have written. But this description, which summons clammy images of the classroom, fails to factor in the incandescent mix of exuberance, arrogance and exhibitionism with which each performer is invested.

The poets of "Def Poetry" flaunt their words the way Fosse dancers flaunt their bodies, in muscle-flexing struts, slides and sashays. Listen to the following declarations: "I wanna hear a poem where ideas kiss similes so deeply that metaphors get jealous." "I'm the mentally buff Chinese Hulk Hogan/ disciplined, determined and deadly."

And, "Spoken word is about to leave the ground like a plane, chain ganging, clanging like a school boy with a pan."

These lines, like most in the show, sound better than they read. You need to experience firsthand the body language that makes the verbal language spin and the voices that seem to get high off their own inflections. This is poetry for the stage, not the page, and it exists completely only in the moment it is being performed.

People can complain that much of

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Photographs by Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Clockwise from top left, Mayda Del Valle, Lemon, Steve Colman and Poetri perform in "Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam on Broadway."