Black Poetry on Stage

By Judy Stone

Busted joy: an excited small black youngster treated to a trip in Baltimore later can only remember the white boy who called him “nigger.” “A Song to a Negro Wash-Woman.” An antebellum sermon from a fire and brimstone preacher. Love lyrics celebrating “the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice.”

From the poetry that black writers have dredged up through the work, pain, laughter and religion of everyday life, Maya Angelou, the multi-talented author of “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,” has fashioned a surprisingly effective theatrical entertainment. “And Still I Rise” which opened Friday at the Oakland Ensemble Theater is bursting with vitality, high good humor and passionate feeling.

An interracial company of about 20, whose movement is cleverly choreographed and controlled, is able to maintain a pulsating, vibrant pace in the continuous line of poetry which flows easily—with scarcely a pause for punctuation—from Childhood, Youth, Love, Work, Religion and The Old Souls.

In their simple, muted costumes, they manage to suggest everything from the chugging of a railroad train to the undulations of a centipede.

The diversity of movement and mood is enhanced through the most adroit use of lighting and a spare, effective set: a raised platform with steps at both ends and a number of open arches below. The poetry is sometimes sung—usually without music, but from time to time, there is a soft, effective accompaniment by Charles Boles on bass and Roy Andrews on guitar.

The poetry ranges from Paul Laurence Dunbar’s racy rhymes in folk dialect, to Langston Hughes’s blues beat and wry humor and the contemporary love lyrics of Nikki Giovanni. A preponderance of the material, often the most effective, is by Angelou, who also directed.

The overall tone is good-natured despite such poems as Dunbar’s “We Wear the Mask” (“This debt we pay to human guile: with torn and bleeding hearts we smile.”)

What is missing is sharp anger or rage that would not only provide another very essential aspect of reality, but would give a different kind of vigor to the production. Even despair is very low-key here. It never plumbs the depths to provide the counterpoint that would make the exuberance of the optimistic “And Still I Rise” even more effective.

With a few minor exceptions, the performers were a joy to watch and hear, particularly Beverly Johnson and Fran Jackson. Ron Stacker Thompson was a dynamo of movement and guile, preaching revolution with his talk about Moses in “The Ante-Bellum Sermon.”