

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 1979

Revue: 'When Hell Freezes Over'

By RICHARD F. SHEPARD

RECIPE for an evening of theater that works well, even without a script: Take the works of two dozen poets and have them performed by seven attractive and talented young performers who recite, sing and dance, accompanied by a half-dozen good musicians. Stir well and you have a delectable feast that goes under the title, "When Hell Freezes Over, I'll Skate."

This latest offering of the Urban Arts Corps, which was established to involve young black and Puerto Rican artists with professional theater, is a revue, but one in which the sequences fit together almost seamlessly. Vinnette Carroll, who conceived and directed the show (she is artistic director of the Urban Arts Corps), describes it as "our poetry program, from slavery to the present." And the program does indeed cover much ground and many well-put words in the less than two hours it is on stage.

The scorekeeper might cavil at the lack of identification of the poetry, whether one is listening at one point to the words of Paul Laurence Dunbar, of Nikki Giovanni, of Langston Hughes, of

Urban Arts Corps

WHEN HELL FREEZES OVER I'LL SKATE. A musical entertainment based on the works of black poets. Conceived and directed by Vinnette Carroll. Setting by Marfy Kappell; musical direction by Cleavant Derricks; lighting by Rick Belzer; production stage manager, Gerard Campbell. Presented by the Urban Arts Corps, Vinnette Carroll, artistic director; Anita Macshane producing director. At 26 West 20th Street. WITH: Lynne Clifton-Allen, Brenda Braxton, Clinton Derricks-Carroll, Cleavant Derricks, Jeffrey Anderson-Gunter, Alde Lewis Jr. and Marilyn Winbush.

Julian Bond. But the less statistically minded viewer can sit back and relish the flow of words and music in blissful ignorance and contented appreciation of the authors.

It opens with a rouser, a thumping of feet as four men and three women, all attractive people, get things under way singing "When the colored band comes marching down the street." Then there are the simple songs of country courting, songs of humor and love. Somehow, because it happens effortlessly, the mood shifts to gospel, rousing and impassioned, drawing in the rhythmic clapping of the audience. There is a sermon, but, of course, it is poetry.

The mood changes. It's the blues, tired and sexy and indrawn. And jazz. It is all here, the many moods and modes of black expression, perhaps not all of them, but a sample case of the bit-

ter and the sweet, the pragmatic and the poetic.

"When Hell Freezes Over" is carried off beautifully by its cast. Marilyn Winbush is a most handsome young woman with a voice that moves easily from throaty torch to concert-hall polished pitch. Lynne Clifton-Allen, who looks, as one observer noted, a lot like Joan Crawford, conveys comedy as well as the pathos of a worn woman. Brenda Braxton is a lithe and intense dancer, an eye-catching whirl of red dress punctuating the prose and poetry.

Alde Lewis Jr. also dances, and he taps and swings to tunes of any era. Clinton Derricks-Carroll and Cleavant Derricks can carry off anything, from gospel and church sermon to tender ballad and hortatory hymn. Jeffrey Anderson-Gunter displays an almost elfin charm and humor expressed in both smile and soft West Indian accent.

Miss Carroll's direction is sure-footed and logical. She has made an entity out of a number of disparate and diverse parts. It is, as she says, an evening of poetry, but it is more than that. It is an evening of entertainment and theater.