

## LA Magazine Interview | Ronald K. Brown/EVIDENCE

with Tim Choy

**(TC):** I saw your company perform here at the Music Center in 2012 — “Grace” was on the program then — and I was struck by the fluidity and musicality of your dancers. I’m happy to see “Grace” on the program again for your upcoming L.A. visit. Can you describe a bit why you selected music by Duke Ellington, Roy Davis Jr., and Fela Anikulapo Kuti, and how did it inspire your choreography?

**(RKB):** Since Grace was the first commission for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1999, I began to look for music that would allow me to say thank you to Mr. Ailey.

That impulse is how I came up with the title. He used Duke Ellington's music a lot and so I went and listened to Ellington's sacred concerts. A came across many versions of Come Sunday, instrumental versions, quite a few sung by Mahalia Jackson and one sung by Jimmy McPhail. I owned a version by Jennifer Holiday and those became the bookends for the piece.

The lyrics of Come Sunday, "Dear Lord above....please come down and see your people through", dictated where I should go in the story musically. I found Roy Davis Jr.s "Gabriel" sung by Peven Everett, which has lyrics that speak of the angel of love Gabriel coming down. This helped with the images of Mother/Goddess coming down from heaven, with angels, to round up the people who were behaving as if they did not understand God's grace. Once down on earth, I needed music to help the dancers live out...the kind of "cified/urban" attitude that is sometimes far away from God's grace. I was familiar with Fela Kuti's Shakara, which is slang in Nigeria for empty braggart. In Brooklyn we would say someone who is popping junk.....or playing to rough, verbally. "I'll punch in the throat.,.....just joking", The music drove the movement for each section. The opening...has Mother/Goddess in a conversation with The Most High, as she contemplates why she is needed on earth. There are gestures up to The Creator, an extend palms asking for a hand, and fits of urgency and compassion. In Gabriel...the movement finds the dancers gesturing up....and flying down...touching the ground and following each other on the path to the city. In Shakara, which is in the city, the movement has more of a punch and an attitude of aloofness and ferocity. The last section opens with the men playing a gambling game (in Brooklyn it was tossing quarters against a wall), gambling is not allowed and definitely not on Sunday. The women are disappointed and show this in the first statements, and the section continues leading to a final embrace of forgiveness before the dancers return through the threshold back to heaven to get another chance. This is "Grace", getting another chance when you really don't deserve it.

**(TC):** The same question goes for “The Subtle One” and “Come Ye” — how did the musical selections influence your choreographic decisions for those pieces? What specifically inspired you, and then how did you respond to that inspiration through the choreography?

**(RKB):** Composer Jason Moran gave me a few CD's over 5 years ago and I spent time listening to decide which songs I would choreograph too. I also knew that the title of the piece was somewhere in the musical selections. One of the songs "The Subtle One" and approximately 10 other songs were going to direct me. It was different for me to work from music first and discover what the piece was. The movement came out very quickly and I was able to finish a section a day and eliminate songs that felt like they did not belong. I found the title intriguing and began asking people what thoughts came to mind when they heard "the subtle one". I also began researching, in the world what is "The Subtle One", and then I happened upon a definition that it is one of the names of Allah, "the one who whispers things in to existence".

Further research lead me to reading people talk about the subtle ones. I began to ponder....are the people walking on earth with this understanding and quality....aware of The Most High, are they conscious of the ancestors walking with us or are they angels? All of these images seemed to inform the choreography.

Each of the sections of Come Ye, dictated the movement choices. The first, Come Ye, is a call to prayer...and urgency for salvation, the 2nd "Sunday in Savannah" has the tone of people waiting for God to solve issues at hand, the 3rd Revolution, has a false start when Nina Simone stops the band reprimands them for pushing to hard. This gave me the idea of people in the 1970's being dressed for liberation but getting lost along the way. The next sections....provide a re-focus. Kalakuta, the name of Fela Kuti's compound...shows the dancers finally on one accord following each other in a box around the stage, until the exit in a strong line with both fists up high. The final section "Coffin for the Head of State", is full of prayer, to Jesus Christ in English, to Allah in Arabic and to all of us in Yoruba. The movement takes on the pleading and urgency in all of these calls to prayer to demonstrate perseverance and determination.

**(TC):** In just a sentence or two for each, please describe the mood and tone of the three pieces on this program: "The Subtle One," "Come Ye," and "Grace." I'd like to give our readers a sense of what they can expect to see.

**(RKB):** Grace begins with a sweet pleading, followed burst of movement and passion to follow a path. Ending with resolution.

The Subtle One is quiet and brews for the first 3 sections, the fourth and fifth section take that concentration to fuel a dedication that is more explosive, responding to the layers in Jason Moran's compositions.

Come Ye, is a psalm. A call for all the people who are dedicated to fighting for their life. The music of Nina Simone musically and vocally has an invitation to hope, the third section brings levity before the dancers answer the call of prayer warriors and those who have taught us about creative protest. The final section "Amen" brings all of these ideas together. As the dances embody the fortitude of the warriors who believe that in a time of war, the destination is peace. The movement goes from Afro-Cuban movements of Ogun in the opening...to Soli from Guinea and Yemaya from Cuba in the final, all mixed with the Evidence style of contemporary choreography.

**(TC):** How many dancers are with the company?

**(RKB):** There are 4 women and 4 men in the company.

**(TC):** Are there any particular people, places, scenes, events, art, architecture, etc. in Los Angeles that influence your work?

**(RKB):** There are people in LA and in California that have shown me what is possible. I think of the legendary pioneer Donald McKayle who teaches at Irvine, and has a career that has covered every genre from the concert stages, to opera to cartoons. There is Debbie Allen who I remembered seeing on TV in a variety show *3 Girls 3*, who also has career with a range of inspiration. Still teaching, Directing, running a school and choreographing. Two good friends Melinda and Rodney Nugent who were incredible dancers in the Ailey company and have forged incredible careers in LA are also sources of influence and resolve.