

“Black Girl” Kicks Up Dust, Memories — And Questions

by BRIAN SLATTERY | Jun 16, 2017 7:32 am

Black Girl: Linguistic Play— running for one more night at the University Theater on York Street as part of the International Festival of Arts and Ideas — began Thursday with the bass, just Robin Bramlett and her instrument, laying down big notes. Pianist Scott Patterson joined her, laying down sweeping cascades of melody.

A lone dancer appeared on stage, exuding childhood, the sense of freedom, of not being sure what to do with her limbs and not caring. She tapped in her sneakers. She did the running man. And at last, she began kicking up chalk dust. It rose around her, still dust, but in the light, it looked a little like steam, too, or like smoke.

For just a minute, it seemed as though the dancer was tapping across the surface of a hot skillet. Like if she stopped moving, she'd be cooked. So the dancer's exuberance had danger in it. Her joy was an end in itself. But maybe it was necessary for her survival, too.

I thought of it at the end of *Black Girl*, a dance piece by the acclaimed Camille A. Brown and Dancers that followed its characters through childhood and adolescence to adulthood and, in time, motherhood. The piece was a thrill to watch, a triumph of movement and music, each gesture carrying meaning and emotion. But talking about it afterward proved almost as rewarding as watching it, an integral part of the experience, as the dancers — Brown, Beatrice Capote, Chloe Davis, Catherine Foster, and Fana Fraser — assembled onstage with Bramlett and Patterson to talk to the audience about what we had seen.

“What came up for you?” Brown asked. “Any thoughts? Memories? Images?”

A lot, as it turned out. A dance sequence in which two of the dancers moved through a rich, athletic game of double-dutch unleashed a flood of memories for women in the audience across generations from their own childhoods, whether they had formed those memories five or 50 years ago. Brown nodded and mentioned that the double-dutch routine also drew from traditional African dance and juba— a moment of thanks to the slaves who “continued to dance the rhythms in their hearts,” as Brown put it, even when they didn't have instruments to play.

“It took a while to get back to that girl inside of me,” Brown said, to “tell the story through my gaze, and not through how people see me.”

“You caught so much of the pain that we go through but can't express,” said an audience member, “because otherwise we become the angry black girl.”

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"But also the joy," Brown said. Which got at perhaps the deepest response I had to *Black Girl* — that despite the harrowing existence the piece hinted at, and the struggles the women faced as they moved into adulthood, from minute to minute the joy of life shone through. A sly glance, or a certain cocky, knowing pose, was all it took to draw laughter from the audience, and as the dancers' characters aged — astonishingly, all conveyed through body language and facial expressions — I found myself rooting for them more and more.

But the joy was more deeply felt because it didn't belittle the hardships around it. A playground fight scene proved as resonant for the audience as the double-dutch scene was.

"When you were fighting, I just remembered my sister and me fighting," said a young girl in the balcony.

"But it's about the resolution too. We fight and then we make up," Capote said.

"We can never let our sisters go," Brown said. "We can fight hard, but we love harder."

An older audience member politely asked a question about a particularly affecting scene toward the end of the piece. "Was that about braiding hair?" she said. Laughter rippled across the theater, a sense of collective recognition. The woman continued by telling the crowd that she had grown up in Tennessee, and had vivid memories of having her hair braided.

"We were made to sit there, and it was always confrontational," she said. "Did you ever finish doing that hair?" The audience laughed again.

The company revealed that the seamless integration of dance and music was no accident; dancers and musicians had developed *Black Girl* all together. "We talked about our childhoods and made gestures out of that," Brown said. "It's my name, but it's the company's performance."

Similarly, Patterson revealed that he and original bass player Tracy Wormworth developed the music by starting with the melodies of childhood hand games. Then they put "some Earth, Wind and Fire in there," he said. He paused. "Put a little Chopin on there," he said, "and then just tried to build a soundscape with it."

Why develop a piece this way? an anthropology student in the audience asked.

"Because I want to," Brown said, matter-of-factly. "I'm doing what I want to do regardless of what people think about it. That might mean I see no one in the audience and it might mean there are beautiful people in the audience," she continued. "I don't want to think, 30 years later, that I should have done something but someone told me not to."

Which brought things full circle, back to the chalk dust that rose around the dancers as they moved, and for me had turned to smoke and steam. Another audience member

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said that it reminded her of sand — like playing in a sandbox, as children do, but then it also put her in mind of mortality, of the dust of ancestors.

Brown nodded. She mentioned that in previous performances, the dust had come to mean many things to many people, and not all of them pleasant. “When you hear the phrase ‘black girl,’ what comes to mind?” she said. “Even though this piece is built around joy or humanity, it’s still a part of the world of trauma.” She mentioned that a previous reviewer had said she thought the dust was cocaine.

But for Brown, such were the acceptable risks of putting on a piece done her company’s way. Maybe they intended one thing and an audience received a different message. The interpretation was part of it, as dancers, musicians, and everyone else in the theater dove into the question of what it meant to be a black girl.

“At the end of the day,” Brown said, “we have to stand in our truth.”