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Music, story-telling drive look at race and tolerance

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By SUSAN BROILI, Special to The Herald-Sun



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Camille A. Brown & Dancers will perform "MR. TOL E. RANcE" Tuesday through Thursday at Reynolds Industries Theater. It marks a leap in her development as a choreographer. It's her first evening-length (50-minute work), tackling issues of race and tolerance.

DURHAM —

For choreographer Camille A. Brown, this American Dance Festival season represents a number of firsts.

It's the first time her company, Camille A. Brown & Dancers, has appeared at the festival. She did appear as a dancer on the ADF stage in 2003 and 2006 as a member

of Ronald K. Brown's Evidence, A Dance Company. But she was never an ADF student. Instead, she attended La Guardia High School of the Arts and earned a BFA from the North Carolina School of the Arts.

Another first - "MR. TOL E. RAnCE," the work her company's performing Tuesday through Thursday at Reynolds Industries Theater -- marks a leap in her development as a choreographer. At 50 minutes, it's her first evening-length work. And, she had to work up to tackling the subject matter of race and tolerance.

"For me, this work is the most courageous work I've done," Brown said in a recent telephone interview from New York, where she lives and her company is based.

In addition to coming to grips with the subject matter herself, she needed a permanent company of performers gifted in both dance and acting to tell the stories she wanted to tell. In 2010, she decided the time had come to form such a company, she said. She and that company created "MR. TOL E. RAnCE" about a year ago.

In addition to her work being driven by story-telling, music plays an integral part. Her musical background began when she started playing clarinet in elementary school and continued through high school.

For her new work, she needed a certain sound. "I've always loved ragtime," she said. So, she wanted to include Scot Joplin's "Lorraine's Rag" and needed a pianist to perform it live. She chose Scott Patterson. "He's amazing and stunning," Brown said. "We can see his soul when he's playing." Patterson plays the piano onstage and the score includes some of his compositions.

Inspirations for this dance theater work include her own experiences as well as Spike Lee's satirical film, "Bamboozled," and Mel Watkin's book, "On the Real Side: From Slavery to Chris Rock." As an artist, she was starting to see social games she did not want to play but was encouraged to advance her career, she writes.

She watches Lee's "Bamboozled" at least once a year. "It grounds me, connects me to the past, but also informs how I look at the current situation of artists in the world," she writes. The 2000 satirical film tells the story of a modern televised minstrel show featuring black actors donning blackface make-up and the violent consequences.

She sees the story of comedian Dave Chappelle as an example of someone who felt like he was being exploited but in 2005 was able to walk away from a reported \$50 million contract to continue his No. 1 show on Comedy Central.

In the process of creating her newest work, she started asking questions: "What did black artists have to tolerate in the past" What do they tolerate today" How much of this [stereotype] are we perpetuating?"

From Watkin's book, she learned, among other things, the origins of "The Dozens," a verbal competition in which two people hurl insults at each other. This term originates from slave auctions where slaves considered defective in some way, including disfigurement as a result of punishment, were grouped in lots of 12.

But Brown doesn't intend for her work to be a history lesson or just about black issues. "I always tell people if by the end of the piece, if you are looking at me and the dancers as human beings, if you see the human struggle, I've done my job. It's a human story. We all have to smile when we don't want to," she said.

"... We all wear a mask. We are all perceived differently than how we really are. We are all put in a box," she writes.

Her company is all about engaging people in dialogue to address issues and emotions. For this reason, there will be after-performance discussions at every ADF show, she added.

"I believe this is how we all move closer to understanding each other and the world," she writes.

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