

Camille A. Brown and Dancers at ADF

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"Grins and Lies": Camille A. Brown and Dancers at ADF

In the American "conversation" about race, the idea of tolerance is often invoked to encourage groups to accept those who are different from them, or at least put up with them. Camille A. Brown's "Mr. TOL E. RANcE," performing at the Reynolds Industries Theater July 9-11, fractures and skews this notion of tolerance through pointed, ironic, and earnest critique. Drawing on the legacy of blackface minstrelsy in America, "Mr. TOL E. RANcE" examines the images of black performers of the recent past ("Amos and Andy", "The Jeffersons") and contemporary media (rappers, reality TV shows). What archetypal figures--caricatures, stereotypes--have been perpetuated for black entertainers-- the Vixen, the Gangster, the Clown, the Mammy--and why are we still tolerating these roles?

The dance is a complex mix of images, associations, and references, all emotionally and culturally charged. In addition to the live performers (intentionally termed "entertainers" in the program)--7 dancers including Brown, and pianist Scott Patterson--the dance incorporates images, video and animation on a screen at the back of the stage. The video plays a functional and thematic role, providing supporting images for the dancing and clear transitions between sections. As the dance opens, credits roll across the screen, ushered in by cartoonish figures--paper cut-out faces of famous black entertainers attached to animated bodies. This element, funny and clever, sets the stage for the dancing characters--themselves clearly cartoonish.

boyant energy, dancers in shoes modified to resemble tap shoes, with a soft "toe" and wooden heel, suspenders, and caps. Their tapping is wild, as they compete for the most outrageous moves, displaying their skill and personality. Set against black and white video of black vaudeville performers, the choreography honors the talent of these classic entertainers, even as it begins to draw out the clownish, slapstick aspects of their performance style. Contemporary hip hop postures begin to make their way into the loose-limbed, angular, stomping tap dance.

The performers draw in more and more references to black characters in TV and films, parodying familiar gestures and facial expressions, riffing on catch phrases--Jimmy Walker's ("Good Times") "Dy-no-mite!", Gary Coleman's "What'chu talkin' 'bout, Willis?"--and even rapping a full-cast rendition of the "Fresh Prince of Bel-Air" theme song. The work is not purely a history lesson, but opens up current stereotypical images of African-Americans in the media, taking on a harder, sharper edge. The movement becomes

hypersexualized and the dialogue explicit and vulgar. The performers spar, getting up in each other's faces, gyrating their pelvises, thrusting out their chests; there's the gangsta' crotch-grab and the outstretched arm, hand cocked as if holding a gun. These poses, these "masks", begin to seem every bit as exaggerated and buffoonish as their historical precursors.

The pace continues feverishly, through a mock awards show--the awards for black stupidity in film--and a full-out minstrel dance number, complete with white gloves and wide, frozen smiles. The dancing is fierce, the performers' stamina impressive, and their performance risky and often funny. It is uncomfortable (and intentionally so) to find ourselves laughing, knowing the ugliness that underlies the humor.

The dance ends with two solos. The first, danced by Waldean Nelson, is actually a breaking-down, poignant duet with himself on the video that plays behind him. His movement is abstracted, tinged with references to the more dynamic gestures and movements from the rest of the dance, the dual image of Nelson a foreshadowing of a more intense personality split that begins to happen. Nelson finds himself caught in a loop, flicking from one stereotypical character to another in rapid succession, as if flipping channels on the television. He, and the rest of the dancers, who make a monstrous slow-motion entrance from behind the video screen, get caught in this mania, and eventually short circuit, collapsing on the floor. Ms. Brown has the final solo, a vulnerable, searching dance set to a rendition of "What a Wonderful World," in which she struggles to break out of the familiar patterns she keeps falling back into. Finally, she takes off her white gloves, looking not particularly victorious, but a little anxious--who are we without our masks? Even a familiar lie can be reassuring.

This is not a dance to watch passively. Ms. Brown encourages the audience to question their own participation in perpetuating these stereotypes, and starts an ongoing conversation through an artist-audience dialogue as the end of the performance. Listening to the dancers discuss their experience of creating and performing "Mr. TOL E. RANcE" makes it all the more clear that these roles ARE masks, not reality. Who is supplying these masks, and funding them? What masks do the rest of us wear? And why do we still accept them?

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