

REVIEW: ‘Mr. TOL E. RAncE’ brings it all

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BY Susan Broili; Special to The Herald-Sun

DURHAM — The American Dance Festival’s fifth week, July 9-July 13, features the festival debut of Camille A. Brown & Dancers...

“Mr. TOL E. RAncE”

July 9-11, Reynolds Industries Theater

Camille A. Brown & Dancers performance of “Mr. TOL E. RAncE” had it all – heart, mind, soul, passion, full-out dancing and introspective solos that bridged the history of minstrel days with present struggles. Add high production values and a gifted cast, who gave it their all, and you have one heck of a show. Pianist Scott Carpenter plays live onstage and delivers a soulful, virtuoso performance. This 50-minute work seems over way too soon.

Film footage from the early minstrel days and posters from TV sit-coms featuring black actors, help set the tone and put this dance theater work in an historical context.

At times, performers generate a whirlwind of non-stop movement that communicates a frenetic compulsion as though on automatic. It also speaks to persistence and courage just to get the job done. At times, dancers wear white gloves to denote servitude to a form of “entertainment” that sometimes required a black performer to use black face paint. And, Brown and her company also sport those minstrels’ big, toothy smiles that do not radiate joy. Instead, fixed in place so wide it seems their faces could crack, these “trauma” smiles signify the pain behind the mask these performers wore.

At times, shadowy images of dancers on the backdrop evoke generations of performers having to step to someone else’s tune.

Solos by Brown and Waldean Nelson really bring home the devastating effect of having to shuffle to someone else’s bidding – whether during minstrel days or in the present dance world – or, at times, in most work situations. Nelson slaps his own face and seems beside himself in frustration and agony. Brown, wearing white gloves, makes big pumping motions from her chest to emphasize heavy heartbeat sounds as the song, “What a Beautiful World,” plays. These solos make it clear that it’s far from a beautiful world for these minstrel performers and anyone in a similar position.

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