

Review: Camille A. Brown & Dancers @ the Egg, 10/25/13

Saturday, October 26, 2013 by: [Tresca Weinstein](#)



Camille A. Brown & Dancers in MR TOL E. RANcE (Courtesy The Egg)

by Tresca Weinstein

ALBANY – Camille A. Brown’s ambitious dance theater work, “Mr. TOL E. RANcE,” drives home the weariness, frustration and pain of wearing a mask and tap dancing for the Man, decade after decade.

Told through video, images, song, text and the virtuosic movement of Brown and her five dancers, the piece is a treatise on the prejudice and stereotyping that African-American entertainers have endured, from minstrelsy and vaudeville to “Amos and Andy,” “The Jeffersons” and beyond. Brown’s source material included Spike Lee’s film “Bamboozled,” a satire about a modern minstrel show; Dave Chappelle’s metaphor of “dancing vs. shuffling” (making art vs. playing for laughs); and W.E.B. DuBois’ concept of “double consciousness”—the challenge of reconciling an African heritage with an American cultural upbringing.

Brown distills these multi-layered concepts and conflicts in choreography that is both seamlessly executed and deeply disturbing. Early in the work, the dancers, dressed in newsboy caps and saddle shoes, bring to mind marionettes whose strings are being jerked this way and that, sending them into clownish postures. They hop and step with pasted-on grins stretched across their faces.

One stomach-turning scene features a fictional awards show, presented by “the League of Repression and Fabrication,” acknowledging the bigoted clichés that African-American actors have been corralled into: the “Jezebel,” the tough guy (Brown uses a different, unprintable word), etc.

In another section, the dancers wear white gloves like those traditionally worn by blackface minstrels; glowing eerily in the dim light, the gloves seem almost to weigh down the dancers’ bodies as their shadows loom above them.

Brown dances the final solo to the accompaniment of “What a Wonderful World,” played live on stage by pianist Scott Patterson. (She chose the song in part because Louis Armstrong was criticized for recording such optimistic lyrics during the racially and politically charged 1960s, Brown said in a Q&A after the performance.) At first, she seems locked into the programmed, artificial gestures that we’ve seen throughout the piece, but then she stops herself, throws down her white gloves and begins to move in a new way. Finally, it seems, she is free to dance without the mask.

The program also included Brown’s “New Second Line,” from 2006, full of exuberant energy expressed in intricate footwork and loose, easy movement influenced by African dance. In contrast to “Mr. TOL E. RAnCE,” this short work feels like a celebration of the beauty and joy that survives oppression and defies categorization.

Tresca Weinstein is a frequent contributor to the Times Union.

CAMILLE A. BROWN & DANCERS

Where: The Egg, Empire State Plaza, Albany

When: 8 p.m. Friday

Length: An hour and 45 minutes, one intermission

Program: “New Second Line” and “Mr. TOL E. RAnCE”

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