



BWW **Reviews:** James Brown - Get on the Good Foot: A Dance Celebration

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by **Jermaine Rowe**

"Give the people what they came for" **James Brown** said in reference to his shows, and it seemed that the Apollo set out to do just that on the opening night of "**James Brown - Get on the Good Foot**" dance celebration concert in Harlem. It was fitting that the concert opened with a welcome speech by Rev. **Al Sharpton**, given the historic relationship between the **Apollo Theatre** and **James Brown**. Sharpton reflected on his connection with Brown on the very stage that we were about to experience the evening's performance.

The hour-long performance that followed showcased a variety of choreographers exploring the music of **James Brown**, danced by the Philadelphia **Dance Company** (PHILADANCO) and three (3) non-affiliated featured soloists.

The show opened with a dynamic and exciting sound play with music and voice-overs of **Brown** that was effective in setting up the scene for the legacy that was being honored. The fault of the program, however, was that you ended up watching the first three choreographers before you realized that the show was not going to have breaks between each work. This made the flow seem unorganized and unclear. Despite this, "Too Funky," choreographed by **Otis Sallid**, saw a vibrant, young, and talented group of dancers let loose to the funky sounds of a well-arranged set of songs. The team did such a great job of setting up the excitement of the evening that I found myself a little disappointed by the lack of structure in Sallid's work. It often seemed too improvised; as these highly technical dancers often weren't best at the funky freestyle feel. There were moments when the stage was empty as we listened to voice-over and music clip to little effect. This approach to choreography was repeated in "Live," where Sallid used dancers in very predictable ways of mimicking **James Brown**'s performances, rather than challenging a new way of movement exploration.

The evening also featured tap dancer **Derick K. Grant**. Sallid, along with Grant, created a brilliant rhythmic tap solo to Brown's "Superbad, Superslick". Grant displayed brilliant quickness in his

footwork and effectively channeled **Brown's** footwork nuances and merged it with great tapping skills. True to the Apollo's audience, they were very engaged in this performance. I only wished that they had put as much effort into his costume as he did into his dancing.

Choreographer Souleymane Badolo followed with "Benon" which showcased Philadanco's dancers exploring Brown's signature style in a series of solos and group work. I commend the versatility of the dancers in this piece, as they were fully committed to this exploration. I didn't always connect to Badolo's artistic vision of this section. Again, it seemed often like random improv, and there was little effort of giving these moves an updated and modern interpretation. **Michael Wimberly** did a great job in the music arrangement in this section, so much so that you enjoyed the section because the music was well done.

Thang Dao, in his work "Bewildered," featured strong partnering work and contemporary interpretations of **Brown's** music. This is the strength of Philadanco. The work demanded strong **modern** dance technique with exciting moments of dexterity. I am always impressed by the strength and agility of the male dancers of this company, and the female dancers were not outdone in their control and precision. This often made the dancers **dance** competitively rather than complimentary.

Dancer and choreographer Aakash Odedra in his work "Ecstasy" stopped me in my tracks and pulled me into his performance. With additional musical arrangement by Ronobir Labiri, Odedra mixed traditional Indian percussion **music** to Brown's "Get on the Good Foot" and "Make It Funky". His technical play with the Indian **classical** technique, Kathak, with Brown's signature nuances and footwork was the sort of artistry I expected in the show. Odedra represented the global influence of **Brown's** work in his mesmerizing solo. With brilliant subtleties, he brought the Apollo's receptive audience into his trancelike turns and knee work. He raised the bar for the show and was a fitting tribute to the legacy of **Brown's** work.

Abdel Salaam was a fitting choreographer to follow with his work "There was...There is a time". In his exploration of the tensions in the black power movement, Salaam was clever in his juxtaposition of African technical movement and **classical** petite allegro vocabulary. The work danced by Philadanco saw a clear direction in the movement development and Brown's influential activism. This was definitely one of the strongest works of the entire evening.

This clever development was mirrored by dancer Ephrat Asherie in "It's a man's world".

Choreographed by Jennifer Weber, **Otis Sallid** and Asherie, the work explored the breakdancing technique to Brown's music. Asherie displayed technical prowess in a series of windmills and body patterns with great musicality, while showing an artistic development of **Brown's** movement influences. This Asherie also did in her later work "Out of Sight", adding "vogueing" to the movement vocabulary with thrilling effect.

Camille Brown explored great characterization in her work "1973". Her work saw a pantomime play with dancers seemingly at a party, where their personalities were showcased to great effect. Philadanco dancer Tommie-Waheed Evans did a great job in conveying and maintaining a strong character in the work, much to the amusement of the Apollo audience. Since the work relied so much on the movement-characterization exploration, it wasn't always clear what was being said.

Ronald K. Brown has a genius formula of vocabulary and phrasing. In his work "Think" you couldn't help but feel you were privy to some internal dialogue that's somehow connecting the dancers. Philadanco did a great job in capturing this subtlety, even after dancing the entire performance. The company, however, should be mindful of not always attacking every movement, especially in a work that requires a different approach like Brown's. The work featured some of the stronger female dancers in the company, who danced with much clarity to purity of movement.

"Get Up Offa That Thing," choreographed by Sallid, ended the program. In this freestyle and freeform work, dancers flashback to movements already explored throughout the entire program. This was not always effective, as the audience was presumed to be joining the dancers by getting up and participating, and even at the invitation of some of the dancers this was unsuccessful. This could have been because the work felt so block party random, as well as the awareness that there were no pauses or breaks in the entire program.

The Apollo's presentation of "James Brown Get on the Good Foot" was indeed a cause for celebration. The entire creative team was successful at showcasing a variety of performances and maintaining a high level of dynamism that is signature to the legacy of James Brown. The entire show, however, was not always clear. These choreographers individually had interesting ways of interpreting Brown's influence on dance but placed uninterrupted did not always present a seamless flow.

Photo: Shahar Azran

1.Derick K. Grant performs during Opening Night of James Brown: Get on the Good Foot, A Celebration in Dance.

2The Philadelphia Dance Company (PHILADANCO) dancers perform during Opening Night of James Brown: Get on the Good Foot, A Celebration in Dance.