

Camille A. Brown's Mr. TOL E. RANcE

IN WHAT KAT SAW / BY KAT RICHTER / ON APRIL 25, 2014 AT 11:03 AM /

by Kat Richter for The Dance Journal

Judging by the title, “Mr. TOL E. RANcE,” and the lengthy program notes, which cite Mel Watkins, Spike Lee and Dave Chappelle as inspiration, it would be easy for some to dismiss Camille A. Brown as just another “angry Black woman” taking a choreographic stab at racial injustice. But Brown, a two-time Princess Grace Award recipient who brought her company to the Painted Bride Arts Center earlier this month, isn’t angry. At least she isn’t just angry. She is curious, eloquent, well-read and ridiculously talented. In fact, I’m still trying to figure out if I’d rather dance with her—we’ll get to her brilliant manipulation of the so-called “vernacular” dance forms later— or grab a coffee and pick her brain.

A former Guest Artist with Rennie Harris’ Puremovement, Brown is the sort of dancer who quotes Langston Hugh’s and defies the oft-held belief that people—dancers in particular—must be smart or talented. She is both, and “Mr. TOL E. RANcE,” is a triumph, aesthetically, musically and intellectually.

The first act, entitled “Change the Joke, Slip the Yoke” begins with a short film in which images of well-known African American artists, ranging from Gregory Hines to Whoopi Goldberg, “prepare” the Bride’s stage for action. Hines pushes a cart to a finger-snapping, toe-tapping Ragtime beat as the opening credits role and the dancers, labeled “Entertainers” in this case, wear high waisted pants, jackets and suspenders.

Their costumes, designed by Carolyn Meckha Cherry, harken back to the Harlem Renaissance but in a vague and understated way that’s part modern dance, part Vaudeville (or its African American counterpart, T.O.B.A., the Theater Owners Booking Association, more popularly known as “Tough On Black Asses.”) The dancers wear hard-soled shoes and they stomp, feet heavy, marching, lunging, arms slicing. It’s tap-esque but not quite; jazz hands abound but they’re politically motivated jazz hands if such a thing is possible (which it is under Brown’s direction).

Pianist Scott Patterson provides a fierce counterpoint, frolicking at times and poignantly lyrical at others. The dancers burst into a time step; earlier motifs are repeated, deepened and lengthened; syncopated footwork builds into layered polyrhythms and the audience is whisked from the white-gloved world of the blackface minstrel show to hip hop and the Fresh Prince of Bel Air. Pop culture references abound: “I don’t know nothing ‘bout birthing no babies” becomes a sultry, sexual refrain in hands of the elegant Mora-Amina Parker and the audience breaks into hysterics when Brown exclaims, “The twerk? Ain’t nobody got time for that!”

Act II, “What It Is,” pushes the envelope with a satirical take on a fictitious awards show entitled, “Who You Be, Nigga... That’s Me!” The dancers become gangsters, thugs and reality TV stars. A solo performed by Timothy Edwards takes this theme to the next level; he knits his hands, wrings them out, grabs his crotch and humps the floor, trading one “mask” for another. Like Brown and Parker, he dances with his entire body, fingertips to eyeballs. The work reaches its Bamboozled-like crescendo as the ensemble returns to the stage, mechanized and doll like, repeating the same frantic movements again and again until Brown emerges as they calm eye at the center of the storm.

Seeing as it’s only April, it wouldn’t be fair to say that “Mr. TOL E. RANcE” was the best show to come to Philly this year, but it’s definitely in the running. And Brown herself just might become the next Katherine Dunham, bridging the gap between art and academia, between American and African American worlds, between politics and artistic expression, exposing the good, the bad and ugly with humor, gusto and grace.