

DANCE REVIEW

Many Answers, Still More Questions

A Premiere for Ronald K. Brown's Evidence at the Joyce

By SIOBHAN BURKE JUNE 4, 2014



Evidence Shayla Caldwell of Ronald K. Brown's company, performing "The Subtle One," choreographed by Mr. Brown, at the Joyce Theater. Credit Ruby Washington/The New York Times

It can be tempting to say — and some critics [have](#) — that Ronald K. Brown creates the same piece over and over. There are undoubtedly common elements, both structural and thematic, running through his work: a fluent, hybrid language of African-based and modern dance; a preference for patchwork musical playlists; an allegiance to the realm of the spiritual. Each of his dances, in one way or another, is an expression of praise.

On Tuesday at the Joyce Theater, where Mr. Brown's company, [Evidence](#), presented the first of its season's two programs, I kept expecting the word "formulaic" to apply, as similar moves and moods cropped up in one work after the next. Yet somehow that assessment never felt right. To arrive at a formula is to stop asking questions, and Mr. Brown, no matter how often he returns to the same idea, seems always to be searching, as do the dancers he brings along for each soulful ride.

The title of "The Subtle One," a world premiere, derives from one of the many names for Allah, whom Mr. Brown has [described](#) as "the one who whispers things into existence." There is indeed a whispering, almost placid quality to this work, which, like much of Mr. Brown's oeuvre, strikes a reverent but not pious chord. To Jason Moran's ambling jazz piano, the eight dancers, all absorbed at first in their own worlds, coalesce into something more like a tribe. Their gauzy white costumes, by Keiko Voltaire, add extra breath to their movement, as they coast through balletic attitude turns or pummel the air with loose fists thrown down over stamping feet. Crossing the stage in a side-stepping procession, eyes fixed straight ahead on the audience, they extend and retract palms, an offering that carries them out of sight.

The company looks remarkably refined this season, and so did its guests, David Gaulein-Stef and Asha Thomas, who delivered the New York premiere of "Ghazals," a collaboration between Ms. Thomas and Mr. Brown. "Lately I can't seem to find myself," Ms. Thomas declares in a spoken-word confession at the front of the stage, as Mr. Gaulein-Stef comes into view behind her. Eventually they find each other, their violent side-by-side shuddering taking a playful turn with the help of two billowing white sheets. But the work as a whole, like a series of sketches, seems not yet to have found itself.

Two older pieces for the full ensemble — "Ife/My Heart" (2001) and "Torch" (2013) — show Mr. Brown at his most euphoric, weaving intricate tapestries of earthbound, undulatory motion. While "Ife," with its partly gospel soundtrack, invokes churchgoing, "Torch" seems to unfold on the dance floor, though, for Mr. Brown, the club and the church (or synagogue or mosque) are maybe not so different, dance and prayer being one and the same.

"Yes the night is young, but it won't last forever," Busiswa Gqulu chants during "Torch," on a thumping [track](#) by DJ Zinhle. In their rising intensity, the dancers heed her warning.

Accessed on June 5, 2014 at 12:49pm from <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/05/arts/dance/a-premiere-for-ronald-k-browns-evidence-at-the-joyce.html>