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Ronald K. Brown, Joyce Theatre, New York – review

By Apollinaire Scherr

The choreographer's own troupe made clear that he has cultivated not just a style but a language



From left: Randall Riley, Coral Dolphin, Brionna Edmundson. Photo: Ayodele Casel

Last month, Cuba's Malpaso troupe featured a Ronald K. Brown premiere for its North American debut, and next week the Ailey company includes his breakout, 1999 hit *Grace* in its Lincoln Center season. The Brooklyn native is so ubiquitous that it is easy to forget he is also sui generis and brilliant. But his own small troupe, Evidence, will remind you.

On another company's slate, his range can seem narrow. Always the diaspora mix of steps: from West Africa they travel to the Caribbean, the gospel choir, the disco. Always the daze of pleasure as the movement washes over you like a wave thick with sand. As for theme, ever the spiritual path.

The more concentrated the Brown dose, however, the more clear it becomes that he contains multitudes. Like last century's moderns and scant postmodern contemporaries, the 47-year-old choreographer has cultivated not just a style but also a language, sufficient to accommodate a wide dynamic range and thus individual idiosyncrasy. In the first of two distinct programmes, Coral Dolphin lent her steps an unpredictable edge; Shayla Caldwell emanated warmth; Clarice Young was at once gangly and womanly in her grace.

The dances proved equally distinct. The layered, dramatic *Ife/My Heart*, made for Ailey in 2005, takes up the collision of history and religion in Afro-Cuban culture. The dancing was full of strife and as propulsive as its drum-heavy score. The arms flew out from the chest in a hot temper.

By contrast, the premiere, *The Subtle One*, set to the spacious jazz of MacArthur grantee Jason Moran, seemed to transpire on cloud nine. The edgeless steps did not so much end as attenuate. Dancers were arrayed neither anarchically, as in the Brown dance-party piece *Torch*, nor in communal or ritual unison, as in *Ife*, but in an unforced harmony of asymmetric clusters. *The Subtle One* indeed.

Typical of Brown, the pieces abounded in strange allusions to prayer: head bobs that resembled dunking for apples in an intriguing collaboration with former Ailey wonder Aisha Thomas or, in *The Subtle One*, palms turned upwards as if feeling for rain. But Brown is not proselytising. He is saying there are as many ways to pray as there are to live or dance.



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