

# Dancing Through the Pain and Joy of Comedy

Choreographer Camille A. Brown tackles racial stereotypes while celebrating African-American humor in a new dance work.

**BY: VALERIE GLADSTONE**

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Three days before choreographer Camille A. Brown presents her electrifying dance-theater work *Mr. TOL E. RAnCE* at the **Lincoln Center Out of Doors Festival** in New York City, she and seven members of her company, plus composer-pianist Scott Patterson, gather around a laptop computer in a studio at the City Center before a rehearsal.

Amid hearty laughter, they study a video of a previous performance, looking for places where they could improve. They are intent on getting everything right. The 34-year-old Brown—a former member of Ronald K. Brown's Evidence, a Dance Company and Rennie Harris Puremovement—started her troupe, Camille A. Brown & Dancers, in 2010 and has been challenging audiences ever since with humanistic works that often examine controversial aspects of our society.

Inspired by Mel Watkins' book *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy From Slavery to Chris Rock*, Spike Lee's film *Bamboozled* and Dave Chappelle's "**dancing vs. shuffling**" analogy, Brown takes on racial stereotypes and celebrates African-American humor in this new piece, citing TV shows *Amos 'n' Andy*, *Diff'rent Strokes* and *The Jeffersons* and some of today's entertainers. Employing movement derived from contemporary dance, hip-hop, African dance, ballet and tap, she evokes a wide range of emotion, from anger and sadness to genuine joy.

"Like [Watkins'] book, I want to make clear the pain and triumph involved in the years of stereotyping in entertainment," Brown says. "We all wear masks to some degree, but those entertainers had to project multiple personalities."

Not satisfied with simply presenting the work, she holds a question-and-answer session after every performance to hear the audiences' reactions. Since the show's premiere in Pittsburgh in 2012, she and her dancers have fielded a variety of responses, ranging from greatly appreciative to borderline racist. "I'm hoping audiences see it as a universal story, an American story, not just a black story," she says. "I want to move the conversation and inspire people to talk to and listen to one another."

Brown also knows how to move people physically as she joins her dancers for the rehearsal, moving the piano to the center of the studio, where Patterson will play his rambunctious and nuanced score for the duration of the piece. His first work for dance, it evokes everything from the 1940s big band era to '80s hip-hop. He sounds a note and the dancers all start to move, a few wildly, others in a more constricted manner, artificial smiles straining their faces. They convey desperation and pleasure, the twin emotions that so often pervaded minstrelsy.

To perform her dances takes not only enormous physical facility but also guts. Just the gamut of emotions in *Mr. TOL E. RAnCE* and the sensitivity of the subject matter demand a flexible and confident dancer. As it turns out, they are an especially warm and friendly group, who seem unfazed by the demands placed upon them.

"They're all willing to dive into character work," she says. "They're versatile and grounded; good people who love to laugh. They trust me and are behind me."

Dancer Marlena Wolfe likes that Brown often asks them to do research, for instance—in this case—to read Watkins' book. "She draws you into her world."

So far, sometimes, that dancer Timothy Edwards says, "You become really vulnerable. In this work, it's as if I had to put a mirror up to myself and examine what I do and what I tolerate. It's very powerful; it has affected my everyday life."

After the rehearsal, Brown and the dancers gathered around actor **Delroy Lindo**, who had become enthusiastic about her work after seeing it at 651 Arts, the Brooklyn, N.Y.-based organization dedicated to performing arts of the African Diaspora, where he is a board member. He had volunteered to give Brown notes and share some of his knowledge of performance with the group.

"I really don't have any notes," he begins. "It moves me to witness the depth and intensity of commitment all of you have to telling this story and the depth of your execution. It's very exciting. I am very touched by the piece."

Shaking his hand and saying goodbye, the dancers stream out into the night, while Brown readies herself for the next day, admitting that she never would have thought she could pull off such a controversial major work.

"My grandmother inspires me," she says, "her strength. It's for her."

*Valerie Gladstone writes about the arts for the New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times and many other publications. She is the co-author, with photographer Jose Ivey, of the children's book **A Young Dancer: The Life of an Ailey Student.***

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