

## Dance review: Dancers more than entertaining

BY JULINDA LEWIS Special correspondent | Posted: Sunday, September 7, 2014 10:30 pm

After a big buildup, including a well-attended panel discussion last Wednesday evening, Camille A. Brown & Dancers did not disappoint. The New York-based company opened the Virginia Commonwealth University dance season with a highly theatrical and very provocative work entitled “Mr. Tol E. Rance.”

First performed in 2012, but constantly evolving, the hour-long piece is not mere entertainment. The group of seven dynamic dancers, including award-winning Camille A. Brown, invited their audience into a frank and uncompromising exploration of African-American stereotypes, using movement, music and visual media.

Against a historic backdrop of African-American entertainers, including Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, the Nicholas Brothers, Amos ‘n’ Andy, Flip Wilson and Bert Williams, representing minstrelsy, vaudeville and the heyday of black sitcoms in the 1970’s and 1980’s, Brown and her company of versatile and skilled dancers quickly progressed from a languid, introspective solo to a flurry of tapping, stepping and intricate rhythms punctuated by a flat-foot stomp, reminiscent of the BS Chorus and Shim Sham Shimmy of bygone decades.

Dressed in trousers with suspenders, saddle shoes and caps, they alternately blended in with and contrasted with a stunning background of historic photos and animated images. Kudos to Isabela Dos Santos for creative animation that became part of Brown’s choreographic vision.

Brown drew inspiration from W.E.B. DuBois’ theory of the double consciousness, Mel Watkins’ book, “On The Real Side: From Slavery to Chris Rock,” Spike Lee’s movie, “Bamboozled,” and Dave Chappelle’s decision to walk away from a \$50 million contract in order to keep his own integrity.

The dual nature, the wearing of the mask, and the stress of code switching or flipping between one culture and another was beautifully exemplified when dancer Timothy Edwards performed a duet — with his own projected shadow.

Brown choreographed light, shadow and animation with the same level of intensity she gave to her dancers.

Pianist Scott Patterson also became a key player in the production.

Wilson did more than play the music, which ranged from ragtime to the theme songs of black sitcoms; he set the dancers’ pace and interacted with the dancers.

His instrument was integrated into the choreography, providing, at various times, a refuge, a hiding place and a passageway.

Use of the “n” word and blatant confrontation with African-American stereotypes — not just about dancing, but about social and economic status — gave “Mr. Tol E. Rance” an edginess and relevance, both of which came up in Saturday’s post-show dialogue with the cast and audience.

This dialogue, moderated by E. Gaynell Sherrod, chair of the VCU dance department, occurs wherever the piece is produced and lends to its ongoing development.

Overall, Camille A. Brown and dancers proved to be a dynamic company of versatile contemporary dancers who enhanced the Richmond dance community. A return visit is in order.

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