

Camille A Brown review: An exuberant attack on history of bigotry



Camille A Brown and her dancers made their European debut at the Mac last night

BY JOANNE SAVAGE – 25 OCTOBER 2014

This sassy dance show is a blaze of buoyant choreography and tap-influenced frantic footwork, leaps and freestyle shuffling, the exuberance on display a joy to behold.

But this is more than light entertainment and New Yorker Camille A Brown and her troupe engage with political themes of African American oppression, racial stereotypes and the ways in which humour can be used as a mechanism to cope with the horrors of history and contemporary bigotry.

Dressed in grey trousers, caps and braces, then also minstrel-like white gloves, these incredibly inventive and energetic dancers journey back through myriad representations of black performers in pop culture, moving from minstrel shows to vaudeville, the 1940s to sitcoms of the '70s and '80s, *The Crosby Show*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and a lot of satirical booty-shaking and twerking now predominating in music videos.

The piece also draws inspiration from Mel Watkins book, *On The Real Side: A History of African-American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock and Spike Lee's 2000 film Bamboozled*, a satire of minstrelsy. Projections display vintage images of this cultural history while piano music by Scott Patterson projects the shifts in mood.

The theme is tolerance and how black performers have been forced to endure, struggling to find their place in entertainment so as to shake off the oppression of the past, the slave trade, the minstrel shows and the ridicule that was tolerated in US popular culture. There are moments when we are made to feel uncomfortable, confronted with the vicious reality of the derision of black performers and the predominance of racist attitudes.

The subtext to the intricate movement, physical hi-jinx and arch parody of minstrel-like roles is that the marginalisation of African American performers is still tolerated in more subtle forms today; we paper over injustice with humour and pretence while black people tolerate insidious stereotyping and prejudice.

This is an anarchic, incisive and witty production full of gymnastic moves and wry humour that uncovers the politics of black artistry in a world still ruled by a predominantly white elite.

It brings to mind Langston Hughes' 1925 poem 'Minstrel Man' which draws attention to the masochism of this form of performance, asking: "Because my mouth/ Is wide with laughter... You do not think/ I suffer after/ I have held my pain/ So long?" Camille and dancers examine this question fearlessly.