



Review: Mr Tol E. RAnce

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A powerful and thought-provoking dance piece

After enjoying Victor so thoroughly at last year's festival, I jumped at the chance to see another dance show and Mr Tolerance certainly did not disappoint.

Billed as an “interpretation of how much black performers have had to tolerate in the history of performance”, the show was full of energy and wit, combining choreography, animation and beautiful live music. But this was a theatre experience with a difference: included in the performance was a ‘Dialogue’ – a Q&A session with the choreographer



and performers immediately after the show, both of which were interesting and provocative.

All of the dancers involved are incredibly talented performers, and the high energy choreography showcased their talents very well; from a purely dance point of view, the piece was beautiful. However, I found it made very uncomfortable viewing a lot of the time. The stereotype of the minstrel featured heavily in the routines and the frantic and exaggerated movements (to the point where they were bordering on the grotesque) were not always easy to watch; the atmosphere in the theatre felt very charged during those parts of the performance. Not all of the projected emotions were negative, however. Other black stereotypes in the (American) entertainment industry, including TV shows I remember fondly from childhood, were celebrated. Images from *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, *Different Strokes*, *The Cosby Show*, among others I didn't recognise, were instantly recognised by most of the audience. The show also touched on stereotypes in popular music, hip hop and R&B. There was a surprising number of moments that were played for laughs, given the serious nature of the main theme, and this often served to break the tension. The most poignant moment of the show came near the end as Camille A Brown, who also choreographed the show, performed a solo routine that seemed to



express her difficulty in finding her own identity; she tried on various stereotypes and found that none of them were a terribly good fit. Her confusion and bewilderment was beautifully expressed through her movement and facial expressions.



If I'm completely honest, I would have slipped out of the theatre before the dialogue started if my seat had been close to one of the exits. I'm very glad that I wasn't able to do that, as it developed into a really interesting and honest discussion of prejudice and racism in both America and Northern Ireland. It was surprising to hear that the performers

found the audience laughter during some parts of the show quite difficult, and that it spurred them on to be even more exaggerated and grotesque in their movements during those times. Camille took time to explain that her aim was, indeed, to provoke laughter from the audience,



but that there was no denying that it was in some ways hard to deal with that laughter when it came. It is always good to have one's prejudices challenged. Growing up in rural Ireland, I did not meet a black person until I went to university at 18. With no frame of reference, other than the TV shows I grew up watching, I accepted those stereotypes as a true reflection of African Americans without really questioning them. This show challenged me to look at those stereotypes with a more critical eye.

Overall, a really worthwhile theatre experience and one I would heartily recommend.

Edelle McMahon, Ulster Bank Arts Ambassador

Images Aurora Photographic Agency