

Camille A. Brown innovates

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Camille A. Brown & Dance Troupe delivered an innovative multimedia performance last Tuesday. Photo courtesy of Ashley Cart

On Nov. 4, Camille A. Brown & Dance Troupe performed at the '62 Center for a one-night engagement – a multimedia dance performance that explores the complexities of the black female identity in America. Through an exploration of the history of black performers in media, she seeks out its residual effects on her as a choreographer and as a black woman.



Camille Brown's performance expanded the constraints of dance in a performance that held the attention of her audience through various mediums. Brown organized her performance into three parts: Mr. TOL. E. RANcE, Black Girl and her most recent work, The New Second Line. The music extended beyond a form of background noise, becoming fully integrated into the pieces, both musically and spatially, with pianist Scott Patterson playing on stage among the dancers. In African-American history, along with African traditions, dance has been linked with music and the musicians and dancers continually feed off of each other. Brown's placement of music on the stage amongst the dancers attests to that traditional overlap of sound and dance.

During Mr. TOL. E. RANcE, a series of black sitcoms was projected onto the background. The dancers performed traditional black stereotypes, like the tap dancer from vaudeville shows, the Mammy character and the black servant. The projections then morphed into shows on TV from the 1950s onward, such as *Amos N' Andy*, *Different Strokes*, *Good Times* and *Fat Albert*. While the different shows were being projected, the dancers mimicked racialized tropes of black people. There was a loud chorus of yelling as dancers showed off their moves. At one point, they comically began to sing the theme song of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* while doing the Carleton. Mr. TOL. E. RANcE had a lot going on onstage, which could easily distract and overwhelm the audience. However, Act 2, Black Girl, commenced with a minimal setting of two bright lights on two mini- platforms, ameliorating the effect of its chaotic predecessor.

The darkness of Black Girl was heart-wrenching, lonely and quiet. Although a soft bass guitar and piano played for the majority of the act, there were moments of silence in which the sound of tap dancing actually became the music. The dancers had two small platforms that accentuated the sounds of their tap dancing. The use of the stage was limited, as was the lighting. For the first time during the work, it was clear where Brown wanted her audience to focus.

By comparing the Mammy character to recent black sitcoms, Camille Brown exposed the influence that racial misconceptions have on our society to this day. Her self-discovery as an independent artist in Black Girl and her exploration of the resonance of African-American folklores in African-American lives in The New Second Line is a form of acknowledgement of the power of black individuals. She pays homage to those who played offensively stereotypical roles in order to make it in the media industry. Although Brown is primarily a dancer with a troupe, she also tells the story of black women through multiple media.

After the performance, the dancers quickly ran back onstage and sat for a talkback with the audience, moderated by Sandra L. Burton, dance professor at the College. Brown specifically sought constructive criticism of her last piece, The New Second Line, as the work is still being completed. Although most audience members praised her work, one individual claimed that she ignored the black man's voice in her work, although black men and women face many of the same societal challenges. Pianist Patterson responded that the black man's voice does not physically have to be present for his voice to be there. Patterson said that throughout the piece, he could find his place, although the work was not specifically made about his struggle. Brown also responded, saying that it is not wrong to be specific about one's work and focus on black women. She is not denouncing the experience of black men simply by speaking about black women. When she asked the gentleman whether white men and white women have the same struggles given that he claimed that black men and women do, and he responded with a hesitant yes, it was clear that there was not enough time within the last minute to fully address the issue. This last dialogue epitomizes the reason why we need works like Brown's. We do not live in a post-racial, post-gender society, and the scars left by our history continue to shape our thoughts.