

# The Boston Globe

DANCE REVIEW

## Ronald K. Brown explores whole of human experience



AYODELE CASEL Ronald K. Brown's EVIDENCE, A Dance Company performed at the ICA over the weekend.

**By Karen Campbell** GLOBE CORRESPONDENT, NOVEMBER 25, 2014

Choreographer Ronald K. Brown takes his audiences to church — but it isn't stuffy or preachy or hobbled by any particular kind of dogma. It's more a sense of grounded spirituality and abiding humanism that runs through his dances like a deep vein, including the three Boston premieres that he and the eight exquisite dancers of his EVIDENCE, A Dance Company presented over the weekend at the Institute of Contemporary Art in their fourth World Music/CRASHarts engagement. And it's not just penitence and praise they deliver, but also a palpable joy and exultation that flood right over the footlights.

Brown's work has little overt theatricality. In fact, one of the weakest aspects of his dances is contextual murkiness and a lack of narrative or choreographic development. Often, sections seem minimally connected except for the music and a stylistic sameness to the choreography. But as his company nears its 30th anniversary, that style is distinctive and unmistakable. It's also totally engaging, blending modern dance and Afro-Caribbean influences with a loose-limbed sensuality and rhythmic pop that has a powerful kinetic impact. I suspect by the end of Friday's program, many viewers during the standing ovation were not only clapping but also sashaying a bit.

Last season's "Torch" was the undisputed hit of the evening and best displayed Brown's artistic leanings. It was also the one work featuring Brown himself, still a gorgeous mover and magnetic presence onstage. In the opening tableau, the ensemble, costumed in choir-like robes of green, lifted a white-clad Annique Roberts, reaching upward as if ascending to heaven. The work seems to be about letting go — physically, emotionally, spiritually. Dancers bend, heads down, weight sinking into the floor, and one moment midway resonates long after the work ends. As Roberts collapses from the waist, head thrown back, Brown moves in with support, a firm but gentle touch to the small of the back. Ever so subtly, Roberts seems to settle into Brown's open palm until finally, feeling safe to let go, she melts into his arms to be tenderly carried away.

But just as surely, that letting go brings a sense of release and uplift. Vigorous kicks and stomps slide into lyrical turns and airy balances. Outstretched arms pump like pistons or gently pulse like wings. Knees swivel, pelvises thrust, torsos ripple. The finale has a party feel, driven by a popping techno beat. While it doesn't quite fit with the ritual-like ceremony of the work's gospel-fueled beginnings, it has a rousing, irresistible pull that got the audience clapping to the beat.

The concert opened with excerpts from "One Shot: Rhapsody in Black & White." Inspired by Charles "Teenie" Harris's photographs of black life in Pittsburgh from 1936-75, some of which provided a visual backdrop, the dance explores the legacy of community. Shayla Caldwell, her costume recalling the white robe and vestment of the acolyte, opened the work with a long, beautifully calibrated solo suggesting a welcoming of the spirit. The ensemble in military drab contributed a twinge of defiance and regimentation, while the jazzy duet of Arcell Cabuag and Roberts brought in the energy of urban life.

"The Subtle One," which refers to the creator, is more abstractly reverent. Set to music by Jason Moran, it unfolds slowly, gracefully, full of lyrical swoops and arms that always seem to be reaching to the beyond.

*Karen Campbell can be reached at [karencampbell4@rcn.com](mailto:karencampbell4@rcn.com).*

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