



Review of Camille A. Brown & Dancers

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Review of Camille A. Brown and Dancers at the Flynn on Saturday, January 17.

Camille A. Brown and Dancers gave a beautiful and meaningful performance on Saturday night. We saw three different works: Act I of the award-winning *Mr. TOL E. RAnCE*; *Black Girl*, which is still in development; and *New Second Line*. To wrap up the evening, Camille A. Brown & Dancers, along with its musicians, came out on stage to respond to audience questions and comments about what we had just seen. Altogether, it made for an enjoyable and enlightening evening, where I sat in awe of the dancers' talents and their willingness to explore the intentions behind their works.



The first work, *Mr. TOL E. RAnCE*, was perhaps the best example of the company's strength and fortitude. Never have I seen dancers exude such palpable levels of energy while on stage. The dancers maintained an incredible level of intensity throughout the duration of the piece. Laughing, joking, and exclaiming on stage, they all just looked like they were having a lot of fun. In the background, a number of cultural references and nods to black television slid across the projection screen. I was definitely singing along when they burst out into the theme from *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. But otherwise, I was unfamiliar with most of the references, and was thus left with a sense of curiosity as I tried to make connections.

It seemed appropriate to me that there would be aspects of this particular work that I didn't fully understand, the obvious grounding in minstrelsy tradition being just one of those. This came up during the dialog at the end of the show, and I was grateful for the light that the dancers shed on this point. An audience member asked about how the dancers felt performing a work so embedded in minstrelsy, a theater tradition that began in the 1800s that continued to be popular throughout Reconstruction and the Jim Crow era. In the minstrelsy tradition, white and also often black actors would perform in black face, offering grossly exaggerated portrayals of black culture that lead to harmful and enduring stereotypes. An exhibit for the University of South Florida libraries, "The History of Minstrelsy," explains the tradition, saying, "If slavery was the commodification of black labor, minstrelsy, with its focus on presenting authentically black songs and dances, was the commodification of black culture."

In response to the audience question, one of the dancers paid homage to Bert Williams, arguably one of the most famous African American performers, and one of the actors who turned minstrelsy on its head and used it to bring a black political agenda to white stages. The dancers explained that, while there was

a painful aspect to this minstrelsy history, there was also a feeling of honoring those who took part in that tradition. The sum of these parts equaled a powerful mix of shame and pride in this piece that the dancers said was much more apparent in Act II, which we unfortunately didn't get to see. It was amazing to see into the densely packed layers of context and emotion that had been built into *Mr. TOL E. RAnCE*. It's no wonder that this work has won awards.

While I wish we had been able to see Act II of *Mr. TOL E. RAnCE*, in some ways, I'm glad we didn't. It made room for *Black Girl*, a new work still in development that has evolved even in the short time the company has been in Vermont. This was my favorite piece of the night. It spoke to the idea of Sisterhood and opposing forces of tearing down while building up that are inherent in these complex and important relationships. Percussive elements that were prevalent throughout the night were a keystone in this particular work. At the start, two dancers beat and scraped their feet in rhythmic patterns to accompany the bass player who had come out on stage. The minimal lighting and the casual clothes the dancers wore created a sense of intimacy. For me, it was as if these two women were rocking out in the sanctity of their bedrooms and we were voyeuristically witnessing them enjoying a private, intimate moment. These periods of intimacy seemed to speak to the struggle to be an individual while still feeling a part of the Sisterhood. Finding the balance between being you and pleasing others is something that I think many people can identify with, and was an overarching theme of this piece that I could really relate to.

It was exciting to hear that aspects of this work had "just been added yesterday" during the dialog portion. One of these was the "hair bit." At one point in the choreography, the dancers sat on the edge of the set and proceeded to do their hair. Each woman practiced a different technique on her hair, examining herself as if she were looking into a mirror. This resonated with many members of the audience, and with me as well. To me, all of us (regardless of credence) have had the experience of trying to tame what we see in the mirror so that it obeys our command. What I learned more about from the dialog portion at the end of the show was the unique relationship that the black community in particular has with hair. Many audience members empathized with the time, love, and attention that are required for appropriate care—"the beauty and the pain" of having black hair. I learned that black hair serves as yet another distinct source of both pride and shame. Black women and men work to embrace their natural hair in the face of an American society that doesn't accept it and treats it as an anomaly.

Pride and shame—feeling both of these at the same time about aspects of the black self and black heritage. While I realize I will never understand completely, I feel like after seeing Camille A. Brown & Dancers, I now have a better grasp of what W. E. B. Dubois meant by "double-consciousness," that sense of "twoness" felt by black Americans. To see it played out so elegantly on stage made it all the more meaningful and powerful.

I really could go on about Camille A. Brown & Dancers—the choreography, the intensity, the humor, and the incredible musicality all came together for a truly breath-taking performance. But, above all, I commend these dancers for making themselves vulnerable for the sake of enlightening their audiences. I couldn't help but think about the emotional energy required to have that same tough dialog at the end of every performance. As the goal of the company is to "foster cultural and educational dialogues among audiences and local communities while instilling a sense of curiosity and appreciation," I would say, mission accomplished.

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