



Review of Camille A. Brown and Dancers

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by **Erin Duffee**

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

Camille A Brown's show was a soul-stirring, three part collection of dances, examining black life in America. The show started with excerpts from *Mr. TOL E. RAnCE*, a soulful exploration of minstrelsy. Next up was *Black Girl: Linguistic Play*, a work in progress that depicts the complex nature of positive identity development for black females in urban environments. The finale *New Second Line* was a jubilant celebration of dance, drawing on the brass band parades of New Orleans. There is beauty and darkness to be found in all of Camille's compositions and it is the contrast between these two forces that makes for a richly complex and provocative theater experience. Her brilliant inclusion of live musicians on stage, Scott Patterson on the piano and Tracy Wormworth on the electric bass, made the performance even richer.

Although I loved all three of Camille's presentations, I felt most drawn to *Mr. TOL E. RAnCE*. Several years ago in my studies at the University of Vermont, I took a wonderful class with Professor Paul Besaw called Jazz in American Dance. The class focused on the influence of African-derived dance forms on American dance, beginning with early slave traditions, and moving through minstrelsy, jookin', and beyond. The class challenged the confusing juxtaposition between mainstream America's appreciation for African art forms and our violent rejection of African people, the cultural beholders. Unfortunately that juxtaposition still exists in 2015, and some might argue that it is as much contrasting evidence as ever before. Without getting too political, I will just say that the appropriation of black cultural forms remains a very relevant subject to me.

As the name suggests, the main thrust of *Mr. TOL E. Rance* is just that – tolerance. The work examines the racism and exploitation that black performers have tolerated throughout the years, as well as the questionable social tolerance for modern day minstrelsy in pop culture. The backdrop of the piece was a larger than life video reel of black comedic performers, spanning the time frame of early minstrelsy, all the way up to modern day TV sitcoms such as *Good Times* and *The Jeffersons*. The dancers used a retrospective dance vocabulary that followed the trajectory of the video screening behind them. The mood was jubilant and energetic when the dancers were moving, but as soon as they slowed down, a dark cloud of sadness took over. This energetic shift is a poignant portrayal of the double consciousness that the black performer often lives by. Double consciousness is a phrase most famously used by black writer W.E.B DuBois to describe the feeling of being caught between one's self-conception as an American and a person of African descent. He claimed that double consciousness was a, "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."

As an extension of double consciousness, the black performer often takes on a performance persona referred to as the "mask of survival." This mask allows the performer to entertain the audience, often at the expense of their own dignity, while protecting the true self from the pain of degradation. But the mask becomes a burden, somehow even more draining than vulnerability, because it is a lie. Bert Williams, one of the most successful minstrel performers in American history was once described by fellow vaudevillian W.C. Fields as "the funniest man I ever saw – and the saddest man I ever knew." During the question and answer session that followed the performance, one of the dancers explained it like this: if you feel like your place is on the stage and you love to perform, you're going to find a way do it no matter what the sacrifices are. People give up so many things to follow their dreams and for black performers throughout history, the chance to engage with audiences and do what they love, dancing, music, comedy, etc. was a reward great enough to sacrifice personal happiness and health.