

Dance review: Ronald K. Brown/Evidence captures spirit of community in Dance Council show

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By Jane Vranish / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Dance is all about community, inspiring connections on so many levels — social, ritual, personal and physical among them. But it would be hard to find a company more connected than Ronald K. Brown/Evidence, presented by the Pittsburgh Dance Council at the Byham Theater on Saturday night.

It all began with a strong African conduit, so beautifully captured in the currents of movement. Born of the earth and nurtured by years of tribal traditions, it dissipated in such wonderful ways through dancers' bodies.

There was a sophisticated unity despite the rhythmic complexity. But when the dancers broke apart with independent phrases, they resembled the ebb and flow of an ocean. It was all performed with an undeniable sense of joy, one that has been burnished over the years to a warm glow. Is there any other company today that is so genuine onstage?

That could be seen in the main event, "On Earth Together," an homage to Stevie Wonder. There was a sense of his trademark musical generosity, of course, but the piece alluded to the darker side of life, how problems could still breed love and spirituality and, yes, that sense of community.

To achieve that, Mr. Brown expanded the company boundaries to work with 24 Pittsburghers — young and old, dancers and nondancers alike. When they first formed a procession in a diagonal across the stage, it was with an unbridled sense of excitement and commitment to Mr. Brown, who joined them. They would return several times, mostly in a social dance setting, but also to serve as a reminder to the professionals of their own early dance roots, making for one of the better community works that we've seen.

That sense of sharing also was present in two other works that preceded "Earth." Unfortunately, Mr. Brown's solo, a dance meditation "Through Time and Culture," was disrupted by audience members who mistook a pause between numbers as an intermission and took to the aisles, blocking the intimacy of the performance and lessening its impact.

But the opening piece, "Come Ye," revealed Mr. Brown's choreography at full strength. Bolstered by a score from Nina Simone and Nigerian human rights activist Fela Anikulapo Kuti, it was "a call" to those living in fear, to those willing to fight and to those willing to lead the way to peace.

One of Mr. Brown's more powerful works, it showed how his seemingly simple, condensed vocabulary could unfold with such beauty and significance. The dancers' weighty bounce was punctuated by lashing back attitude and spins. But the arms were so important, held aloft with palms open in either arrest or spiritual supplication, but later transformed into fists. Then one fist.

Most important was the marked use of stillness in a determined open-legged stance, as if waiting for the inevitable. That sense of patience and dignity set Mr. Brown apart and made this dance journey ultimately so worthwhile.

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