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'THE SUBTLE ONE': Brown, Moran debut new collaboration

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Ronald K. Brown's EVIDENCE Dance Company and Jason Moran's The Bandwagon jazz trio will perform the world premiere of 'The Subtle One' Friday and Saturday at Duke's Bryan Center. (Special to The Herald-Sun/Julietta Cervantes)

DURHAM —

Ronald K. Brown and Jason Moran expect explosive things to happen when their groups — Brown's EVIDENCE Dance Company and Moran's The Bandwagon jazz trio — take the stage for the world premiere of their collaboration: "The Subtle One."

Performances take place Friday and Saturday at Reynolds Industries Theater on Duke University's West Campus.

The program also features Brown's "One Shot," based on the life of photographer Charles "Teenie" Harris, who documented life in one African-American community over a 40-year period, to music by Ahmad Jamal and Mary Lou Williams performed live by The Bandwagon. Brown's "Grace" to recorded music by Duke Ellington, Roy David and Fela Kuti rounds out the line-up.

"The energy of the musicians and the energy of the dancers, I know, is going to be volcanic," Brown said.

Moran laughed when told what Brown had said — and agreed. "That meets our expectation," the jazz pianist said.

"It's a rare thing to play for dance," Moran added.

So, he and Brown had welcomed the offer from Duke Performances director Aaron Greenwald of a commission for this collaboration. "He's forging relationships with all kinds of artists," Moran said of Greenwald.

EVIDENCE and The Bandwagon have separately performed here in the past under the auspices of Duke Performances. And, Brown and Moran have collaborated with artists in other genres in the past. Both are award-winning artists in their fields.

"Working with people who challenge my zone — that creates another zone. I can make a new zone," Moran said of collaborations.

"I live off of that thing of not really knowing," Moran added. "I'm very much in touch with that part of creating a new work. It's exciting and frightening. We're really looking for that pop."

This latest collaboration, "The Subtle One," takes its name from a ballad by Bandwagon bassist Tarus Mateen, from the band's album, TEN. The trio also features Moran on piano and Nasheet Waits on drums.

Mateen, a Muslim, prays every day, Moran said. "He writes some of his songs from these places," the bandleader added.



Without knowing this, Brown had felt especially drawn to this ballad by Mateen and in it found guidance for the direction his choreography would take. “‘The Subtle One’ is another name for Allah,” Brown has said.

Brown’s own spirituality goes beyond denominations that can divide. At age 7, this Brooklyn native was already questioning the Pentecostal Christian side of his family’s refusal to call an uncle by his Muslim name, Brown recalled.

Brown also found inspiration for the new dance in the last stanza of the poem, “Angels of the Sunset,” by Alan Harris.

“So subtle are the wings of angels
that you may not realize
they’ve come and gone, except
that innerly remains a glowing
which seems just as good as knowing.”

“They are with us and in us,” Brown said of friends and family who have passed on. “It feels like God in a way whispers that understanding.”

“Dancers enter the stage not with a sense of grief but with a sense of air, of floating,” Brown added.

Seeds for this collaboration were planted some four years ago when Brown and Moran first met on the Broadway set of “The Gershwins’ Porgy and Bess.” Brown was the choreographer for the show and Moran’s wife, mezzo soprano Alicia Hall Moran, appeared in it.

The two had talked about the relationship between dance and jazz. In the past, that relationship used to be closer with specific social dances emerging as people responded to the music, Moran said. “Jazz in recent years has lost that connection to dance. It’s a vital characteristic we don’t want to pass away,” he added.

Working with Brown’s dancers seems to have strengthened that connection on a personal level. Bandwagon musicians have told Brown that it’s made them feel like dancing, Brown said.

“As we get older, we’re aware of how stiffer we get. We want a chance to move with them,” Moran said.

And, perhaps even take some dance classes with Brown, Moran added.