

Hannah Johnson
Dance 2103
Concert Refection

“All of Me is Me” and “Cuckoo for Coco Puffs”: Two Rich Movement Stories of the Black
Experience

The Black Box theater is smokey and fragrant with vibrant colorful spotlights cutting through the fog. The plants create shadows in the low light, evoking the fantasy of a fairytale but with a modern-day context. Cornbread and collard greens are served before the performance, enveloping viewers further into the contextual scenery. *Afro/Solo/Man* is a vivid abstract retelling of Black experiences by two choreographers of Brother(hood) Dance, Orlando Hunter and Ricarrdo Valentine. The storytelling which employed a fusion of dance styles including Contemporary, African, and Hip Hop enthralled everyone in the small crowd that Feb 16 evening. Most vivid in my memory is the beginning, as I had no idea what to expect.

The piece follows two men, Ricarrdo and Orlando, as they relay different vignettes of the Black experience. Ricarrdo sets the stage, adorned in a light and loose outfit with a pointed straw hat and carrying a walking stick like an old rural farmer. He picks up a watering can and starts to pour out its contents on the stage, forming little mounds of dirt. After setting up the stage he begins to dance, taking deep smooth undercurves with his legs to energetically fly around the stage while his arms sweep his walking stick horizontally. His moments shorten as he transforms to a stuttering movement, vibrating his whole body with joints stiffly contorted, , representing how he is plagued by the past. Rhythmically, he begins to talk about death, saying the dead are always listening. This ties in with the scenery elements of the projection of a graveyard and the pile of ashes. The combination of scenery, mellow rhythmic music, and Ricarrdo's pained movement bring about a sense that the events of the past have a heavy presence in the storyline. He transitions to slowly limping about the stage as he talks in a spoken

word manner, both to himself and the audience. He leans heavily on a precarious walking stick that appears to be on the verge of snapping under the weight. His limp is instigated by one foot that is arched in relevè while the other drags behind, the knee its connected to is loose and bendy. He uses his stick to spread the piles of dirt, almost as if he was farming and digging in the dirt. His upper body undulates slowly to the music through the spine as he drags his leg behind him. The movement looks heavy and painful yet is still beautiful and smooth.

While Ricarrdo tells the first story, Orlando enters wearing a baggy rolled up green jumpsuit and a black mesh top. His American streetwear contrast with Ricarrdo's more traditional wear, implying these stories lie on different planes. He travels painfully slow in the front of the stage, taking short, syncopated steps, his body unnaturally rigid. His face is tense, and his mouth moves rhythmically, emitting the unnatural bird like chatter of "cuckoo for cocoa puffs". The movement phrases are short and repeated, mirroring the repetition of word phrases. The aura of insanity drips off him. Orlando makes his way to the pile of ash and grabs a fistful. Violently he smashes the first full of ash all over his face, turning his reflective face an alarming mat gray. The excess dust falls onto the plant under him. Everything is coated including his facial hair and eyelashes. He begins to make crazy faces with his head tilted at unnatural angles, the light powder emphasizing the white of his eyes. His mouth is open wide, almost as if his jaw dislocated. Orlando maintains this stiff posture, bent over as he rotates to trace a circle with the dust that falls off his face. The music and background sounds hint at cocaine or drug use. He suddenly jumps high with both legs tucking up to his torso and starts to walk around in a very stiff jittery manner, his bare feet sliding on the dusty floor. The rhythmic jitters are accompanied by the drumming of flat feet on the floor and crazed mutterings. His elbows, knees, and neck form angular positions contrasting with Riccardo's calm and solemn body position.

Based on Ricarrdo's dancing, memories of the collective past and the dead seem to be a burden and a nuisance. Ricarrdo repeatedly asks "what parts of me are me?" and responds with "all of me is me". With this mantra, he works through the sense of responsibility to carry the burden of the collective past while not having a definite and strong connection to specific ancestors. The carrying of ancestral hurt and cultural memories of torture conflicts with a sense of belonging and family. This contrast with later in the performance where Ricardo and Orlando are dancing together with upbeat music with strong chemistry between them. The audience is left to question if having fun despite horrors of the past is allowed, and if it is even possible to move on.

A clear message is a lot harder to glean from Orlando's part than Riccardo's. It is more abstract, evoking emotions and abstract feeling instead of literal meaning. The stressed agitated movement evokes the taking over of substances. The juxtaposition of drugs and plants highlights the lack of environmental mindfulness due to substance abuse. Orlando is unable to enjoy and connect with the natural environment because he is trapped in the synthetic environment created by drugs.

Both dancers portray the enervation and struggle of living in a hostile system. While their stories are seemingly unconnected, the simultaneous performance led to interesting connection points between the different facets of the black experience. For example, the dust that Orlando smashes to his face is interpretable as both ashes of the ancestors and powdery drugs. Their performance was an effective portrayal of an evanescent emotional experience. Ricarrdo and Orlando were both very committed in their movement. Their facial expressions were so intense and sweat dripped off them into piles of dirt and ash. Both performances came from the heart, and I connected with both performers. Riccardo grappled with his identity and place in the world

which is something I also struggle with. I constantly wonder “what parts of me are me?”. I have found that connecting with the environment, which Orlando explores, has helped to offset my identity struggle.

This work exceeded my expectations of what a dance performance can be. The interweaving of spoken word and rhythmic movement added a new layer of meaning. Overall, this work had a lot of interesting circular spiral movements which I would like to bring into my own movement vocabulary. The use of the facial expressions as major elements of dance instead of decoration was interesting. I would also like to explore the mixing of fluid and rigid movement to introduce dynamicity. The performers focused on very heavy and emotionally scarry topics but were still able to create beautiful storyline about discovering identity in the context of generational trauma and systemic racism. The undeniable chemistry and open unapologetic queerness were refreshing. I would love to hear Brother(hood)’s perspective on how to learn and engage with the black experience through dance while still giving respectful space.