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DANCE REVIEW

Viewing Old Photographs and Picturing the Stories

By GIA KOURLAS

The choreographer [Ronald K. Brown](#) is something of an archaeologist. In his dances — poetic structures of great subtlety and force — there is the sense of a singular artist digging for a forgotten treasure. The qualities he holds dear are those that current society tends to ignore: legacy, tradition, heritage, gratitude and obligation. Yet Mr. Brown obstinately marches along his own path and, in doing so, conjures portraits of modern folklore.

The photographer Charles Harris, who was known as Teenie, is the inspiration for “One Shot,” Mr. Brown’s latest, an evening-length dance, which had its New York premiere at the Joyce Theater on Tuesday. In it Mr. Brown pays homage to Harris, who worked at The Pittsburgh Courier from 1936 to 1975, documenting African-Americans’ lives with fervor. (He died in 1998.) Mr. Brown’s dance features many examples of Harris’s beautiful, haunting images, projected on a screen filling the back expanse of the stage. While Harris captured jazz musicians, politicians and scenes from the civil rights movement, he was particularly adept at illuminating the lives of children and everyday people.

Clifton Taylor, credited with photo integration design, manipulates the images with an enticing framing technique, which causes some to grow so large they create a constellation of grainy black-and-white dots and others to recede to a sliver. Images, which include a group of men carrying small coffins and a gathering of women holding enormous bouquets while walking to a grave, are every bit as alive as the dancers.

Told in seven sections, “One Shot” is an attempt to reveal the stories of the photographs through Mr. Brown’s glowing mixture of ballet and African and contemporary dance. There are period and unison dances that display the exuberance Mr. Brown is known for, but “One Shot” is something of a quiet work. The movement vocabulary is full of reverence, particularly evident in the arms, which rise repeatedly as the dancers face the portraits with veneration and absorption; it’s as if one group is trying to penetrate the other.

In the solo “Bellows,” to music by Ahmad Jamal, Mr. Brown interrupts his earthy, vigorous spins to the floor to pause repeatedly, facing the images with one arm up and the other curved to the side — a gesture somewhere between a bow and an embrace. In other sections dancers wearing militaristic costumes by Omotayo Wunmi Olaiya and Carolyn Mechka Cherry recall servicemen from World War II, and the first half of “One Shot” ends with a rousing drum solo by Mamadouba Mohammed Camara.

In the second half, which features charming romantic numbers set to [Lena Horne](#) songs, the solemn mood shifts to one of love. But Mr. Brown can't quite sustain the reverence in "The Crossroads," the final number, paired to a song sung by Phyllis Hyman, and here he yields to an unfortunate sentimentality. Still, one missed shot can't ruin the album; in this evocative dance, the faces remain in a powerful afterimage. And so does Harris's legacy.

The program continues through Sunday at the Joyce Theater, 175 Eighth Avenue, at 19th Street, Chelsea; (212) 242-0800.

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