Alone together

Ronald K. Brown discusses setting Stevie Wonder to music; Rosie Herrera on our dining rituals

It’s been a milestone year for choreographer RONALD K. BROWN. After the U.S. State Department sent him and his company, Evidence, to perform and teach in Senegal, South Africa and Nigeria for a month last fall, the company and choreographer celebrated Evidence’s 25th anniversary over two separate winter productions in New York.

A one-night December fête at Brooklyn Academy of Music—featuring guest performances by Dayton Contemporary Dance Co., with whom they share the stage this week at the American Dance Festival—prompted New York Times critic Claudia La Rocco to remark, “If there is any company working today whose dancers pack a more sophisticated and vibrant kinetic punch […] I can’t think of it. This is truly an ensemble of individuals.”

Local dancegoers will recall Brown’s optimism, spirituality and keen critical eye in recent works including One Shot, a memorable 2008 memorial to mid-century Pittsburgh photographer Charles “Tennie” Harris at Duke, Walking Out the Dark, an earlier meditation on divisions in a community, and Upside Down, an exhilarating yet analytical slice of village life set to music by Afropop superstar Fela Kuti. This week at the ADF, Brown presents a new work set to a suite of songs by Stevie Wonder, On Earth Together. We spoke with Brown by phone in New York on June 16.

INDEPENDENT: In an earlier interview, you said that choreographer and teacher Beszie Schönberg challenged you to create a work based on one musician’s work.

RONALD K. BROWN: Stevie Wonder had attended a concert of ours in Los Angeles, and the presenter there said that Wonder mentioned he wanted to do something with dance. So Renae Williams at the Music Center called my booking agent at the time and asked if I’d consider doing something to Stevie Wonder’s music.

I’d already done two solos to his music, so I said yes. And when these presenters and friends heard about it, they all started asking, “Have you started work on it yet?” And I’d say, “No, no, no—I need to figure out what it is first.” This was four years ago.

I started writing about what it could be. His catalog is kind of overwhelming. I was looking at his music that was about your responsibility to the world, being compassionate and all of these love songs that also have this kind of compassion and responsibility in it.

I wanted a combination of songs: some that were kind of rare, so that people wouldn’t focus on “Oh, that’s my favorite song,” and some that I felt had to be in there. And I just kept going.

In the playbill information, On Earth Together explores healing, enriching and compassion for humankind. It also says the movement vocabulary is based on Afro-Cuban dances dealing with an Orisha deity. Ogun. He’s not necessarily the first deity who comes to mind for this subject matter: Ogun is traditionally associated with blacksmiths, fire and iron, and with hunting, conflict and war.

The thing about Ogun is, he is very direct. He uses a machete. In a forest, someone has to take down the stuff that’s in the way. That’s Ogun. And that is really the energy I feel that we have to embody, as servers and workers, in order to cut away all of the nonsense. In the movement there’s a kind of directness … it has a kind of slicing feeling.

That’s what we’re trying to do in the piece. I feel like that is our charge in the world, too. Oshun [another Orisha god] is a deity of sweet, sweet love—and I think it’s really a combination of the two: that love, and the directness, to cut away the nonsense. We need that warrior nature or we won’t take care of the business that has to be taken care of.

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e all have, of course, deeply resonant, photographic memories that linger and become part of who we are. After their immediate impact, they sometimes take years to unfold and interpret. For choreographer ROSIE HERRERA, a series of images comes back from the times in her childhood she spent hanging around her father’s restaurant in Miami. They depict older people, eating alone.

“It was just so different from my experience. No one in my family ever ate alone—no matter how nice a chance that might be on occasion,” she reflects. “I’d see these people, eating alone, and I’d wonder, ‘Where are their families?’ Something just felt off.”

This week, Herrera presents the world premiere of her new work, Dining Alone.

Evidence performs Thursday through Saturday at DPAC. Photo courtesy of ADF

The performance marks the emerging choreographer’s third consecutive year at the American Dance Festival, and her second ADF commission. In 2009, Herrera placed an imaginative work, Various Stages of Dreaming: A Cabaret, on festival students in a ‘Past Forward’ showcase. Last year, her company was invited to restage that work and premiere Pity Party, an improbable dance about grieving that was anything but maudlin. In both works, Herrera’s skewed sense of humor enabled audiences to explore some serious issues. We can anticipate the same in Dining Alone.

“Our culture isolates us from each other in so many ways,” she observes. “You drive to work in your little car. In most jobs, there’s not a lot of social interaction at work. And Facebook just contributes to that; they all kind of eliminate our social skills in some ways. Then there’s so much isolation in aging in our culture.”

“Watching people eat is a very private thing,” Herrera continues. “We tend to build forts around ourselves, with our papers and laptops, to protect us from someone invading our super-private experience. I think food and dining personalizes that isolation in a very clear, human way that a lot of people can relate to.”

Dancegoers view the menu—and the tab—next Monday through Wednesday night at Reynolds Theater.

Rosie Herrera’s troupe, seen here in Pity Party, premieres Dining Alone next week.

PHOTO BY ERIC WOODS