

Dance



PHOTOGRAPH BY JANA BRUNER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Recalling the Creation of 'Grace'

Ronald K. Brown's fervent work celebrates 25 years, and enjoys a new production.

By GIA KOURLAS

She is transcendent and glowing: a mysterious woman in white. Standing center stage in a bandeau top with a strip of transparent fabric hanging down her front, and wide, loose pants, she remains still and rooted. This dancer, the mother god of Ronald K. Brown's "Grace," anchors the stage with a quiet strength as the sound of Duke Ellington's "Come Sunday" builds, calling her body — and with it her costume, its fabric swelling and dipping like waves — to action.

She reaches her arms up and out, spinning fervently and pausing to hold out one arm and then the other as if she were protecting a precious flock. Lyrics echo across the stage: "God of love, please look down and see my people through."

This season at Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, "Grace" celebrates its 25th anniversary. The dance, which weaves together modern and contemporary dance with West African forms, was a masterpiece from the start. It was Brown's first commission for Ailey — and it transformed the company. There was ease, intention, a silken, unforced approach to finding new rhythms.

Brown choreographed "Grace" with Renee Robinson, the Ailey company's reigning queen at the time, as its centerpiece. The story is this: "The mother god comes down with angels," Brown said during a recent interview at the Ailey studios. "She rounds up people who are behaving as if they don't understand God's grace."

Book-ended by two versions of Ellington's "Come Sunday" — by Jimmy McPhail at the start, Jennifer Holiday at the end — Brown's rapturous dance is meant to stir the soul. The costumes help tell the story: In Omatayo Wunmi Olaiya's vivid, sculptural designs, the angels wear white and the earthly people red. By the end, they are all in white — they have found grace — and the journey to get there is transfixing, pulsating and galvanizing.

Through his layering of movement idioms and music — there is also Roy Davis Jr.'s house track "Rock Shock" and Fela Kuti's "Shakara" — Brown has a masterful way of digging into spirituality, of giving it a hypnotic groove. The stage can seem buoyant, as if celestial bodies are dancing on clouds.

For the Ailey company, learning Brown's movement meant learning to dance differently — with less overt power. "I think of it in terms of like, we want to speak heart to heart, spirit to spirit," Brown said. "So you don't have to push because if you're doing everything, what is God going to do?"

Now "Grace" is transformed with a new cast. (Only one original dancer, Bernard J. Gilmore, remains — "I am the last Mohican," he said.) The mother god figure will be danced alternately by Constance Stanatou and Coral Dolphin, who performed in "Grace" as a dancer in Evidence, Brown's company. Solomon Dumas and Hannah Alissa Richardson, Evidence-turned-Ailey dancers, are performing it, too.

Back in 1999, Brown, a well-regarded choreographer, knew that he would need to come to his first Ailey commission prepared, so he choreographed "Grace" on his Evidence dancers. He created the mother god role on Angelica Edwards.

Brown, sitting at Ailey with Arcell Cabuag, his life partner and the associate artistic director of Evidence, said that the night in December when "Grace" premiered was a whirlwind. Now he's just gratified to have the dance back in his life. In 2021, he suffered a stroke. Recently, he said, he had been talking to a dancer who had been in a car accident a while back. "I called him and I said:

'I'm working on "Grace" a lot. What is it?' And he said, 'It's getting another chance when you really don't deserve it.'"

Brown is finding solace in this dance on a personal level, too. "It was beautiful and amazing, in recovery," he said, "to come back to the work and its grace, because that's how we're living."

In interviews, Brown and Olaiya, along with dancers past and present, spoke about their memories of creating "Grace" and why it's so enduring. Below are edited excerpts.

RONALD K. BROWN, choreographer I knew Mr. Ailey loved Duke Ellington, and I looked and looked and looked. He did a version of "Come Sunday" — a choral version, Mahalia Jackson singing. But one version was sung by a man. I said, Oh goodness, I'll use that. And what if that God figure was a woman? I said, OK, that's the piece. Because of the man's voice, I thought that would be really a nice kind of contrast.



which is probably the explanation of "Grace," because they get another chance. And so the couples get to hug each other and say, "I'm sorry that I behaved the way I did." So they're kind of asking for forgiveness. And then they get another chance. Except for their young son [an unofficial character in the dance] who still steps out because he didn't learn the lesson. And then he's scolded by the mother god. It's one of my favorite moments in the piece.

CORAL DOLPHIN, current dancer It's almost like [the son figure] raises his voice with me. And as a mother god figure, I tell him to settle down. You can see it in the movement, I'm like, "Calm down." He comes at me hard, and I come at him softer. And you can see that there is this sense of me trying to soothe his spirit. He does this repetitively and it speeds up. I put my hand on his back and his head to just tell him to stop. Release it. Let it go. Give it to God. And then his movement becomes a bit slower, softer, like mine. And we become a reflection of one another. And then we all walk through the light.

OLAIYA I cry every time it ends because you feel like you went through the journey with them to find their grace, to be comfortable with their grace, to be at one. That's the piece. It doesn't matter how many times you've seen it, it gets you. It grabs you. You hold your breath through the whole dance, and at the end, you just got nothing but to scream.



PAUL ROJNEK

Top and above, from Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's 1999 premiere of Ronald K. Brown's "Grace." Left, Brown, seated at center, with Ronni Favors, Ailey's rehearsal director, working on "Grace" in September.

RENEE ROBINSON, original lead One thing that I remember about Ron would be his patience. Impressive patience. He would say, "OK, go and work on it," and then he would start working with someone else. I would notice that we would slowly be drifting toward where he was in the studio. We wanted to be close to him. We wanted to get the full understanding of the look of his style. There was his beautiful way that he hears the rhythms, and where he places a gesture or a pause or suspension. I remember thinking to myself: Why is it that my entire body does not look like his? I feel like I'm doing the steps. Why can't I create that shape?

ANGELICA EDWARDS, Evidence dancer on whom Brown created the mother god choreography Ron lets the part pick you. Renee was the mother of that company, so it was easy to put her in the mother role. She was a role model for everyone. I feel like she always worried about the steps and the shapes and, Am I doing it right? She's a perfectionist. But she always was doing it right because it was her.

OMATAYO WUNMI OLAIYA, costume designer When he told me the story of this journey, I saw fire and cool — that's where the calmness comes in with the white. The mother is like an angel, so she's that white. She's the one who is trying to pull everyone into place. And slowly and gently everyone transitions to that cool place. They find grace when they transition into the white.

BROWN "Wunmi said, 'Ron, I think it's red and white,' and I said, 'Wunmi, I trust you!'"

ROBINSON I went in to get my costume, and I said, "Well, where is my top?" And they said: "That's it. This part right here is like a bandeau. It just goes across your breasts." Ron said he wanted that elegance, the simplicity,

OLAIYA I didn't go for an obvious "mommy" look. I wanted somebody gracefully embodying the feminine — that you cannot deny that it's all woman and sensual, but yet it's so angelic. How do you put that all together in one look? I wanted it to flow. I chose for her to wear pants. I wanted to show her physique. And it was like not going for the obvious: a dress. I feel like a woman in a pantsuit is quite powerful. It was like me having a pantsuit, but it wasn't a pantsuit.

ROBINSON What I remember from opening night is we wanted it to be so good, and we wanted it to be good for Ron Brown. It was his first work on the company, and we liked it so much! But in certain sections, we were still going through the process of getting it right. So I remember us agreeing: "I'm still not sure when to come in. I think I hear it. So we're going to count each other in, and then we'll look at each other in the wing or once we're out there. When I turn upstage, make sure you look over at me and make sure that we are together." That heightened the dynamic of being aware of one another.

Do I dare say we had agreed to give each other grace or show each other grace by doing that kind of support for one another?

SOLOMON DUMAS, current dancer The idea of grace is that we receive blessings when we don't even deserve it. I think when you watch the piece, you understand that it's not forcing anything, but it's just an extension, an expansion of a thought. And you don't leave the theater needing to feel like, Oh, I've got to go to church! If that happens, good for you. It's like when Mr. Ailey said he wants to hold up a mirror to society to show people how beautiful they are; I do believe that Ron is a manifestation of that expression.

BROWN We come back to "Come Sunday,"

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