

We Lead As Black: A Reflection on Spectacular Blackness in Brownbody's *Tracing Sacred Steps*

Dr. Michelle Cowin Gibbs,
Chairperson, Brownbody

Grounded in African diasporic perspectives, Brownbody is committed to the belief that blackness is just fine. We support and nurture Black bodies in the struggle for safe spaces in a skating world dominated by whiteness. We often find ourselves climbing an uphill battle when it comes to curing this space for preparation into our work. I remember attending a Board of Directors invited rehearsal for *Tracing Sacred Steps* and feeling the white gaze of a local hockey team with whom we shared part of the ice arena. They welcomed us with confused stares; their faces twisted in peculiar expressions that seemed to signify their discomfort with us, Black folx, being in the rink. It was disconcerting, strange, and a curious experience. It was an experience I will never forget.

Despite these perhaps unintentional, yet, deeply felt experiences, Brownbody pushes forward in our mission “to build artistic experiences that disrupt biased narratives and prompt audiences to engage as active participants in the journey” (“Brownbody mission statement”). We welcome anyone from any walk of life who desires, and is open to being inspired and transformed by our creative demonstrations of blackness on ice... because at our core, “We Lead as Black”, and our blackness is nothing less than spectacular. In this reflection, I will walk readers through the performance experience of Brownbody’s newest evening length work, *Tracing Sacred Steps*. It is my hope that my thorough musings about the experience will inspire you to follow us as we take our next several strategic and important steps toward building upon our Brownbody mission and goals.



All photos by Aidan Un

Tracing Sacred Steps is Brownbody's most recent evening length work. Founder and artistic director, Deneane Richburg, with associate artistic director Lela Aisha Jones, led an all-Black cast of professional figure skating artists in a lyrically beautiful and spiritually moving performance that was theatrical in its conception.

Lela led the restaging and on ice artistic choreographic direction for *Anybody Here* and the restaging of *Give Your Hands to Struggle* with former associate artistic director of Urban Bush Women, Christine King. The two served as artistic dramaturgs to *Anybody Here*. The work is an excerpt from *Walking with Pearl: Southern Diaries* and is an ode to Dr. Pearl Primus and her research of southern life. Deneane Richburg and the company of skating movement artists made artistic contributions through collaborative translation. This was all done with the remote guidance of Jawole Willa Jo Zollar who is the founder and visioning artistic partner of Urban Bush Women.

In the first half, the company translated New York-based Black dance company, Urban Bush Women's (UWB) *Give Your Hands to Struggle* and *AnyBody Here* contemporary dance choreography to the ice. The translation was a masterpiece in style and power. The sound design, featuring music by Bernice Johnson Reagon of Black folk music group Sweet Honey in the

Rock, wrote a beautiful score that featured an audio track of significant Black people in history who have lent *their* hands to the struggle for equity and equality.

The featured skating movement artists: Rebekah Johnson, Corley Lovett Jr., Chelsea Ridley, Deneane Richburg, Steven Smith, and actress Thomasina Petrus gave powerful performances that embodied the ethos of Brownbody as a multilingual and intergenerational tribe/village/family/community.



Deneane masterfully guided the energy on ice in ways that reflected the pain, grief, and labor Black women give to support Black life. In a moment of precision and heightened emotion, she laid half her body to the ice and literally swept her outstretched open palms down toward the audience. The moment was breathtaking and brought the diverse and intergenerational audience with her on the journey. Audience inclusion was a frequent trend in the entire performance. In *AnyBody Here*, Chelsea Ridley's solos, which included dynamic jumps and complex turns, were always open to the audience as if to bring us into the piece.

A similar effect was in the second half of the performance with famed Twin Cities actress and vocalist, Thomasina Petrus, who sang and narrated much of part two. During the sequence, which retold the story of the 1920 Duluth lynching, she took a long walk on the ice from the back of the stage curtain toward the audience.

The moment was a beautiful collaboration with lighting designer Mags Scanlon's isolated deep white light that seemed to penetrate the ice creating an ominous tunnel that could lead only one way, ending in the tragic murder of three Black men (Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Isaac McGhie) in 1920 at the hands of everyday community members in Duluth, Minnesota.



Thomasina was a gift of love and light during the entire performance experience. She grounded the space, blending song, prayerful meditation, and theatrical storytelling that seemed to encourage the skating artists to take intriguing risks on the ice - opening a channel from our world to another ancestral dimension that radiated healing love and honor. Philadelphia-based sound designer and composer Alex Shaw's original composition proceeded in a collaborative sequence with the skating movement artists; moving with them like a lyrical meditation that had traces of children's laughter. During these moments, the skating movement artists offered candles and photos of people who have passed into the ancestral realm. They shifted altars of their families from down stage left to the center and engaged in a climatic joyful conclusion with a popular African American folk dance, Ring Shout.



Some additional highlight performances were Steven Smith and Corley Lovett Jr's duet in Act II of *Tracing Sacred Steps* titled *Sanctuary*. The performance included moments of intimate weight-sharing and laying on of hands in a moving demonstration of how Black men care for one another in vulnerable places. Rebekah Johnson shone as the youngest member of the skating movement artists at 16 years old. She carried her own in duets with Chelsea and Deneane, and gave an

impressive performance of jumps, turns, and intense speed that moved into compelling spins in the final moments of the performance experience.

To help support the artistic growth of this work, Lela Aisha Jones led workshops with both dancers and members of the production team using her original theories and embodied practices of African diasporic dance, utilizing her *Mining Witnessing Archiving* method that connects skating artists' ancestry, popular Black folk social dances, and movement improvisation to promote and encourage healing and culturally significant creative movement. It is an approach that is nuanced by Deneane, Lela, and *Undoing Racism*, healing, and organizational consultant Sandra Richardson's *Embodied Racial Consciousness* work that also seeks to undo internalized racism to promote healing deep traumas that many Black figure skaters experience in the mostly whiteness-centered world of professional figure skating. The results are astounding! The two-fold technique seems to give the skating movement artists permission to create and celebrate spectacular blackness on the ice. Spectacular blackness is a term I use to describe all the ways that Black creatives unapologetically fill performance spaces with creative energy. This energy connects us/heals us/binds us together. We share our spirited energy with the audience who are ready and willing to receive our gifts, and open a liminal portal to where Black magic can happen in performance spaces. At Brownbody, skating movement artists have the freedom to

push the boundaries of their skills as a tribe/village/family/community of Black artists who are powerful in their own right and embody ethos of spectacular blackness.

As Chairperson for Brownbody's Board of Directors, I occupy a separate space that does not always allow me to intimately process the artistic and creative spaces, and experiences in the company. I have attended an *Embodied Racial Consciousness* workshop and have been privy to watch some rehearsals, which have helped me understand and articulate our mission statement, and effectively usher our non-profit organization in these grounded perspectives. Yet, with *Tracing Sacred Steps*, I am forever changed in how I approach my role as Brownbody Board Chair. I am forever changed in how I communicate the important and meaningful work we do at Brownbody that attempts to free Black creative expression and experiences for the entire world to see and feel. *Tracing Sacred Steps* has encouraged me to shift the places in my own artistic practice as a Zora Neale Hurston theatre studies scholar and solo autoethnographic performance artist inspired by Hurston's creative artistry. It has inspired me to open myself up to the genuine and generous spaces and places that spectacular blackness can occupy. We lead as Black, yes. But I want to push back here a little... blackness is more than "just fine". It is spectacular, and we are all the better for it.



If this is your first time joining us or coming to learn about us, I welcome you! I hope you will support our organization. For more information on how you can be part of the change we are making via our performances and community outreach, please consider becoming a member of our Board of Directors. Please contact info@brownbody.org for more details.