

## **REVIEW: MK Abadoo presents Octavia's Brood: Riding the Ox Home**

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by Kacie Peterson

It was an evening soaked in storytelling. While we'd never leave the theater, we'd travel through time and emotion on the journey laid out before us. During MK Abadoo's performance of *Octavia's Brood: Riding the Ox Home* at Dance Place on Friday, June 16th, we were first invited to stand with the dancers on stage for the first half of the evening entering into a story, after which we could find a seat in the theater.

It was an unconventional beginning, and it worked beautifully. As the audience filed in, we surrounded nine women who stood throughout the space of the stage; one woman danced among the seats in the theater. Four of the women, who were scattered in the space, and the one in the theater were dressed in white tops and bold-patterned pants. The remaining five women served as the ensemble, dressed in modern day outfits, and stood along the upstage edge, facing in towards the four.

In a theater where the stage and the front row are on equal footing, my favorite place to watch dance is in that front row. That seat provides the opportunity to observe more than just the movement. You can see the fire lit in the eyes of the dancer. This was exactly the experience I had during this performance.

The ensemble served as dancers and fellow spectators throughout the first half of the work. When they stood in silence, unrecognizable from the rest of the audience, their stoic presence was still felt. It seemed to me that they were the women of today, bearing witness to the journeys taken by their sisters before them.

MK Abadoo's work plays well between the extremes of vulnerability and strength. Her core group moved fluidly through moments of baring open chests into the backspace and collapsing contractions forward. The dancers moved as we filled the space around them.

Once the audience was settled, the lights dropped. We were drenched in the cover of night. The pattern of light on the floor was similar to that of moonlight peering through the trees. Encouraged by a soundtrack of insect chirps and owl hoots, I was aware that a story was unraveling.

The program notes shared that the work was partly inspired by formerly enslaved abolitionist Harriet Tubman. The intent of that section of work was clear. It was the underground railroad.

The dancers moved seamlessly as one, while simultaneously portraying individuals. A duet formed in the corner to my left, though with the audience tightly packed, I missed most of it. When I could see, the duet stood and took three steps then paused. They repeated the pattern up through the center aisle of the theater seats.

A trio of women headed off stage to my right. The ensemble of modern dressed women moved to the center of the stage to view the partnering happening in the doorway to offstage. From where I stood, I couldn't actually see the movement happening in the lit, backstage space, but I could see the resulting shadows cast upon the wall. It reminded me that not all struggles take place in the light; some happen under the cover of darkness.

Suddenly, a woman burst out of the shallow wings to my left. She wore a harness that tethered her to the wall via a long, brown sheet. The core and ensemble, alongside the audience, watched as she wrapped herself in the cloth, which was pulled taut from the wall. With the created tension, she was able to counterbalance with the wall, before she lowered herself to the floor. She lay on her back,

tracing her hands and a semi-circle of space that existed above her chest. Perhaps she had given up.

Her fellow dancers frantically rushed to free her from the harness. It was almost as if they were not prepared to let her surrender. The desperation in their need to aid her was not forced. It was authentic. I felt called to help in any way I could.

But before I could complete that thought, another woman in a harness burst forth from my immediate right, almost colliding with a fellow audience member. My front row view became even more intimate. This dancer captivated my entire viewing experience. She traced the top hem of the cloth she was harnessed to, measured and folded it like fabric for cutting. She folded in and back out, holding edges up to her hips as if seeing how long to design a skirt. She started slow, but her pattern of movement quickly grew with intensity. A strong breeze blew from her fabric as she flapped out invisible wrinkles.

Then, wrapped in the cloth, she stared back at the wall she was tied to, almost daring it to give way. The group of women gathered to free her from the harness.

A dog's bark caused the group to freeze in the darkness. While I know the dog didn't exist, there was still fear in my heart for these women.

A train whistle sounded. We were all aboard the freedom railroad. The dancers broke out in African dance, but a few fell to the ground. Upon standing, the African movement continued, but others fell. This would become a theme in the program – falling, rising, standing.

A beep in the music singled out a soloist who reacted with accentuating movement. As the beep's speed increased, she almost fell victim to the hysteria. She swirled with her head back and her leg in a bent arabesque, arms opened wide. I couldn't look away. It was mesmerizing. A woman dressed in bright, bold patterns brought her a lantern. The way was lit.

The woman with the lantern marched her way up the stairs of the center aisle. When she turned to beckon us to follow her, I wasn't sure if she meant for us or other dancers to follow. But the second time, we knew. This was the time to take our seats for the second portion of the evening.

A woman emerged, wrapped in the brown cloth like a cocoon, from a doorway in the downstage left corner. While her entrance was meant to create attention, I thought the speed was excruciatingly slow. She was wary of the ground around her, like it might give way with a wrong step. When she finally unraveled herself of the cloth, she wore a top and pants in two bold, but different, patterns. Two women joined her on stage, darting out of the wings, and also wearing harnesses tethered to the wall.

The symbolism of the color of the fabric was not lost on me. These women fought, examined, and writhed in their cloths. They leaned, pulled, struggled, and wrapped themselves tightly. But they never made any progress in crossing the stage. "My skin is black... my skin is brown," the song cooed overhead, driving the point home. The social commentary was poetically beautiful and gorgeously portrayed. Abadoo has physically harnessed these women with something they cannot change. At one point, the trio was running at full speed, only to be snapped back for trying to break free. It was a moment of taking one step forward, but two steps back. Only the stakes were higher, the setbacks were larger and in the end, there was no forward movement at all. It was poignant and heartbreaking to witness.

Individually, the trio was set free by other members of the group. Two helped the first, three helped the second, and then four gathered with the first dancer to emerge. There was a dramatic struggle. It

was as if the dancers were physically trying to remove the societal boundaries holding this woman back.

The dancers moved fluidly through modern phrases. Because of the irregularity of the music, they relied a little too heavily on breath cues to sync up the movement. Breath cues can be helpful, especially when the group is facing different directions, but their overuse took me out of the moment. The dancers had moved into a phrase that started gestural, but later incorporated the lower body, as they tracked down their left leg. For me, the phrase was repeated to a point of exhaustion. I would have liked to see the format of the choreography change a little earlier than it happened. Abadoo's combination of pairings was visually fascinating. A soloist moved through the group, pointing and stamping, as if to ask her fellow dancers, "Are you listening?"

Indeed, they were. They lined up facing the back wall and shed their tops. While still facing upstage, they moved towards the front of the stage with heaving, full body contractions.

The ensemble of dancers walked down from the back of the house. Each carried a white top to put back on their assigned dancer. Each core member was dressed by manipulation of the ensemble cast. From there, the group of 10 women headed upstage and turned toward the audience.

As the program stated, "Fall, rise, fall, rise, rise, rise, stand. Onward." And they did. Different pairings of dancers fell back and stood, fell back and stood, fell back and stood. The entire cast fell back. When they stood, the lights went out.

Abadoo's work was filled with pauses and stillness, which serve the piece well. Those moments served as brief opportunities to contemplate and digest her message. Not once did I feel the pauses might be overused. Her use of formation changes and spacing was innovative, even with only five dancers on stage. Her core members showed a deep and authentic concern for their fellow dancers, throughout the story. Additionally, Abadoo and her dancers pay exquisite attention to their movement details. The stamps are one sound, fingertips are outstretched. It's clean and clear.

The performance was Abadoo's first presentation at Dance Place performing her own evening length work. It was an immersive experience that had me wondering why more artists don't engage their audiences like this. By putting the movement at eye-level, the dancers became more than performers. They gained their humanity back and became people we could relate to and see ourselves within. Abadoo created a storytelling work about a journey, which was enhanced by the opportunities to literally follow the path she set. I walked into the performance space as a spectator, but left the performance space as a thinker. This is not a work I will soon forget. Her choreography spanned a wide range of movement vocabulary, and the dancers moved with depth and sophistication. It was an evening steeped in a vitally important message that we all should bear witness to. With this piece, Abadoo invited us on her journey and it is a journey that I am eager to follow.