

'Radio' is homage to dad, hometown

Choreographer Kyle Abraham's work at REDCAT recalls growing up in Pittsburgh and listening to WAMO.

DEBRA LEVINE

"It's about the loss of the voice of the people. It's about my father's memory, and my relationship with him. And listening to WAMO [a black radio station in Pittsburgh] growing up." Contemporary choreographer Kyle Abraham is articulating the highly personal content he's woven into his award-winning, full-evening work, "The Radio Show." His troupe of silken urban movers, Abraham.In.Motion, will perform the work at REDCAT this week in his California debut.

The hip-hop love child of Martha Graham (he's part of a generation that has rediscovered floor work in choreography), Bill T. Jones (at 34 he's a voice of the black community but less strident) and Merce Cunningham (he's fond of wide space and silence), Abraham has been racking up accolades and a whole lotta love since his breakout solo, "Inventing Pookie Jenkins" in 2007.

Now a top-tier player with bookings at New York's The Kitchen, New York Live Arts (erstwhile Dance Theater Workshop), Dancespace Project, and the Joyce, he's regular at the Bates and Jacob's Pillow summer festivals. Abraham won the ultimate peer praise when "The Radio Show" garnered the New York Dance and Performance "Bessie" Award as the best dance production of the 2009-10 season.

"When I first saw Kyle, I had that gratifying moment: Here's a new voice; this man is original and interesting," says Ella Baff, artistic director at the international dance festival Jacob's Pillow, where Abraham has enjoyed creative residencies and development grants. "He's able to summon a vivid inner life and deliver it honestly to the audience—whether as a character or, more abstractly, in pure movement."

"And he's a gorgeous, gorgeous dancer."

His resume includes stints with Dance Alloy and Attack Theatre of Pittsburgh, plus nathan trice/RITUALS, Kevin Wynn Collection, and David Dorfman Dance. He also made a European tour with Jones, whose "Still/Hier" Abraham saw in the '90s as a high school student. "I was drawn to Bill T. Jones. Hearing him speak, so articulate, so well versed, I was blown away."

A father's illness

Chatting last August in a loft on the town's western Massachusetts campus, Abraham radiates contentment. It's a late Sunday afternoon in the Berkshires, and the scant light, mountain mist, and steady rain provide a moody backdrop. Bundled in funky-chic layered dance togs, he gives off a cozy well-oiled feel.

The conversation turns to the origins of "The Radio Show."



Photographs by STEVEN SCHREIBER REDCAT

WORK'S EVOLUTION: Kyle Abraham, top, studied at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts. Jeremy Nedd and Samantha Farrow, above, in "Radio Show," inspired in part by a station that was a touchstone for Pittsburgh's black community in the choreographer's youth.

'The Radio Show'

What: Kyle Abraham / Abraham.In.Motion

Where: REDCAT, 631 W. 2nd St., Los Angeles

When: Wednesday through Saturday

Cost: \$20 and \$25

Info: (213) 237-2800 or www.redcat.org

Running time: 1 hour, 5 minutes

"I had different things in mind. I was thinking about aphasia [loss of speech], and about [British portraitist] Frances Bacon. And also [Edward] Munch, the godfather of motion picture.

This mash-up of influences comes naturally to Abraham, who earned his dance degree from Purchase College, SUNY and a master of fine arts from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts. His keen intellectual couples with the urge to communicate.

"I was thinking about so many things," Abraham says. He had returned to live, briefly, in his hometown when his father, Samuel, a Pittsburgh social worker, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease.

"Driving by my high school, I remembered how my dad would pick me up from rehearsals. But I wouldn't talk to him. I was being a bad teenager. We listened to the car radio. Driving around [Pittsburgh years later], I would break down and cry, wishing I could change that."

"WAMO was going off the air. Around that time, I was listening to Michael Baisden [an African-American radio talk host] talk about a young black boy in Chicago being beaten to death, I wondered, without black radio, who would care about that?"

"Things started to shift. And ["The Radio Show"] started to take shape."

"The Radio Show" mourns the loss of a central community touchstone in Pittsburgh's airwaves. With a score by Alva Noto, mixed by Abraham with music by Ryoji

Ikeda, radio chatter, hip-hop and classic soul music, the piece also evokes his father's growing isolation as he deteriorates from Alzheimer's. In dance terms, the choreographer interrupts flowing movement with halts. Says Abraham, "I was thinking about the synapses in the brain."

Call-in feature

Baff, one of the nation's top dance presenters, likes "The Radio Show": "There are touches that make it satisfying and valuable for the audience. Chunks of costumes that are missing [the form-fitting pants ensembles gape, shredded at the back] represent losing part of yourself. There's the image of a spinning record projected at intermission. Kyle takes you on an emotional ride; he has the ability to go places."

The piece packs a wallop. But Abraham, a smart showman, inserts humor to cut the anguish. He re-creates a nutty WAMO radio call-in feature. "Make it or break it," in which a DJ plays a newly released song, then eggs on listeners,

"Do you want to make that song ... or break that song?"

"I got really frustrated when a good song got 'broken,'" says Abraham, a monster music fan in whose panticon Prince holds first place. "I'd call the station many times to vote in support [of cutting-edge music the audience didn't like]."

"One time I did call in to 'break' a song. Before I went on the air, the DJ coached me to say, I wanna break that jam thing!," Abraham says, aping the voice and laughing at the absurd tingo.

Earthiness, pure talent and gentle humor serve Abraham well. "The difference in where I'm at now versus two or three years ago is that I never needed to tell anyone what I'm doing then. I just made stuff." The Purchase grad, who's also attended Cal Arts, adds: "I've always wanted to perform in L.A. Music in L.A. is such a vital big business. Everyone drives. It's a community that still listens to the radio. So it's a show that comes close to home."

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