

Rise from the Ashes

FROM INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMAS OF RACE AND GENDER, DANCE ARTIST MURIELLE ELIZÉON EXTRACTS UNIVERSAL CATHARSIS IN *BROWN* BY BRIAN HOWE

Six years ago, Murielle Elizéon reconnected with her father just in time to watch him die. For the first seventeen years of her life, she hadn't known him at all. For twenty-five more, she'd seen him only a few times. In their final meeting, she traveled to his bedside and touched his hands. Then she traveled to his coffin, where he looked smaller. No one gathered there knew what to say because they had no shared history with him, so they danced instead.

With taut emotion and brutal brevity, Elizéon relays all this in the monologue that begins *Brown*, the hour-long dance solo she recently premiered at Monkey Bottom Collaborative in Durham, adding, "It was a fucking bummer."

That's a fucking understatement. Produced by Saxapahaw arts nonprofit Culture Mill—which Elizéon codirects with her husband, Tommy Noonan—and presented by DIDA, *Brown* leaves you not depressed so much as electrified and enervated, scoured and purged, feeling sorely intimate with the performer, the other spectators, and yourself. When Elizéon batters herself against floors and walls, it is not easy to watch. But she cracks this vessel for pain and trauma with a single vignette of sublime beauty, a gesture that mightily bends an arc of loss back toward repletion.

Émilien Elizéon peers out of the cover of the program in a snapshot, his dark suit a Rorschach blot against white architecture, his smile cryptic, his eyes hooded in shadow. His presence in the show is at once pervasive and elusive. His name is etched on a glass urn filled with what appear to be cremated remains. Beyond its literal representational purpose, the urn is also a symbol of the mortal meeting between father and daughter, an event that became a sort of container—a face and a form—for all the unmade memories that had previously swirled through Murielle Elizéon's life like so much cloudy ash.



Murielle Elizéon in *Brown* PHOTO BY BRIAN HOWE

Brown is neither primarily narrative nor primarily confessional. We don't come to know Émilien Elizéon through it—how could we, when his daughter barely did?—nor, really, do we come to know the artist. "Do you have something to say?" she huskily whispers to the ashes. Of course, they don't. But the suffering they incarnate contains many strata, including racism, sexism, cultural displacement, and domestic violence against women.

Survivors of any of these miseries are apt to encounter keen triggers and zones of identification barred to me, a white man. But even those of us who have been privileged to evade these particular woes don't escape unscathed. *Brown's* visceral portrait of trauma, abstracted from Elizéon's backstory until it stands alone and darkly shines, is one-size-fits-all.

After the opening monologue, on designer Sarah Marguier's sparse set—a shard of mirror and a square of black metal or plastic on the floor, a microphone on a stand, and the urn of off-white ashes—Elizéon embarks on something more like an exorcism than an elaboration of her premise. She performs most of the piece wearing only dark glasses, leather pants, and high heels. She beats the mic on her thigh, slowing it like a dying heartbeat. She has seizure-like episodes,

strafing her bare skin on rough surfaces. She carries herself by the hair. She jogs, staggers, loses her breath, collapses.

The presence of her Italian mother can be felt in the sparing use of songs like "Stabat Mater," but more of the piece is scored with seemingly incongruous party music that Elizéon, who was born in France, associates with her French African father. "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag" does double duty: the title is a bit of gallows humor, while the biography of its creator, James

Brown, calls down the specter of domestic violence.

In the talkback, Elizéon took care to say that this thread was not about her husband, Noonan; their daughter plays a role in the show that should not be spoiled. But her cameo supplies the moment of sublimity hinted at above, reforging a broken intergenerational line. At one point, Elizéon becomes the absent father, wearing a man's dress shirt and tying back her hair with a necktie. But here, without artifice, she is the present mother. If this scene were not in the piece, it would be intolerably painful; because it is, *Brown* heals as well as hurts.

Suffice it to say that the ashes eventually come out of the urn. Elizéon uses them to draw a square around the performance space, a ward of protection—but is it keeping spirits in or out? Her strained, too-bright smile and edge-of-breakdown jauntiness—a performance persona of hers I recognize from other works but now see in a new light—gives nothing away.

Brown is too intense—in its violence and self-immolation, its effort and futility—to say one "likes" it. Instead, it is daringly authentic and honest, dance as group regression therapy. (Not for nothing were the post-performance talkbacks moderated by Val Hanson, director of the Restorative Justice Program at the Dispute Settlement Center in Carrboro.)

It's also a reminder of the difference between entertainment and art. The former flatters our preferences; the latter renders them inert through harder, stronger emotions. In this piece, which you should keep an eye out for at inevitable festival stagings, it also works a strange alchemy whereby the unique personal history of a "brown" woman from France becomes a universal template of damage and resilience, vulnerability and defiance, and the love and loss we carry down the generations.

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