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Anne Midgette, "Talking to myself: Two ways of looking at Carrie Mae Weems's new work," *The Washington Post*, October 22, 2017

The Washington Post

THEATER & DANCE

Talking to myself: Two ways of looking at Carrie Mae Weems's new work



By [Anne Midgette](#)

October 22, 2017

Critic A: There's a line between performance art and performance. Carrie Mae Weems's project "Grace Notes: Reflections for Now," which premiered at the Spoleto Festival last year and came to the Kennedy Center's Eisenhower Theater on Friday night, shines a spotlight squarely on it. As performance art, "Grace Notes" offers snippets of thoughts and imagery and events that are sometimes powerful, sometimes oblique. As a performance, it doesn't quite come off.

Critic B: It's irrelevant to criticize a piece that is reaching for something much bigger than mere entertainment. You could argue that simply offering a Kennedy Center platform for this piece, a strong statement about African American lives today, a work that involves many artists speaking, singing, dancing, musing on the nature of grace, and at one point commemorating the lives lost to senseless violence — from Trayvon Martin to Philando Castile, an all-too-long roster of names that bite like nails fired from a nail gun — is far more important than whether the result "works" according to anyone's notions of artistic effectiveness.



The blank page aestheticized in Carrie Mae Weems's rambling and sometimes poignant "Grace Notes: Reflections for Now," which came to the Kennedy Center on Friday night. (William Struhs)

Critic A: Yet Weems, a MacArthur fellow best known as a photographer and performance artist who had a Guggenheim retrospective of her work in 2014, chose this particular medium — a staged work in a live theater setting — so it's reasonable to examine whether the work functions on this medium's terms.

The piece opens with a woman sitting on stage at a desk with a typewriter, facing a wall: a nice metaphor for those of us familiar with the blank page. The real action, then, begins with a video of Weems herself walking through a museum, and I thought briefly of Beyonce's video "Lemonade" — simply because it was an image of a strong African American woman walking with a clear purpose at the start of a long immersive piece. But the "Lemonade" video was an unfortunate comparison, because that astonishing hour-long operatic work offered a level of sophistication and power that this evening, for all its virtues, never quite achieved after its promising opening.

I think this is partly a question of inexperience. Each medium has slightly different rules, and artists spend their lifetimes figuring out how to communicate in each of them; Weems has not had much chance to figure out what works well on stage. What she did was introduce a number of performers in a kind of revue that played out against a minimal backdrop of a wall with inset windows, branches and falling snow. Three singers with lyrical silvery voices: Eisa Davis, Alicia Hall Moran and Imani Uzuri, called "The Three Graces," now joined, now soloing in a gentle lullaby. Spoken-word artists Aja Monet and Carl Hancock Rux, the resonant baritone speaking voice of the latter rolling out his texts. The dancer Francesca Harper, moving gently along with some of the words. The whole thing culminated with no less a luminary than the fierce Nona Hendryx, who got the whole company and the audience singing along. But her closing message was simply, "Grace will set you free." Is that really adequate to the anguish of Trayvon Martin and all the other senseless deaths? It felt as if Weems was falling back on a slightly hackneyed answer — as if she didn't quite know how to make use of all that creative firepower.

Critic B: Certainly there were awkwardnesses. But the whole evening was in a way about facing those awkwardnesses, about the junction of art and human life, and the question of how art can deal with or transcend the raw horror of events. The work is a meditation on grace, and what constitutes grace, and the grace of acknowledging tragedy. It had its genesis in the image of President Barack Obama singing "Amazing Grace" during his eulogy to a victim of the massacre in Charlestown, S.C., in 2015. This kind of grace is a part of the African American tradition, by default — something forced on a community that's been subject to repeated bouts of senseless violence. It's a quiet dignity. You don't howl. You sing, gently. You stand, with pride. And, like Emmett Till's mother, you leave the casket open.

Critic A: I would have loved to see more of that in evidence on the stage, rather than left to my inference. What actually played out, in the performance, was more well-meaning than genuinely evocative.

One exception was the number performed by a terrific multiethnic group of steppers, Dem' Raider Boyz Step Squad from Eleanor Roosevelt High School, three-time national high school stepping champions, a last-minute replacement for a college team that was unable to perform. The sharp, explosive, percussive gestures, performed in perfect unison — arms and legs out at straight angles, slamming into one another — represented an amazing fusion of form and content, tradition and expressivity, emotion channeled into formal expression through hours and years of hard work.

Critic B: I agree that it stood out. But I'd say the point of the piece as a whole was that it set out to present a collage of overlapping voices and experiences around questions of just such emotion, and that the effectiveness of individual moments in it could be taken as the proof that it worked.