Camille A. Brown coming to Ford Center

Renowned choreographer and speaker Camille A. Brown will be coming to the Gertrude C. Ford Center with her dancers in March to perform selections from her work "Black Girl: Linguistic Play." (Matt Karas)

By Chaning Green

Camille A. Brown and Dancers will be coming to the Ford Center in March to perform selections from Brown's "Black Girl: Linguistic Play." The popular performance piece reflects on the complexities involved in finding an identity as a black girl in urban America.

During the success of her previous work "Mr. Tol E. Rance," which delved deep into the world of minstrelsy the black community has been forced to deal with throughout history, Brown was asked several times if she would ever create a piece focusing solely on the experience of the black woman.

"I started thinking about it," she said. "It usually takes me one to two years to choreograph a piece and it is exhausting work. You're dealing with a history that is loaded, and it's a lot to unpack. Stereotypes are a lot to unpack. I didn't know if I wanted to spend another two years unpacking stereotypes specifically about black females. I am a black woman, and I have to deal with those stereotypes and tropes on a daily basis."

So instead of telling the black girl's story, Brown set out to tell a black girl's story: her own. At the time, she was choreographing a show that begins with a character reflecting on his childhood, going back. So Brown decided that she could find the answer by going back as well. She began drawing upon her experiences as a girl growing up in Queens.

In addition to the piece, Brown created an initiative dedicated to empowering black girls through dance, teaching them use their bodies as a form of self-expression and protest. She did this because she honestly was not sure if the piece would do well, and she wanted the message and meaning of the work to live on through the initiative, which she named Black Girls Spectrum.

"Black Girl: Linguistics Play" premiered in September of 2015 in New York City.

"I wanted to do something that was a gift to black women and black girls, and that is something that I didn't know if I would be able to do," Brown said. "I didn't know if I would able to reach black girls or if they would be able to connect to it, but they did. They continue to connect to it wherever we go. Regardless of not being black or not being a female, people are finding a way to relate to it. I set out to create something specific, but with universal themes."

Though the work is focused on the experiences of a young woman of color, there are overarching themes of friendship, sisterhood and camaraderie—things that Brown describes as universal themes that we all experience has humans.

Because of this, the work has been successful. Black Girl Spectrum has been able to blossom right alongside the piece and focus on what is called social dance. Social dance refers to a certain dance move that is widely known in society and cannot always be traced back to a singe moment or a single originator. These dances can be traced back to their African roots and then through the slave trade and into the hip-hop movement of the 80s and 90s. The form is often ignored by the world of dance and music education. Brown believes social dance is an important part of history that has something to teach us all.

"I use social dance as a way to connect to people because it comes from the community," she said. "When people hear 'dance,' they tend to run the other way if they are not dances, but, in a sense, we are all movers. Every day, the mundane things we do contribute to dance. Social dance is often treated as sidebar. People say it has no technique, but if I came out and did the running man wrong, everyone would know. It's a technique. Dance has always been a way of protest and healing and resistance. It is still very much that today."

Camille A. Brown and Dancers will be at the Gertrude C. Ford Center March 2 at 7:30 p.m. Tickets range in price from $22-$30.