

Black history, culture told through dance

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(Photo: Courtesy of Matt Karas)

ASHEVILLE - The Charleston, swing dance, the Twist, the Running Man, the Electric Slide — most everyone understands the basic steps, though dancers tend to add their own personal flair.

Together considered social dance, each originated in black communities before becoming pop culture sensations.

Award-winning choreographer Camille A. Brown likes to dissect the phrase. First, take social — a community, coming together for a purpose — then add dance, a sequence of movements. It's an art form that's spanned generations — evolving across centuries, continents, cultures — from the drum-like Juba dance of enslaved Africans to the modern Bop.

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Camille A. Brown

"Social dance is part structure and part individual creativity," Brown said. "It supports your identity. It's telling us who you are."

In January, Brown met with Asheville community leaders to discuss local outreach for her upcoming February residency and shows, which take on added meaning considering the month also is a celebration of black history in the U.S.

Together with the Diana Wortham Theatre, where she'll be performing with her dancers on Feb. 16 and 17, Brown helped plan a pre-show discussion, to be led by activist and Hood Huggers International founder DeWayne Barton, and a free dance workshop, titled "A Journey through Juba and Other Social Dances."

Her latest pieces, a trilogy of performances that focus on culture, race and identity, have won awards for connecting the dots between black history and modern culture.

"It's who I am; it's part of my identity," Brown said. "So that's what I connect to and that's where I choose to draw from."

Bubbling up

Social artistic expression has been important for African American communities, Brown said, because it's part of a collective identity.

Like visual artwork, a dance can channel an emotion or communicate a message. And, just like watching a room full of painters, the final product will always be different, each artist expressing personal identity with a flick of the wrist, a splash of color.

In a viral TED Studio video, Brown narrates a history of social dance while children and adults perform various moves in a brightly lit room, smiling and laughing and moving to the beat.

"Social dances bubble up, they change and they spread like wildfire," Brown explains in the video. "They are as old as our remembered history. In African American social dances, we see over 200 years of how African and African American traditions influenced our history. The present always contains the past and the past shapes who we are and who we will be."



Who is Brown? She's a dancer, an artist, a creative thinker, a role model and an African American woman — and that all comes together in her personal performance "Black Girl: Linguistic Play," which navigates the complexity of being a black woman in modern American culture.

Facing stereotypes from a young age, Brown details, through dance, her experiences of having identities thrust upon her while she was still trying to find an identity of her own — and what that can do to a child's fragile sense of self.

It's through her art that she hopes to make a difference, showing other young girls that it's OK to carve out your own identity by showcasing a spectrum of womanhood through history over rhythmic drum-like beats.

Camille A. Brown has won multiple awards for her thought-provoking and emotion-filled choreography. (Photo: Courtesy of Matthew Karas)

Part of Brown's mission, when touring from city to city, is to engage with audiences and empower communities by talking about the meaning behind the choreography, to teach workshops — to meet with and learn about the community.

"Her vision supersedes just coming into an area, performing, making money and leaving," said Sheneika Smith, founder of Date My City, a local organization for African American civic and cultural engagement. "The heart for her movement is to come into a city, get acquainted with that city, find out what movement is happening in that city and then add color and life to that movement."

Building culture around the arts

Barton, whose work with Hood Huggers supports and empowers historically black communities, said that, as a sculptor and poet, he deeply understands the value of self-expression through art.

"Art saved me," he said. "It has a powerful way of connecting people or reaching across lines like very few things can do. But we take art for granted. I don't think we use it to its full potential."

But art — whether it's dance, theater, visual exhibits — has always had a huge accessibility problem.



Camille A. Brown's "Black Girl: Linguistic Play" explores a spectrum of black womanhood. (Photo: Courtesy of Christopher Duggan)

Young people need to first be introduced to the arts to make a connection with art, but not every child gets that opportunity — and that's why organizations like Hood Huggers and Date My City and companies like Camille A. Brown & Dancers purposely seek out those communities to make that connection.

"You go into a neighborhood and you see a basketball court — you don't see a stage or a platform for artists," Barton said. "Sports have a long list of support, and they have the infrastructure for kids to practice. ... How can we create that same culture around the arts so we can start identifying young artists like we do for young (athletes)?"



When a community can identify with a work of art, especially if its people are involved in the creation or design of the piece, "it brings a sense of pride. It brings a sense of empowerment," Barton said. "If you had a show, and artists from your community or culture were a part of the show and everybody enjoyed it, I think that's a very powerful feeling in bringing people together."

Similarly, art can also help send a message to others and spread cultural or political movements through the movements on stage.

"Social issues, right now, are saturating our nation, and it's very easy for any individual issue to get lost among the other issues," said Smith, who also works with the Tzedek Social Justice Fellowship and Green Opportunities.

Camille A. Brown has won multiple awards for her thought-provoking and emotion-filled choreography. (Photo: Courtesy of Christopher Duggan)

"But I think the arts become a powerful mechanism to draw attention to movements and give us a deeper insight into the hearts or the minds of people who are championing the movement — leading the movement."

Sometimes, audiences get caught up in the art or the rhythm, the color and the tone, "and the movement becomes romanticized a little bit," Smith said. "But that's not what Camille is doing. (It's a) strategy that makes the impact deeper and more sustainable. Bringing art into a movement can open the window, open up the conversation and lead people into a deeper analysis of the history — the history of oppression, the development of oppression and how it functions presently in society."

Dance, spoken word, theater, paintings — with a diverse audience — can spark something in a community.

"Once that first part of the bridge is built," Barton said, "then everything else can be built on top of it."



Brown's free community workshop celebrating social dance will be held at 4 p.m. Feb. 16 at the Arthur Edington Center, and a pre-performance discussion will be held each evening at 7 p.m. Feb. 16 and 17 at The Block Off Biltmore prior to her 8 p.m. performances at Diana Wortham.

On Feb. 17, matinee performance for students, families, homeschoolers and community groups will be held at 10 a.m.

For her shows, Camille A. Brown & Dancers will excerpt pieces from several different shows — from "Black Girl: Linguistic Play," from "Ink," about pedestrian interactions, from "Mr. TOL E. RANcE," celebrating black humor and examining stereotypes throughout history, and "New Second Line," which was inspired by the resilience of New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina.

Camille A. Brown has won multiple awards for her thought-provoking and emotion-filled choreography. (Photo: Courtesy of Whitney Browne)

"When I was starting to do research for my work, I found that there was so much that I wasn't taught — and the people that nobody taught me about were all reflections of me," Brown said. "So I think that it's important for people to have all the tools, all the knowledge — you have the freedom to choose whatever path you choose."