

Camille Brown jumps, riffs to dispel stereotypes in ‘Black Girl: Linguistic Play’ June 15-16

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Photo: Photo Courtesy Of Matt Karas Via A&I

They’ll be sneaker-stomping and riffing, double-Dutch jump-roping and hand-slapping to notify the world that black girls are not to be defined by stereotypes, and that, they, too, as [Cyndi Lauper](#) generalized, just want to have fun.

But the idea of fun gets personal when [Camille A. Brown](#), choreographer and artistic director of Camille A. Brown & Dancers, brings the company to University Theatre June 15-16 at 8 p.m. for two performances of her “Black Girl: Linguistic Play.” The 2015 work examines how black girls play, how they celebrate life — not as defined by the world, but through the prism and layers of Brown’s personal experiences as a black woman/girl. The event is part of the International Festival of Arts & Ideas, which runs through June 24.



Inspired by [Kyra Gaunt](#)’s book “The [Games Black Girls Play](#),” and stirred creatively by some of the audience feedback in post-performance talkbacks after her 2012 Bessie Award-winning “Mr. Tole E. Rance,” the Queens-based dancer/choreographer felt a need to use the concept of play and bust some moves to bust some of the negative stereotypes surrounding black women. Gaunt’s book, says Brown by telephone during a rehearsal, is “about how black girls use play as a form of identity and connection and encouragement and positive reinforcement of your identity.” The energetic 90-minute work (tickets \$35-\$75, [artidea.org](#)) takes the audience “from childhood innocence” with pantomime double-Dutch jump-roping to “girlhood self-awareness to maturity,” where street-dancing adds a theatricality to that play.

“But it’s not about black stereotypes,” says Brown, a three-time (and first female choreographer) winner of the Princess Grace Award. “We’re fighting those every day.” Brown says some of the feedback in the talkbacks that she calls Dialogue, which she’ll be leading here, painted black women as tragic figures surrounded by trauma and fighting for a better life, their shoulders burdened with expectations as the parental role model in fractured families. “... I wanted to show something different...,” she says. “But,

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you want to be very careful not to put all black girls in one box either. There were many girls that did not do double Dutch. This is a black girl's story, not the black girls' story. ... We want to be very careful, because when we generalize, then we fall into stereotypes, too," she says.

"I just spoke from my personal experiences, what it was like to be inside my community. I was the research. I had to remind them that I am a black girl living in this black body, being in a community of love, of sisterhood and what those different forms of being in a community are... "I'm 37, so I've been an adult more than I've been a child. I just realized in going back to my childhood and finding the idea of play, it was so important to always keep what's best and special about us as close as possible, because the world will try to make you think differently."

Brown, one of the five women dancers in the piece, accompanied by two musicians playing original music that drives the work with the rhythms of a mélange of classical, hip-hop, jazz, punk and blues, has taken a broad view of the black street culture — everything, she says, from the complex hand-slap rituals of athletes or friends meeting on the street to the influences of break dancing and just plain movement.

"When we were creating the piece, we asked what you think of black girls. Some of the responses were positive, some negative. Some said they were loud or rude. These are not things I was making up; they were coming from the audience. ... If I'm talking to a black audience, they will share both positive and negative. Or, they will say, 'They say this about me, but it's not true.'" Sometimes, the reactions can raise hackles, as Brown relates the story of a man who said he never saw black families, only single parents, while Brown's company, the majority of whom are from two-parent families, listened on stage. One could hear the frustration anew in her retelling of the remarks. The use of the word girl, says Brown, is also another cultural reflection and personal recollection. "You, know, when you see a friend on the street, you say 'Hey, girl, can we get together?' The teenage girl uses it, but it's also a term of endearment as well. So 'black girl' represents both."

She asks them also to stretch their imagination about what play means, noting it can be actual games, conversations or just interaction. "Obviously, one is double Dutch. Yeah, they're playing. As children get older, and they do mature as the piece goes on, we see how play does go on."

Arts & Ideas programming chief [Chad Herzog](#) told the Register recently that he's been involved with Brown's work and this piece for some time, dating back to his previous job. "I think (some) people will say, 'Well, I can't relate.' Everybody can relate to this performance," he said. "... I'd like to think that anytime someone sees a piece of Camille Brown's work, they walk out of that theater as a better person."

Brown is a prolific choreographer, dancer, director and producer with a résumé that includes Broadway ("A Streetcar Named Desire") and regional theater credits, numerous fellowships and awards, including a Guggenheim, Jacob's Pillow Award,

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Doris Duke Award, commissions with Alvin Ailey Dance Company, and dozens of others, a TED lecture that holds the record for views, and producing 11 works as head of her company founded in 2006. The Queens native, who received her BFA from the University of North Carolina School of the Arts, would like to loosen up some of the conceptions of dance, too. She wants to acknowledge the daily dance we all do, even unwittingly.

“I think we have one view of dance. It’s the kicks or the split or pointing of feet,” she says. “Then people say, ‘I can’t do that.’ But there is another aspect that’s just as valuable, but just not acknowledged as it should be. Ballet and modern dance are often placed on a pedestal, whereas African, hip-hop, social dance is sometimes seen as secondary. Sometimes social dance is not seen as technically dance, but it is.

“You can be sure that if I stood on stage and did the running man wrong, they’d laugh. Once people realize that, there would be more appreciation of social dance. I think the change starts with you. That’s what I’m doing. I’m starting with me.”

And everyone is invited to play.

Donna Doherty is the former arts editor of the New Haven Register. Joe Amarante contributed to this article.