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## Play's the thing in triumphant 'BLACK GIRL' at Jacob's Pillow

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Beatrice Capote and Chloe Davis of Camille A. Brown & Dancers in "BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play."

**BECKET** — In the immortal words of Cyndi Lauper: Girls, they wanna have fun — and that goes for girls of *all* colors, the choreographer Camille A. Brown reminds us triumphantly in her 2015 "BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play," performed by Camille A. Brown & Dancers at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival through the weekend. Exhausted by the one-dimensional categorizations too frequently laid on black women — "angry black female" or "strong black female," take your pick — Brown set out to create a dance celebrating, simply, the ways children in general, and black girls in particular, play. Simplicity is the guiding principle: Brown and four other women perform on designer Elizabeth Nelson's handsome, straightforward set of multilevel platforms. Burke Wilmore's subtle lighting is effective, shadowy without being ominous. Placed onstage, pianist Scott Patterson and bassist Robin Bramlett blend in, and the ambient/funky/bluesy score, largely featuring original music by Patterson and Tracy Wormworth, is integral to the work.

A large blackboard covered in pastel chalk drawings and the sunny streetwear for the performers provide the only overtly colorful touches in this urban playground. And yet

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“BLACK GIRL” is flooded with the vibrancy of Brown’s choreography, the superb cast morphing from the weighted, intricate clapping and foot-stomping rhythms of the Juba dance of plantation life to its jazzy, street-smart offspring, tap dance. (The dancers perform in sneakers, and with a purposely grounded attack, so the hoofing pulsates earthily.) Sidewalk games such as Double Dutch are also conjured in some of the dancers’ wittily whiplashing footwork.

A series of barely overlapping solos and duets builds toward a lucid whole, with a sense of an epic arc. Have we in fact seen Brown, the tough and goofy child who begins the work with her charming variety show of a solo, grow up to be Brown the resilient and worried/wise mother?

Evolving maturity is illustrated via three main duets. In Brown’s first, she and the strong yet tranquil Catherine Foster dance with a joyous unselfconsciousness that is at times easy, laughter-filled, and at other times earnestly concentrated, the two engrossed in the secret, but still innocent, intricacies of a friendship. Beatrice Capote and Chloe Davis may be playing sisters, with Capote the younger one somewhat embarrassed by Davis’s display of sexuality. Apparently mimicking what she’s seen on TV, Davis experiments with a sultry jutting shoulder here, a cocked hip there. Davis herself occasionally breaks up at the silliness of her hot-mama posturing, but Capote is at that in-between stage — still young enough to be terrified by the new sensations she’s feeling in her own body. Capote’s own solo, in which she frenetically gropes herself and the air as if trying to grab onto something to steady herself, is quite moving, as is the way Davis first gives her the privacy to flail about before quietly circling back to be by Capote’s side.

In her solo, Teneise Ellis moves with a suppleness that suggests an increasingly confident young woman. Brown appears behind her, watching with both patience and fretfulness, her hands fluttering in front of her stomach, or gesturing bossily, as if trying to direct Ellis’s path. The classic mother-daughter tension/affection dichotomy is palpable, Ellis needing to assert her uniqueness but secretly loving it when her mom fusses with her hair. These lessons — how children must be allowed to be children, the ways in which our dances pass and grow from one generation to the next — are proffered with such sweetness.

In the end, for all of her exploratory independence, Ellis snuggles down, curling up to the maternal warmth and safety of Brown. Girls will be girls, after all.