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Camille A. Brown & Dancers celebrate Black girlhood, social dance in upcoming performances

BY [KATIE O'CONNOR](#) | STAFF

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Camille A. Brown is a storyteller. She speaks in many tongues: social dance, modern dance, clarinet, TED Talks, lectures, stage directions ... the list goes on. But whatever languages she draws from, Brown's art makes audiences want to listen.

On her way to rehearsal for the new musical she is creating, Brown spoke with The Daily Californian about her company's upcoming visit to Cal Performances. From Dec. 8-10, Camille A. Brown & Dancers will bring "BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play" to Zellerbach Playhouse.

Brown choreographed "BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play" in 2015 as a testament to the complex beauty of Black girlhood. In "BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play," Brown deftly balances cultural specificity with universal themes: "This is for Black girls, this is by a Black girl, but this is also for other people to see their stories too — and how often do we get to see universal themes in a body that's not white?"

The choreography incorporates social dance and children's games in a layered soundscape of childhood joy. Though Brown was originally inspired by ethnomusicologist Kyra Gaunt's book, "The Games Black Girls Play," the games featured in the piece are pulled straight from Brown's own childhood. "I was a child once, too, so it came up from the games that I used to play and the other women, too, the games that we used to play together," Brown shared. "Even though it's my work, it is still based on all of our stories."

As with many of Brown's works, "BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play" is personal not only to her, but also to her dancers. They spent countless hours in the studio sharing stories about growing up as Black girls in different places. The trust she builds emanates into the work itself, leading to a deepened vulnerability on stage.

In fact, Brown's inclusive process is part of the reason she chose to focus on her own company rather than taking commissions for other companies. Though she has created critically acclaimed works for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Urban Bush Women and others, Brown founded her own company, Camille A. Brown & Dancers, in part to focus on building that "close intimacy," and "not just (to) work with them for two to five weeks and then never see them again."

As part of her ongoing commitment to a "real working relationship" with the dancers, Brown has a unique process that tailors the story she wants to tell to the personal experiences and dance

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style of each dancer. When choreographing, Brown listens to and looks at each person and thinks, “How would you do it, your own way, so we see you, we don’t see a dancer that’s playing a character, we actually see the person.”

Though Brown builds community with the dancers, she also expects a lot of them. Her dancers must have “a really full toolbox” in order to keep up with the many different styles Brown works in. All of her dancers are trained in ballet, tap, jazz and modern dance, but they also have to be comfortable with character work. In “BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play,” the choreography is rooted in social dance vernacular and the many other creative modes that Black girls have developed to express themselves.

Putting social dance on a concert stage, however, was no easy feat in a dance scene that privileges ballet and modern techniques.

“At first it was scary because I knew that this was something that doesn’t get put out there or exposed as much, and I knew that there would be people that wouldn’t consider it ‘dance,’ ” Brown said. Eventually, though, Brown decided she “had to get over that and say, ‘this is what I want to do, this is how I want to tell the story, and this is my golden language.’ ” Brown added, “We wouldn’t have created the dance if we were so concerned about what other people thought.”

Part of Brown’s mission is to elevate the history of social dance, which is woefully too often ignored in dance education. Dismissing social dance as not technical enough erases the creative labor of Black dancers, whose ingenuity has produced a tapestry of social dance forms that are at the very fabric of American dance history.

“It’s definitely just as technical as anything else,” Brown said. “I always describe it as the running man — like if I came and showed you the running man and I did it completely wrong, you would say, ‘That’s wrong, that’s not how the running man goes, and that’s not the specific form and placement of your body,’ so that means that it’s technical.”

Camille A. Brown & Dancers claims a space for Black creativity on the concert stage as well as in the studio. As part of the company’s visit to Cal Performances, the company will host a social dance workshop that do the work of raising up Black vernacular forms in the minds and bodies of dance students.

For more information about the upcoming workshop, public forum and performances, visit [the Cal Performances website](#).

Contact Katie O’Connor at koconnor@dailycal.org.