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Camille A. Brown's "ink": Beautiful etchings in space

By Sarah L. Kaufman | December 3, 2017



Juel D Lane, left, and Beatrice Capote of Camille A. Brown & Dancers perform in "ink" at the Kennedy Center Eisenhower Theater in Washington on Saturday, Dec. 2, 2017. (Christopher Duggan)

Camille A. Brown works like a fine jeweler on her choreography. She crafts small-scale, detailed pieces that address subtle emotions and the overlooked but meaningful events of daily life, especially those deeply seated in the African American experience. Her intimate approach is best appreciated at close range, so the eye can follow her dancers' exquisite joint-by-joint control, and the faint shifts in body language from, say, tension to seduction to confusion.

Brown's troupe, Camille A. Brown & Dancers, made its Kennedy Center debut at the Eisenhower Theater this weekend, and it was in that vast, 1,100-seat house that she premiered her newest work, "ink," on Saturday. Live music was provided by excellent onstage percussionists. This hour-long piece, which Brown created in collaboration with her musicians and dancers, makes a beautiful study of personal and even secretive gestures and rituals, such as stirring a stewpot, cradling a cellphone and the silent communication between friends and lovers.

"Ink" was often intriguing, as Brown's seven dancers, including her, can make you believe that whole weather systems are coursing through their bodies; they convulse, shake and calm themselves with exceptional ease. But the more delicate moments were lost in that theater.

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It's a highly promising work, but it needs a properly scaled frame, and the Eisenhower isn't it. "Ink's" six sections address romance, brotherhood, spirituality and, in a segment cheekily titled "Milkshake," the female body, particularly the highly versatile backside. These sections are mostly either solos or duets, and they all share a silky, emollient quality of movement, punctuated by volatile bursts. The movement passages are extraordinary: At one point a woman slides and skates across the stage as if she were a child in socks on a freshly waxed hallway. When she grabs her partner's hand, and the drumbeats quicken, they sweep around together in a combination of stepping, spinning and twisting that looks like swing dancing and hip-hop ran off together and eloped.

Yet there are many more introspective moments, which sharply shift the tone from the blistering moves that Brown's dancers can toss off with ease. When the couples stand still and focus on something small, such as a rotating wrist, or a spot on the floor, it's a signal that memory or reflection has taken over.



Maleek Washington, left, and Timothy Edwards of Camille A. Brown & Dancers perform in "Ink," study of personal and even secretive gestures and rituals, such as stirring a stewpot, cradling a cellphone and the silent communication between friends and lovers. (Christopher Duggan)

At times, these inner-directed moments last too long, and it takes a while for "Ink" to surge forward again. When the dancers cast their gazes down and draw inward, and the drums go silent, and the minutes tick by, it feels like a door has shut. In a smaller space, where the audience can more easily sense the drama, these lulls might not feel so bewildering. But at such a distance from what the dancers were trying to convey, I was reminded of what musical-theater choreographer Charles Augins once told me: "People now are so 'inner' — I say, darling, if you want to be inner, go home to the basement, put your music on and dance by yourself."