



Review: ‘ink’ at The Kennedy Center Eisenhower Theater

by [Lisa Traiger](#) on December 4, 2017

In *ink*, choreographer/dancer Camille A. Brown’s final installment in her trilogy examining African-American identity, an entire history of a people is written indelibly on the bodies of her six dancers as well as her own. Their gestures, their postures, their interactions speak from the depths of centuries of lives lived with both vivid creativity and warmth and with the remnants of oppression encroaching a rich and elastic community.

Brown is far more than a choreographer of the moment. She’s one for the ages. She founded her company in 2006, following a career with Ronald K. Brown’s *Evidence*, and stints with Rennie Harris Puremovement and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. And, with [Camille A. Brown & Dancers](#) world premiere of *ink* at the Kennedy Center Eisenhower Theater Saturday, December 2, occurring the same week as the Broadway opening of the revival of *Once on this Island*, for which she created the dances, Brown is likely the most hardworking (and exhausted) choreographer of the year.

Her wheelhouse has been mining black identity and her works speak to the “woke” among her audiences, but even more important, they speak to the uninitiated teasing out questions, comments and realization from those for whom the depictions of intimate “souls of black folk” – to borrow a turn of phrase from W.E.B. Dubois – are outside their experience or understanding.

The hour-long evening presents a journey into archetypal moments in African-American culture through a series of personal solos and duets that call out to ancient African roots, like the *bantaba* – the circular space where village communities gathered to dance out their celebrations, rites of passage and mourning rituals. The journey, too, takes us to more personal moments – introspective solos and a post-modern *pas de deux* that provides a snapshot of a couple behind closed doors – loving, sparring, supporting, and playing. There’s even a tribute to the female backside, entitled “Milkshake,” which celebrates the Black female body and recalls Urban Bush Women’s piece “Batty Moves,” with its bold focus on women’s butts, shaking, shimmying and undulating with fleshy abandon. *Ink*’s six sections, accompanied by percussion-driven original music by Allison Miller joined by a quartet featuring keyboards, hand drums, drum set and piano, draw as much on the diasporic movement language as the musical language. Comprised of traditional African rhythms joined by jazz, swing, hip hop and go go, the score tells a parallel story of the evolution of the beat. Illuminated by Brown’s choreography and her dancers, redolent with a wordless commentary that speaks volumes.



The evening opens with a piercing drum beat – a reference to tribal drum calls that brought communities together for news and events in rural African villages. Dancer Camille A. Brown sits on an upturned wooden crate. She's a wordless *griot* – a culture keeper and oral historian in some African cultures — conjuring silent stories with her expressive hands and body. A sweep of a palm, hands trembling, fingers flickering like dragon fly wings, a subtle cock of her head, a stirring motion, fanning, grinding and other task-like gestures speak of women's work in an eloquently wrought and impeccably detailed tone poem. Later, one of the musicians begins a hamboning sequence, slapping out a rhythm on her thighs that electrifies the dancers into an edgy percussive movement sequence that melds into a go-go- influenced rhythm. And when Brown takes the stage, her petite stature belies her ferocity when she attacks movement with needle-point specific precision.

The duet for Kendra “Vie Boheme “ Dennard and Maleek Washington has a cozy informality to it. They're both lovers and friends, playful and stubborn as they weave themselves together, roll and snuggle on the floor, legs intertwining, bodies spooning each other. There's simplicity and mundanity in Brown's portrayal of this behind-closed-doors portrait that belies a tense undercurrent, revealed at the end when Dennard smooths Washington's shirt collar to send him out into the world. An unspoken message hangs in the air, that outside their warm embraces, the world is cold, hard and maybe dangerous.

Later, Washington and Timothy Edwards spar with friendly competition in “Turf.” It's a buddy tale as they leap and dive, shuffle and jog – maybe they're on a playground or basketball court, but they're relishing their strength. Initially the pair are innocents, like kids watching with wonder as a line of ants crosses the pavement. Later, the two display gestures to suggest a dice game, then comes the crotch grab and a hard stare out at the audience – both intimidating and comical. Their dancing remains free and fueled by muscle: one-legged balances, two-footed high-jumps, grounded scoots and slides. It's a companion to Brown's *Black Girl: Linguistic Play*, about girls' interpersonal relationships told through playground games.

When all seven performers return to the stage for the final sections, “Migration,” past and present are channeled, in a call out to the spirit of the ancestors embodied by these young, beautiful, powerful dancers. Their semi-circle is a 21st century Ring Shout, recalling past in movement gestures, but in a dynamic rhythmic amalgamation that sounds like post-modern go go. *Ink* celebrates peoplehood, its joys, sorrows, dramas and games. Most important it honors a legacy in our nation that has been frequently overlooked.

Ink is the third in a trilogy that wrestles with African-American identity. Brown has culled from embodied history, drawing forth a rich blend of gestures, some as recog+ble and powerful as the dap—that cultural greeting, sometimes a raised fist or a fist bump or hand clasp—others that might not be read universally, but still speak of with evocative specificity. Brown has called on her dancers to dig deep to perform with a level exactitude that renders the unspoken into an at times enigmatic yet compelling movement language. *Ink*, is, ultimately, embodied history that touches hearts and souls.