

Black Girlhood Through Black Girls' Eyes: A Chat With Camille A. Brown

By Carla Escoda DECEMBER 6, 2017



“How often do we get the chance to see ourselves through a black girl’s eyes?” asks choreographer [Camille A. Brown](#).

Brown’s exhilarating portraits of black girlhood are distilled through street games and social dances handed down through generations of the African diaspora in [BLACK GIRL:](#)

[Linguistic Play](#), which comes to Cal Performances in Berkeley on Dec. 8. Intricate polyrhythms and a rich gestural language tell intensely personal stories that remind us how childhood play builds one’s sense of self, and that torpedoes reductive ideas often associated with black girlhood.

I caught up with Brown in September in New York City (where *BLACK GIRL* premiered in 2015) in a Chinese tea shop opposite New York’s City Center, where Camille and her dancers were fitting costumes.

Do you think the show resonates differently with audiences today?

I think the show resonates with black girls and black women in the same way that it did in 2015. I can’t really speak for other people. Though now, probably more than ever, it’s important for white people and people from other races to see different narratives of black girls and black women.

Most of the time, in the media, in stories and movies, we have to see ourselves through a white lens. *BLACK GIRL* lets audiences see universal themes through a black girl’s lens. It’s culturally specific, but the themes are universal. I wanted to challenge someone walking out and say “Now you can’t say you haven’t been there or you haven’t experienced that. It might not have been the way you experienced it, but mother-daughter, sister-sister, friends, being a child – these are all things we’ve known.”

Racism has existed since black people came to America – or, I should say, were brought to America. Now I think it's just that people are more open about how they feel. I do think we are living in a very charged moment, to a point where it's scary.

But when we see the audacity of things that are happening, we have to be audacious too. Because if people in power are larger than life, then we need the confidence and power ourselves to be larger than life, to make our voices be heard. We have to find a way to use the energy that is circling around us, to continue to create art.

That's the beautiful thing about dance – when people can still communicate without words. We can be from two different continents but we can still come together based on the hand gestures. That's something that we have in common, that we might not have had if we were just trying to talk to each other.

For a period of eight years we had two very high-profile young girls growing up in the White House. How do you think that very visible image of black girlhood change public understanding, if at all, of black girlhood?

People tried to come after [Malia](#) and Sasha; they tried to dehumanize them. The girls couldn't do anything without being criticized. As I said, racism has been around for a very long time, and just because people see another narrative doesn't necessarily mean that they will say, "Oh, I'm going to change my narrative because I see a different view of black girls." They may say, "They're still like this" or "I still think this about them." That's how racism continues, as people convince themselves of their feelings. So, yes, it was powerful to see a black couple with black children in the White House. I was so proud. But I also saw the stuff that people were trying to do them and create a narrative around them, because they were black.

Your newest piece of dance theater, titled *ink*, is also premiering at the Kennedy Center in December. How has doing *BLACK GIRL* influenced *ink*?

Doing *BLACK GIRL* has helped me to trust my instincts, to feel more empowered to tell stories that I know and that I believe in.

Mr. TOL E. RAnCE [a 2012 piece] was about black stereotypes in the media, from an outside perception. *BLACK GIRL* was about the black girl gaze, from the inside perception. *ink* continues with the inside perception, but tells your story the way you know it, whereas in *Mr. TOL E. RAnCE* we were making the point that these were stereotypes. In *ink*, we – both men and women – are reclaiming our stories, reclaiming our narratives, and our gestures.



How have your dance theater works like *BLACK GIRL* and your work on Broadway informed each other? You've got a show, *Once on this Island*, opening on Broadway on Dec. 3.

The cast of *Once on this Island* are actors who move. I love working with actors because it helps me to become a better choreographer for my own work. So much of my work is based on gesture and character, and theater is about character, so it's great to have this type of challenge. A lot of the stuff I've learned is from my theater experience: the real craft of putting stories together, the arcs, and the transitions – that came from theater.

Did you study theater?

No, my degree is in dance. [Brown studied at the North Carolina School of the Arts.] But I've always loved musical theater, because my

mom loves musical theater. When I was younger, she introduced me to all these shows, so it's always been in me. One of the shows that stuck in my mind was *The Unsinkable Molly Brown*, with Debbie Reynolds. I loved the choreography in that show, by Peter Gennaro. Michael Jackson's *Thriller* also sticks in my head because it was so theatrical.

I didn't necessarily want to be on Broadway as a dancer, or work in theater – I actually wanted to be a choreographer. I didn't always think that was possible, because I didn't see a lot of black women doing it. I found out that it wasn't that black women weren't choreographers, it was that they weren't getting exposure.



The second in a series of [four Berkeley RADICAL programs](#) that explores the work of four groundbreaking African-American choreographers of different generations, *BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play* runs from Dec. 8–10. More information [here](#).