

THE DAILY CALIFORNIAN

Camille A. Brown & Dancers evoke emotional dreamscape of Black girlhood in ‘BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play’

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Chalk in hand, Camille A. Brown entered the stage and began to draw. She examined the blackboard wall of drawings above her — a playful burst of stars and colors — and tentatively added to the mural as if piecing together a distant memory. Her self-conscious gestures turned to contemplation, to curiosity and, finally, to play as her knees bent and wobbled and her feet brightened the stage with rhythm.

On Saturday at Zellerbach Playhouse, “BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play” read a bit like a dreamscape. Nothing was fully connected. Images popped out of the dark, took shape, then dissolved again. But for Brown and the women of her company, that is exactly what it was: a vision of the past, pulled piecemeal into the present.

Brown was inspired by ethnomusicologist Kyra Gaunt’s book, “The Games Black Girls Play,” to create a dance theater piece drawing from her own childhood and lifting up the creative work of Black girls. The evening-length performance consisted of Brown’s solo, then three duets exploring themes that portray a rich diversity of experiences of Black girlhood.

Though the exact meaning of the stories portrayed in “BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play” was sometimes opaque, the deeply personal nature of the work was unmistakably clear — the dancers shared a vocabulary of rhythm and movement, but each brought her own unique energy to the stage. Each dancer seemed to draw from her own childhood memories of play, self-doubt, friendship and empowerment, giving the dances an air of genuine vulnerability.

In Brown’s solo, she carved out a sound for herself, stomping her own soundtrack into existence. When Catherine Foster joined Brown on stage, though, she added a new layer to Brown’s solo performance, transforming the sound into a conversation.

Not only did Foster and Brown’s duet accelerate the pace of the show and establish a playful energy, it also emphasized the links between the games Black girls play and social dance

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traditions. The pair shifted effortlessly between stylized forms such as tap and the “nae nae” and playground games such as “Gigolo” and double Dutch.

Foster and Brown sample a range of Black dance traditions, transitioning seamlessly between movement vernaculars from various time periods in Black social dance history. The choreography emphasizes the interconnection between dances from different times, lifting up Black social dance as an evolving art which stems from traditional African and diasporic communities.

The second duet of the piece portrayed two girls navigating difficulties in their relationship. While one dancer seemed to adjust to a changing body and other challenges of growing up, the other fought for her attention. The duet risked slipping into a caricature of childhood, but the dancers’ emotional commitment and individual movements gave it a life that felt both relatable and personal.

The final duet shifted tone substantially into a complicated relationship between a Black girl and an older Black woman. Kendra “Vie Boheme” Dennard played the younger character with a sincerity and conviction that rattled the stage. Her long lines and powerful movement, coupled with Brown’s emotive gestures, filled the narrative with a depth not yet reached in the performance.

Each of the duets highlighted the contributions that Black girls have made to social dance, reminding the audience that dances that some people today see as frivolous — or, in some cases, so common that they seem simple — are in fact complex vernacular practices with specific cultural origins that have grown from the creativity of Black girls. But above all, the fun exuding from their skillful rhythms was infectious and got the audience smiling.

“BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play” pieced together fragmentary memories of Black girlhood into a powerful whole through Brown’s intricate and layered choreography, the dancers’ emotional complexity and the subtle but impressive score played by musicians including bassist Robin Bramlett and pianist Scott Patterson. Brown spoke directly to Black girls, but she also lifted up their humanity and the universal experience of play.