

# TED Fellows

## Dance that celebrates the beauty and history of black life

*Meet choreographer Camille A Brown, who boldly draws on the legacy of African-American social dance to explore contemporary black identity.*

Camille A Brown says she's always had a small voice. "I tell people my voice hasn't changed since I was 13," she jokes. "It just got a little lower. But it's never been considered normal."

Growing up, Brown was teased so much about her voice—which is higher than average, sharp and clear, only hinting at her birthplace of Queens, New York—that she didn't talk much at all. "I felt a lot of times people cared more about my voice, and how I was sounding, than what I was saying," she says.

So Brown started finding ways to speak with her body instead. "Dance was a way for me to express myself without feeling insecure," she says. "It was an outlet for all of my emotions and frustrations and celebrations."

It's fair to say that Brown, a [TED Fellow](#), has since found her voice. In 2017 alone, she choreographed two musicals, one on Broadway, and toured her hit show [BLACK GIRLS: Linguistic Play](#) around the country. She was awarded an [Art of Change fellowship](#) from the Ford Foundation and a [MAP Fund grant](#). And just last month, she premiered a bold, important new show, [ink](#), at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC.



*ink* completes a trilogy that explores the experience of being black in America, following [Mr. TOL E. Rance](#) in 2012, which examined black stereotypes and minstrelsy in the media, and [BLACK GIRLS](#) in 2015, which showcased underrepresented, authentic

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experiences of black girlhood. *ink* expands on this previous work, drawing on the gestural language and traditions of the African diaspora to tell stories of contemporary black life as it's actually lived. And while *BLACK GIRLS* probed black sisterhood, *ink* expands to tell a spectrum of stories about black brotherhood as well.

“*ink* is not only about black strength. It's about black vulnerability. It's about black love and black community and black humanity,” Brown says. “And I think that gets lost in the conversation of racism, because when we're talking about racism, we're not talking about humanity.”

## Camille A Brown

Brown grew up in Queens, New York, and began dancing not long after she started to walk: when she was only three years old, her mother enrolled her in beginner dance classes. “I would watch Michael Jackson and Janet Jackson videos, and learn all the dance sequences,” she says. “My mom also loved musicals, and when I was younger she would show me all of her favorite musicals and the dance sequences.” This included [The Unsinkable Molly Brown](#), both Brown and her mother's favorite musical.

But it wasn't until high school that Brown began to realize that dancing might be a viable career option for her. She attended LaGuardia High School—the school from the 1980 musical *FAME*—which was right across the street from the renowned Alvin Ailey Dance Company. “I got to see the Ailey Company and saw dancers that were actually doing what they loved for a living,” she says. Brown ended up choreographing two pieces for Alvin Ailey, and eventually formed her own company in 2006.

As Brown evolved as a choreographer, African-American social dance increasingly become a core concern. Her repertoire celebrates the motifs and gestural language of social dances like the Juba, the Cakewalk, the Charleston and the Buzzard lope—body movements that grew out of 200 years of African-American experience and tradition. Brown's work recasts these dances to reclaim African-Americans narratives that are so often appropriated or excluded from the mainstream. *Mr. TOL E. RANcE*, for instance, drew on the legacy of minstrel performance to celebrate the humor of the black performer and expose racial stereotypes. *BLACK GIRLS* draws on double Dutch and tap to portray coming-of-age stories of young black women. And *ink* draws inspiration from social dances like the Buzzard lope, the Juba and the dap to portray pedestrian interactions that give way to moments of liberation and displays of power.

“Dance comes from the community,” Brown says. “All these dances—jazz, tap, ballet—they were codified. But before they were codified, they came from people simply moving their bodies. So when people see other people moving their bodies, and they understand that there's a history to that movement, they can relate in a different way.”

## Brown's TED-Ed lesson on the history of African-American social dance.

When Brown first started to conceive of *ink*, she kept coming back to the idea of comic heroes, but didn't know why. “I was like, ‘Okay, this makes no sense,’” she says. “It didn't seem to fit into this context.” Then, she came across [Question Bridge: Black Males in America](#), a wide-ranging series of interviews with black men of all ages about their

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identities, with accompanying portraits. In the book, Brown read an interview with a young black man who said, “I see black people as superheroes, because they keep rising.”

“When I read that, I realized why I kept thinking about black people as superheroes,” Brown says. “It’s not the literal cape-and-mask idea. It’s the idea that black people continue to persevere.”

For *ink*, Brown gave each of the dancers in the show’s six narrative-based sections their own superpower. In one section, the dancer’s power is the dap. “It’s their way of communicating, their way of owning their creative identity and their space,” Brown says. In another section, the superpower is love.

“You won’t see capes or anything like that,” she says, “but hopefully you’ll get that there are powers that are holding these stories together.”



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In addition to developing *ink*, which is now touring, Brown also choreographed two musicals this year—*Bella: An American Tall Tale*, and most recently her tenth musical, the Broadway revival of *Once On This Island*, which tells a sweeping love story set on an island in the Caribbean. Brown’s choreography for the show draws on African, Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Cuban dance traditions. The show opened to rave reviews in December.

“I love that musicals provide an opportunity for us to get lost, but also to be found, too,” she says. “They give us that opportunity to breathe, and exhale—or get your breath taken away.”

At 37 years old, looking back on her career, Brown recognizes similarities between herself and the titular character in her favorite musical, *The Unsinkable Molly Brown*. That show unfolds like a superhero story of strength and survival: it tells a fictionalized version of the life of Molly Brown—played by Debbie Reynolds in the 1964 film—who transcended humble beginnings in the American West to become a well-known socialite who survived the sinking of the *Titanic*.

“I like it because Molly Brown is a fighter, and I’ve always felt like I’ve had to fight—not physically, but I was never considered the best at anything, and I always had to work extremely hard,” Brown says. “So when I see that story, I can definitely relate to it. It’s also a love story, and I like love stories. And the dancing is just dynamite.”

