

A Storytelling Choreographer Who Listens to Her Audience

By **BRIAN SEIBERT** | JAN. 26, 2018



Camille A. Brown says that working not just in dance but also in theater “has helped me be a better choreographer.”
Photo Credit: Ike Edeani for The New York Times

For an in-demand choreographer, Camille A. Brown spends an unusual amount of her time listening and responding to what audiences have to say. Often, what she hears is upsetting. Sometimes the most disturbing comments prove the most useful.

Since 2012, performances by her dance company have incorporated a post-show conversation among viewers and the cast — presented not in the usual way, as an extra, but as an integral part of the work. Earlier this month, Ms. Brown recalled an exchange from one of those conversations:

“This older white man decided to start talking about how the black family basically doesn’t exist,” she said. “He went on and on about single-parent homes. I pointed out how most members of my company” — all African-American, including Ms. Brown — “came from two-parent homes. I told him, ‘You have a narrative in your mind, but I’m showing you another narrative.’”

“Love does exist between black men and black women,” she continued. “And you have to tell people that.”

This exchange is a reason that her newest dance, “ink,” includes a love duet for a man and a woman. Another section of the work, which has its local debut in Montclair State University’s Peak Performances series Feb. 1-4, features a sequence of playful brotherhood for two men.

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After a recent preview performance, someone expressed surprise that the men didn't turn on each other.

"It goes to show what people expect when they see two black men on the stage," Ms. Brown said. "I want to show them something different."

That is what Ms. Brown, 38, has been trying to do, in many ways, since she started her company in 2006, and in the works she has made for other troupes, including Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. But it's especially true of the last three pieces she has created for her group, a series that reveals her growing trust in her own art.

"Mr. TOL E. RAnCE" (2013) took on the stereotypes of blacks in entertainment, past and present, using film footage and spoken dialogue. "Black Girl: Linguistic Play" (2015) looked at the experience of girlhood, making a dance out of playground games. Both had educational components: post-show conversations, study guides in the programs.



Catherine Foster, rehearsing Ms. Brown's "ink." Photo Credit: Ike Edeani for The New York Times

"The first one was about other people's perceptions of black people," Ms. Brown said. "And 'Black Girl' was more about the inside — my childhood, my perspective. Where is the black girl joy that I don't see in the media? How can we bring that to the stage?"

"Ink" extends that idea — its brotherhood duet is a kind of male counterpart to "Black Girl" — and also the method, turning everyday gestures into dance. Ms. Brown said there were more to investigate, like the handshakes known as dap. "And I wanted to tie them to the African tradition and show how the gestural language keeps coming around."

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In an opening solo, Ms. Brown — an exceptionally precise and powerful dancer — looks like she is stirring a pot, introducing gestures that recur with different meanings throughout the work. One second, she’s an African griot miming stories, the next she’s a hip-hop D.J. spinning records. “I wanted it to be pops and flashes, not chronological,” she said. “So that people see the different gestures but not in a particular place and time.”

The mash-up continues through the other parts of “ink.” But the live music is centered on percussion, on drums, and in a climactic section called “Migration,” the African element gains force in communal dance like a spiritual explosion.

Ms. Brown explained: “It’s to say, ‘This is what’s been underneath the whole time, the thing that’s carrying us through, the African spirit.’”

The idea of cultural continuity, that the present always contains the past, is itself a running theme in her work. It’s the explicit message of her 2016 TED video [“A Visual History of Social Dance in 25 Moves,”](#) a four-minute survey course on African-American social dances, which has been viewed more than a million times online.

In “ink,” the concept is presented more abstractly. Ms. Brown said she and the dancers worked on stripping the gestures down so that they didn’t look “dancey,” then on building them back up so that they became alive in a theatrical sense. She gives her dancers the freedom to make choices, the way actors do.



Maleek Washington, left, and Timothy Edwards, rehearsing the brotherhood duet. Photo Credit: Ike Edeani for The New York Times

“I almost look at my dancers as actors,” she said, which isn’t surprising, since she is one of the rare concert dance choreographers who sustains a high-level career in theater, too. Most recently, she did the choreography for the current Broadway revival of [“Once on This Island.”](#) (In his review of the show for The New York Times, Jesse Green called her work “electric.”)

For Ms. Brown, there is no hard separation between her work in musical theater and her work for her company. The Double-Dutch jump-rope moves in “Black Girl” had their origin in something she created for [“Fortress of Solitude,”](#) the musical version of the Jonathan Lethem novel at the Public Theater in 2014.

“Working in both worlds has helped me be a better choreographer,” Ms. Brown said. “Because theater is all about the story, the story, the story. And as a choreographer in concert dance, I want to be a storyteller.”

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To Theresa Ruth Howard, a writer and former dancer who has followed Ms. Brown's career closely, "ink" demonstrates how musical theater has contributed to Ms. Brown's artistic growth.

"The work has become more and more abstract," Ms. Howard said, "but Camille has learned how to tell a story so well that she can now tell it in a purer concert dance form."

Ms. Howard — who described Ms. Brown's work as a love letter to black people, "showing things we want to see" — also noticed another progression. "Camille has always been concerned that people would miss or misunderstand things," she said. "She practically wrote a textbook in the program for 'Black Girl,' but now she's more willing to let the work speak for itself."

Ms. Brown agrees. "When I was creating 'Black Girl,' I wanted it to be a piece that was recognizable for everyone," she said. "I wanted it to be culturally specific, but with universal themes. But this new work is not about being universal."

"The gestures are a language," she continued, "and some people will recognize it, and think 'I know that' or 'I know that guy,' but other audience members won't be familiar with it." Similarly, references in the rhythms — reggae, dancehall, the beat from Mary J. Blige's "Real Love" — will carry strong associations for some people, but not for everyone.

"I like that," Ms. Brown said, "because it forces some audience members to think past what they think they know about black people."