

NEW JERSEY Stage

CAMILLE A. BROWN'S "INK" AT PEAK PERFORMANCE

By Patricia Kiernan Johnson, JerseyArts.com



From February 1 through 4, [Peak Performances](#) at Montclair State University presents Camille A. Brown and her dancers in “ink,” the final installment in Brown’s dance theatre trilogy about identity. The first installment was “Mr. TOL E. RAnCE” in 2012 and “BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play” from 2015. The hour-long “ink” is a new work, having received its premiere on December 2, 2017 in Washington, D.C.

Created and choreographed by Camille A. Brown, “ink” is a collaboration with music director Allison Miller, percussionist Wilson Torres, violinist Juliette Jones and composer/pianist Scott Patterson. Using the rhythms and sounds of traditional African and handmade instruments at its center, “ink” takes the audience on a musical, dance and storytelling journey through time with elements of the blues, hip-hop, jazz and swing. The company dancers also took part in the collaboration to make “ink.”

NEW JERSEY Stage



How does that all work? Check out this work-in-progress clip of ink (and make sure you have your sound turned on to hear Brown's narrative!):

"ink" is performed by seven dancers (including Brown herself) and consists of six different sections, mostly performed in solos or duets. Here, Camille A. Brown describes each of the six segments that make up "ink:"

The rev up | Super Power:

Heritage. The rev up sets up the ritual and clears the path for these stories to be told. I feel like I am stirring a pot of stew and each go-round I keep pulling out more gestures, more groove, more pain and more work.

Milkshake | Super Power: The

Butt. Milkshake celebrates the Black female

body. Harkening to the last section of the mother/daughter relationship in "BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play," Milkshake offers the story of the daughter who is now a woman, and celebrates one of her many assets that has been objectified and appropriated.

Balance | Super Power: Love. Balance represents the shared energy between a man and a woman. Often men and women are put into very specific roles—the man as the protector/provider and the woman as the nurturer. In Balance, these roles are interchangeable. Through their mannerisms and gestures, you see the story of how they meet, court, lift, care, protect and, most importantly, love each other.

Turf | Super Power: The Dab. Turf is about brotherhood, and similar to "BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play"'s journey of sisterhood, tells the story of two Black men from boyhood to manhood. They are claiming their turf in society, home, and life. Through it all, they walk the path together, protecting each other.

NEW JERSEY Stage



Migration | Super Power: Spirituality. Migration is about how our bodies hold energy and how we transfer that energy to someone else. What happens when someone holds the space for you to exhale?

Migration II | Super Power: The Ancestors. Migration II connects the lines between African rituals and African American rituals. Our stories live within “the circle of the bantaba” – The Dancing Ground – and “the dab” – a greeting with the hands that takes on many forms. Through relationships, friendships, and spirituality, we use the powers of the past and present to propel us into the future.

You probably noticed that many of the segment titles include “super power.” No, you’re not likely to see the dancers wearing capes and protecting their secret identities. Rather, Brown was inspired by reading “Question Bridge: Black Males in America” (Brown is REALLY keen on research and investigation as she creates works) where one of the men interviewed said, “I see Black people as comic book heroes because they always keep rising.” And for Brown, that was a lightning moment – that there are superhuman powers to be found in basic survival: “Powers to mutate, to overcome and to transform within an often hostile environment,” she says.

NEW JERSEY Stage

Brown calls her works “dance theatre” and uses them to explore intense issues of culture, race and identity, especially in light of power and control. Outside of her own company, Brown also does a lot of choreographic work for the theatre as well, including the choreography for Broadway’s “Once on this Island,” so she is well immersed in the ways of telling stories and conveying large-scale concepts through dance.

In her works, Brown questions—and wants the audience to think about—what it means for a person of color to be manipulated by another power, how people and communities to claim their own power with ancestral and contemporary vocabulary, and what it means when people are able to claim their own power. Brown’s dance trilogy, of which “ink” is the final installment, continues these questions and highlights the resilience and creative genius of African Americans. In the previous trilogy installments, “Mr. TOL E. RAnCE” explored stereotypes of blacks in entertainment, while “BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play” looked at the experience of girlhood, making a dance out of playground games like double Dutch, red light-green light and hand-clapping games.

And Brown doesn’t let these questions rest at the end of her shows. After the conclusion of performances, she and her dancers often participate in community conversations with the audiences. During the Montclair run, that conversation takes place following the Saturday, February 3 performance.



NEW JERSEY Stage

With “ink,” Brown says that she is “working from a place of reclamation—taking back narratives that have been placed on Black people (stereotypes, tropes, etc.) and taking those stories back. Writing and rewriting our stories the way we know them to be—not what is dictated by others. The title, ‘ink,’ speaks to this. Reclaiming African-American narratives by showcasing their authenticity, writing our stories with our bodies.”

The Washington Post, in its review of the December premiere, called ink “highly promising” and “often intriguing,” and said that the work “makes a beautiful study of personal and even secretive gestures and rituals.”

“ink” is centered on love, Camille A. Brown says, and represents it through family, relationships, friendships, spirituality and hope: “It’s about using the power of the past and present to propel us into the future.”



Not just the venue for these “ink” performances, Peak Performances at Montclair State University is also a co-lead commissioner of the work, along with the Kennedy Center. Peak Performances was created in 2005 and has since brought a wide range of internationally acclaimed artists and productions to the Alexander Kasser Theater. With an emphasis on interdisciplinary work, Peak Performances has presented more than 50 world and American premieres. Peak Performances also presents performances by Montclair State University’s students as part of its efforts to bring together artists of uncommon imagination with audiences of adventuresome spirits to foster a greater understanding and appreciation of the creative spirit. Count me in.