

Camille A. Brown develops vocabulary of meaningful gestures in 'Ink'

By: **ROBERT JOHNSON** | February 3, 2018



PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER DUGGAN *Camille A. Brown, in a solo portion of "Ink."*

You can often tell how someone feels by reading body language, before a word is said. Beyond the raised eyebrow of suspicion and the fist with a finger sticking out of each end, which, placed beside an ear, means we are talking on the phone, our world is full of signals and meaningful gestures.

So it was easy for a young, black woman in the audience to read Camille A. Brown's "Ink," an intimate contemporary dance piece that received its local premiere on Feb. 1 (and runs through Feb. 4) as part of the Peak Performances Series at Montclair State University. Participating in the post-performance discussion at the Alexander Kasser Theater, this woman snapped her fingers overhead and, switching her hand back and forth, exclaimed, "Don't mess with me!" She wanted confirmation from the artists, but she already knew what that gesture meant; and she could perform it herself.

Brown's dances often communicate with viewers that way, making her works emotionally intelligible and familiar. The title of this latest piece, "Ink," suggests that blackness itself is a medium of communication, although there's enough shared humanity in this deeply sentient work to appeal to anyone, regardless of ethnicity.

Despite the ambitious contributions of Brown's collaborators, who include music director Allison Miller and lighting and scenic designer David L. Arsenault, "Ink" feels small in scale. Arsenault's painted collages hang on either side of the stage, the canvases wrinkled with faces, numbers and isolated patterns emerging among splotches of red and black. A line of musical instruments, including a grand piano and an assortment of drums, hugs the back wall; at one point, violinist Monique Brooks Roberts joins the dancers in the center. Yet "Ink" is composed largely of duets, establishing intimate relationships among the seven dancers.



Drawing the focus still tighter around herself, Brown opens the work alone. Waking to the sound of a drum, she performs a solo of deft gestures while she sits atop a crate, the movements darting out and ornamenting the space around her, before her hands return to a calm center, folded over her chest.

These gestures are not necessarily literal, though they suggest the activities of daily life. Reaching to one side, Brown traces a smooth circle. She squeezes the air, and turns an invisible handle. She fans herself, and her wavering fingers exude a nervous excitement. When she rises, we see her apparently dragging a burden, holding fast to an invisible rope over her shoulder. When she stumbles, the rhythm of the drums catches her and pulls her up. It seems to rain, and she rushes to catch something in her hand.

Catherine Foster replaces her in this space where the dancer seems to hover in between abstraction and real life. Crouching low, she holds her hands, palms down, just above the floor where they appear magnetized. She conjures there, and then seems to toss something away. Later she rises, and scatters invisible seeds. She caresses the long braids of her hair, and crowns herself with her hands.

By way of contrast, “Ink” then passes from these disconnected solos to their opposite — a duet in which Kendra “Vie Boheme” Dennard is often attached to Maleek Washington, each holding the other firmly by the forearm. A casual, gestural conversation (even a phone call) leads them to a place of mutual understanding; soon his arm is around her shoulders. When he grows angry and threatens to pull away, she hugs him close. As they lie, side by side, on the floor, he kisses her shoulder tenderly. When she departs, she carries his shirt off with her like a trophy; and the audience laughs in recognition when Washington runs a comb through his hair, his eyes following Dennard as she goes.

A dance for two buddies follows; and the atmosphere of love and joy evaporates in a segment where the two of them, Washington and pugnacious Timothy Edwards, are knocked to the ground and lie there clutching their heads. We are left to imagine who their assailants might be.

The final duet introduces Beatrice Capote and Juel D. Lane. As he hobbles around the stage, agitated, she follows him and waits for



Maleek Washington and Timothy Edwards in “Ink.”



a chance to intervene. Rubbing her palms together as if to generate healing energies, she takes his head between her hands. Then she joins him on his wounded journey, churning, twisting, hauling and spinning.

When the other characters return, they watch Capote and Lane from the sides and perform a kind of exorcism by clapping their hands. Once again, rhythm is a source of strength and renewal.

While much of “Ink” has been joyful — or do we simply prefer to remember the loving bits? — the gestural vocabulary Brown has assembled here is the collective memory of a people; and we can’t expect all of it to be pleasant. Happily, she leaves us in a positive space, with all the dancers leaping skyward as if to catch hold of their dreams.