

Choreographer Camille A. Brown is free to nae nae and bop and juba around the country

Her new work 'ink' explores the grace and democracy of African-American social dance



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Alvin Ailey used to say that “dance is for everybody.”

Camille A. Brown, the tiny choreographer with big ideas, may be the living embodiment of that legacy. She’s the latest choreographer to marry social dance with concert dance, creating something that’s both sophisticated and familiar, evocative and unmistakably black.

You may know Brown’s work from a video that went viral and was turned into a TED explainer:

She’s an accomplished storyteller who began her career with Ronald K. Brown’s EVIDENCE company and danced for two years with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. She did the choreography for the Broadway revival of *Once on the Island*. And she’s something of a dance evangelist, not just choreographing and performing but often staying for audience Q&A’s postperformance. She wants to make dance accessible.



Brown is now touring her newest work, *ink*, which she debuted in December at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. It's the final chapter of a trilogy that began with *Mr. TOL E. RAnCE* (2012), followed by *Black Girl: Linguistic Play* (2015). All three examine black identity, stereotypes and authenticity. Her company performed *ink* at the University of Iowa last week, moved to Alexander Kasser Theater in Montclair, New Jersey, this weekend and will take the work to St. Paul, Minnesota, in late March.

Brown, 38, grew up dancing in Queens, New York. From the time she was 3, she'd watch Michael Jackson and Janet Jackson videos. Her mother noticed that she was preternaturally good at recreating the Jacksons' complex choreography and enrolled her in dance classes. Brown loved it. She had a knack for learning dances quickly under [Carolyn DeVore](#). And then puberty — or, rather, the way the adults around her reacted to the changes in her body — momentarily wrecked everything.

"When I got to high school and college, all of the sudden I became aware of what the ideal body was, and I quickly learned that I was not the ideal person," Brown said during an interview in Washington. "I had a butt. ... When you think of a dancer, you think of someone that's petite, and I just wasn't that ... so people would say, 'Oh, you're not going to fit the costume. Oh, you need to lose weight.' "

Brown began dieting when she was 16, and by the time she started studying dance in college at North Carolina School for the Arts, she'd become accustomed to getting sent to the school nutritionist. It was like being called to the principal's office, but for food. She's since shed 15-20 pounds, but that time and the way she felt about her body had a lasting impact.

"I had teachers that really saw my ability and really helped nurture that, and then I had teachers that just didn't look at me, or just was like, 'Oh, she's not going to be a dancer.' I just really had a struggle with that," Brown said. "Me being a dancer, it was something that I wanted to achieve, but I didn't necessarily think that I would be able to achieve it based on the things that I had been hearing about who I was."

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So after receiving her bachelor of fine arts degree from NCSA, Brown joined a dance company where it didn't matter that she had a butt, or a chest size larger than an A cup: Ronald K. Brown's Brooklyn-based EVIDENCE.

"Body image was one of the reasons why I got into choreography, because I don't know if I was always considered the best or had the perfect body image," Brown said. "Would I be a choreographer now? I don't know. I just know how I got here."



Ink incorporates dancers of various shapes and sizes, using African, modern, hip-hop and social dance to explore black identity and day-to-day life. Brown's movements explode from her petite, muscled frame (she's *maybe* 5 feet tall) to fill the stage. Another dancer in the company, Kendra Dennard, holds your attention as a long, lithe, seductive flirt. There are bald heads and locs, juicy booties and small ones. Brown's dancers run the gamut.

Brown takes movements that are familiar — the way a black woman might pat her hair as if to say, "I'm feeling myself," or the act of scrubbing a floor — and folds them into stories about romance and friendship. In *ink*, Brown is a consummate observer of male body language. Her dancers capture the hesitation that comes with meeting someone for the first time, the way men can outwardly show off and exaggerate themselves while concealing vulnerability and sensitivity. And Brown reveals what it's like in the intimate, comfortable moments when that mask is dropped.

In a section of the performance called *Balance*, about the courtship between a man and a woman, Brown said she wanted to use the scene to "debunk patriarchy." And so the audience sees the male partner following a woman's lead. The relationship moves at her speed, not his.

"It's not the romance that we might see in the movies, but it's romance in the sense that I know what romance is," Brown said. "I mean, it's coming from what I see or what I've experienced, so in that way it's what I know love to be."

What comes through in Brown's work is a philosophy that social dance is just as significant as its classical cousin, ballet, and that incorporating it on stages like those of the Kennedy Center doesn't cheapen the work of George Balanchine, whose [outsize influence](#) on what's considered the "ideal" dancer body type continues to loom large. It's simply a different form of communicating, drawing on another set of traditions and skills, the same way choreographers like Ailey or Twyla Tharp or Katherine Dunham created their own styles too. What's more, using a variety of bodies to communicate those traditions doesn't cheapen anything either.

"If you go all the way back to when I was a kid, I'm [told], 'You're not the ideal dancer.' To go from that to actually being at the Kennedy Center under my own name? It's something that I would have never dreamed of, ever," Brown said. "It's really a powerful time, and especially because we're doing work that is not, by some people, seen as valuable. We live in a very Eurocentric dance world, where ballet or contemporary is seen as the elite movement, and so I'm not doing that. I'm doing modern, and hip-hop, and tap, and African, and social dance. To have this kind of platform, knowing that other people, whoever those other people are, don't view this as real dance, is tremendous."

For Brown, a Kennedy Center debut wasn't just a platform; it was a springboard. She is now free to nae nae and bop and juba around the country, and even the globe.