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Don't Dare Underestimate Camille A. Brown



Camille A. Brown is on an impressive streak: In October, the Ford Foundation named her an Art of Change fellow. In November, she won an [AUDELCO \("Viv"\) Award](#) for her choreography in the musical [Bella: An American Tall Tale](#). On December 1, her [Camille A. Brown & Dancers](#) made its debut at the Kennedy Center, and two days later she was back in New York City to see her choreography in the opening of Broadway's [Once on This Island](#). Weeks later, it was announced that she was choreographing NBC's live television musical [Jesus Christ Superstar Live in Concert](#), to air on April 1.

An extraordinarily private person, few knew that during this time Brown was in the midst of a health crisis. It started with an upset stomach while performing with her company on tour last summer.

"I was drinking ginger ale, thinking that I would feel better," she says. Finally, the pain became so acute that she went to the emergency room in Mississippi. Her appendix had burst. "Until then, I didn't know it was serious," she says. "I'm a dancer—aches and pains don't keep you from work."

It is a testament to her strength: In a situation that could have been fatal, she literally never missed a beat. She is the unsinkable Camille A. Brown.

Like the old graffitied subway cars that rumbled through her hometown of Queens in the 1980s, Brown's work is tagged with cultural identifiers. Her strong technical modern dance foundation merges with African, topped with the social and theatrical dance that were staples in her home. (Her father teaches salsa; her mother loves musicals.) Hip hop, tap and step round out her distinctive choreographic portmanteau.

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Growing up, Brown wanted to choreograph since before she even knew the word for it. "I always put things together, made up dances to cartoons," she says. She began training in neighborhood schools (Queens' Bernice Johnson Cultural Arts Center and DeVore Dance Center), then became a scholarship student at The Ailey School while also going to the famed LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts.

She was a standout: Her senior year she won a YoungArts' Presidential Scholar in the Arts award, the Young Artist Award and the Helen Tamiris Award, all for performance. But it was in composition classes at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts that she learned the language for the dancemaking she had been doing.

Almost as soon as she came on the scene, she started turning out work that was recognized at the highest levels—four Princess Grace Awards, a Bessie Award, a Doris Duke Award, a TED Fellowship, residencies at places like Jacob's Pillow.

In the early years, her It-girl status generated a great deal of jealous "hateration." From the outside it looked like grants and commissions were being handed to her. Few knew the depth to which Brown descends into personal, artistic and cultural wellsprings to mine her choreographic gems.

Maybe she is underestimated because of her diminutive stature and distinctive, high-pitched voice. But she is a woman who knows her mind. There is nothing happenstance in her career or her creations. Audience members often assume the work is improvised, due to its spontaneous feel; she takes umbrage at that thought—every moment is carefully crafted.

"People have no idea how hard she works. She has always been willing to try, and unafraid to fail," says longtime dancer Juel D. Lane. Urban Bush Women artistic director Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, who commissioned her work early on, agrees: "She has a voice, a point of view. It's distinctive. You can see her dance history, all the techniques, in her vernacular, and it's compelling and original."

As a black person, watching her work feels highly personal, like you're sharing a secret, or reading a love letter. She escorts the beauty of our dance culture into a space where it has often been excluded—that of high art. In the vein of a Dunham or Ailey, she cuts us slices of life.

Mr. TOL E. RAnCE takes us behind the mask of minstrelsy to reveal the weight of double consciousness. In *BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play* she makes us recognize black girls as children, exposing their humanity and the genius in their play. Her newest work, *ink*—the last in the trilogy—reclaims ritualistic African-American gestural vocabulary, and highlights positive male relationships and black love.

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Along the lines of television producer Shonda Rhimes and film director Ava DuVernay, Brown is a part of a cultural movement of black female artists who are redefining how African-American stories are told: with humanity, sensitivity, depth and intellectual sophistication.

Each of her evening-length works comes out of a one- to two-year process that includes extensive research and the composition of an original score. To foster a deeper understanding of black history and culture, Brown offers reference guides in the programs and post-performance dialogues. Seeing, hearing and interacting with the artists make her dancers not just objets d'art; they have voices that she encourages them to share.

Yet the audience is not afforded an emotional release. For instance, in *Mr. TOL E. RAnCE*, her use of disturbing images of minstrelsy set to the awards show "Who You Be, N****...That's Me!" makes viewers shift in their seats. In naming a show *BLACK GIRL* she was highly aware that she might well be shooting the production in the foot.

"I mean, it was a risk," she says. "People might not have wanted to book it, or see it because of a preconceived notion about what a production called '*Black Girl*' was going to look like."

In recent years, Brown has been steadily laying track for a dual career in theater. Her first major theater commission came in 2011 when director Daniel Aukin tapped her to interpret the music of the '70s for *The Fortress of Solitude*. "I didn't know what I was looking for, but after I'd seen a bunch of Camille's choreography, I knew I'd found it," he says. "Her work is fierce, deeply personal, socially engaged and witty."

Brown quickly learned that musical theater is a different animal than concert dance. "In theater you have to be able to give the director options on the spot," she says. "It's not about your first idea, it's about your eighth. Concepts are constantly changing and you have to ride with the tide."

She also has to factor in more than the dancing. "Early on I helped her navigate jurisdiction of the director/choreographer roles in theater," says Broadway veteran Rickey Tripp, who's worked as her associate choreographer. "I'll also remind her, 'Okay, remember they have to sing after doing this.'" Theatrical lessons like always serving the story have only deepened her concert work.

Today, in addition to directing and performing in her own company, plus choreographing for Broadway, she also has developed two programs of civic engagement: The Gathering, a convening of women of color in dance; and Black Girl Spectrum, an initiative that works to establish "safe spaces for black girls to live as creative citizens."

Brown is very aware of what she represents to younger black women. "Most of the time we don't see ourselves in the front of the room, in power. I want to normalize that," she says. "I feel that when you get that door open, it is your responsibility to keep it open for others."

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Her team—CABD's managing director Indira Goodwine, manager Lakey Wolff, concert agent Pamela Green and theater agent Michael Moore—works like air traffic control around her, performing a constant dance of scheduling. "There is no way I could do any of this without them," Brown says.

As she's hit her stride, she has decided to pull back on commissions. "Look, I don't have a million ideas for pieces, but I *do* have a million ideas that can fit into one work!" she confesses. Right now, the place she wants to put most of those ideas is into her own company and theater work.

She speaks frankly about being black and female in the world, the struggle to be seen and acknowledged, embodying the old adage about having to be twice as good to get half as much. However, she represents the by-product of that imbalanced reality in her endurance, ingenuity and creativity.

A thought that anchors her latest CABD work, *ink*, is a quote from the transmedia art project *Question Bridge: Black Males in America*: "I see black people as superheroes because we keep rising." This encapsulates Camille A. Brown: She keeps rising, unsinkable.