



Q&A: Camille A. Brown

This weekend, the award-winning dance and theater choreographer Camille A. Brown opens the TITAS Presents season with *BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play*.

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Dallas — 2018 has been quite a year for **Camille A. Brown** whose powerful combination of storytelling and modern, African and hip-hop movements has been capturing audiences from every angle, including concert dance, on and off-Broadway, and television. Most recently, her work has been seen on NBC with the Emmy-nominated special, *Jesus Christ Superstar LIVE*, and also on Broadway with the 2018 Tony award-winning production, *Once On This Island*. Her other theater credits include *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Cabin in the Sky*, Jonathan Larson's *tick, tick...BOOM* and Dallas Theater Center's world premiere productions of *Stagger Lee*, *Fortress of Solitude*, and *Bella: An American Tall Tale*.

The dancing *It Girl* is also a four-time Princess Grace Award winner, TED Fellow, Ford Foundation Art of Change Fellow, Jacob's Pillow Dance Award winner, Guggenheim Fellowship recipient and Audelco Award winner. Her work has been commissioned by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Complexions, Ailey II, Philandanco!, Urban Bush Women, Ballet Memphis, and Hubbard Street II, among others.

With all these creative accolades it's no surprise to learn that Brown has been choreographing since childhood when she would make up dances to cartoon shows. A lot of her movement is influenced by the social dances of her childhood, including hip-hop, African and step dance. She was also versed in salsa dancing and musical theatre thanks to her parent's love of musicals and Latin social dances. Add in her point of view as a strong black female from Queens and you have the foundation of *BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play* (2015); the second part of a trilogy that her troupe **Camille A. Brown & Dancers** will be performing as part of TITAS Presents in Dallas Aug. 24-25.

TheaterJones caught up with the busy dancemaker to talk about her current success, working on *Once On This Island*, finding her artistic voice and what Dallas audiences can expect to see from her dancers this weekend.

TheaterJones: Most young dancers dream of becoming performers, and yet you knew you wanted to choreograph from a very young age. Dancers don't usually come across composition classes till they reach high school age, so how did you foster your interest in creating movement growing up?



Camille A. Brown: I have always been a quiet child. My voice was small, so I got teased a lot, and it made me more self-conscious about speaking. I watched Michael Jackson and Janet Jackson videos as well as musicals (which my mom introduced me to). I would spend hours learning all the routines from videos and musical numbers. I also created movement to the opening credits of cartoons I watched. Family gatherings were opportunities to put on a show with friends and cousins. My family would support our efforts and was always a great audience.

How has your upbringing in Queens influenced your artistic choices throughout your career?

One of the first works I did was about rush hour in New York City and what happens when everyone is waiting for a delayed train. I took all of my experiences riding the subway since 13 to create six minutes of material. The work was eventually commissioned by Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. My most recent work is also pulling from my experiences growing up in the city. Some of it is inspired by my neighborhood. A couple in Queens walking down the street with their isms bold and bright. The guys that play basketball outside. The hand gestures (dab) they do greeting each other.

In *BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play*, there are moments that are inspired by relationships with my mother, grandmother, and cousin. Q85, Farmers Blvd., Guy R. Brewer, Foch Blvd, E/F train (last stop), Green Acres Mall, Rochdale Village, grandma and granddaddy's house. We carry our stories with us and they never let us go.

Looking back, would you still have chosen to go to college before starting your professional dance career?

Absolutely! I wasn't ready to be a professional dancer after I graduated high school, and still wanted to learn more as a student.

How did you get involved with *Once On This Island*? What research did you do leading up to teaching the choreography for the show?

I had never seen *OOTI*, but was very intrigued by the story. I knew it was a very popular musical, which made me nervous! It's hard stepping in as a choreographer creating material for a show that's been done thousands of times. I got a little bit in my head about it. I knew my role as a part of the creative team was extremely important. I wanted to honor the culture of Haiti and the Caribbean islands, but also honor my choreographic voice.

People ask me what the inspiration behind the movement for the show was. Culture always tells you where to go. The challenge was to create a language that combines culture, my voice and the actor's creative identities. I connected with an Afro-Haitian/Afro-Cuban consultant, Maxine Montilus. We had four sessions together. I told her that these sessions were not so I could implant these specific steps into the show. It was about me knowing the origins of steps so they could help to inform my choreographic choices.

The other challenge for me was the production was staged in the round and I had never choreographed anything in the round before. I was creating my latest work, *ink*, at the same time



so I used that creative process as an opportunity to practice. It's interesting how many projects can support one goal. I'm grateful for it all.

How have your experiences working on Broadway and TV impacted the way you think about movement for your company dancers?

I have always been interested in telling stories, but working in theater with collaborators and putting an entire show together that has music, acting, dance, set design, sound design, costume design and orchestrations has made me a better storyteller and communicator. The information that I absorbed working in theater has helped me to create my movement language and given me the tools to communicate what I want to my dancers and musicians.

Can you please talk to me about the building of *BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play*? Is it mainly autobiographical? Is it one complete story or broken up by experiences?

BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play is the second piece of the trilogy and it reveals the complexity of carving out a self-defined identity as a black female in urban American culture. In a society where black women are often only portrayed in terms of their strength, resiliency, or trauma, this work seeks to interrogate these narratives by representing a nuanced spectrum of black womanhood in a racially and politically charged world.

Kyra Gaunt's book, *The Games That Black Girls Play*, talks about the contributions of black girls to hip hop through childhood games. If we look at the mechanics of the hand clap game "numbers", it's highly intelligent, mathematical and musical. Social dance grounds a time and place. The body has so many stories to tell and we can see them through social dance. We can also see people's creative identities.

There is artistry in childhood games and social dance.

I am bringing all my stories, my personal experiences of being a woman and of being black into the work. *BG:LP* is about my childhood. It has glimpses of the relationship I have with my sister-friends, cousin and mother.

At what point did you know you wanted to make this part of a trilogy? After creating Mr. TOL E. RAnCE, my headspace was still in the world of black identity. My mentor and dramaturge, Talvin Wilks, encouraged me to go with the flow. Three evening length pieces later!

Where do you want to go from here? I want to stay focused, clear and keep growing. It is my goal to continue creating works for my company, become a director/choreographer for musical theater and do more TV and film. Debbie Allen is a huge inspiration. She does it all. Her body of work makes me believe that all things are possible.