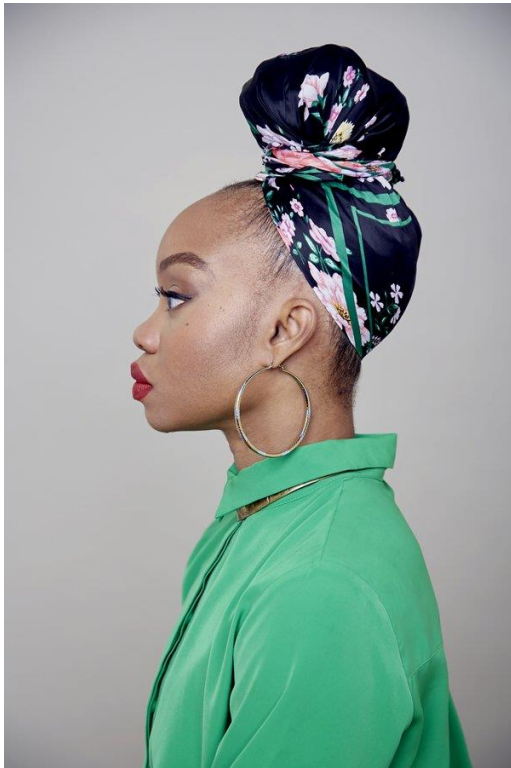


## Honesty in Every Choice: The Evolving, Social, Individual Dance of Camille A. Brown

BY JUSTIN TORNOW | NOV. 07, 2018



**Camille A. Brown & Dancers** are in Durham this week for their first of three residencies with Duke Performances. Their time in Durham will be spent in rehearsal, **public artist talks, and various classes and workshops throughout the area.** Brown's company presents engaging work about African-American identity, reframing stereotypes by placing authentic representation on stage and creating open discourse between the work and the communities in which it is performed.

Brown has spent much of this decade creating a nationally acclaimed trilogy that **Duke Performances is the first presenter to show in a single season,** starting this weekend with the newest work, *ink*, then working back through *BLACK GIRL:Linguistic Play* (2015) in February and Bessie winner *Mr. TOL E. RAnCE* (2012) in March.

Throughout the trilogy, Brown throws into sharp relief the divisive, one-dimensional stereotypes that still pervade in our media and culture by staging a three-dimensional counter-narrative. Her intricate interweaving of gesture, social dance, interdisciplinary collaboration, and thoughtful concepts highlights her extraordinary talents in all of her roles—choreographer, performer, and director.

Last Friday, the *INDY* spoke with Brown about the realities of the choreographic process, the themes of her works, and the importance of being accessible as an artist.

***INDY:* This is the first time this trilogy has been presented whole. What has that experience been like so far?**

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**CAMILLE A. BROWN:** It's interesting because *TOL. E. RancE* was supposed to be the evening-length piece, and I told my agent *BLACK GIRL* was probably going to be fifteen to twenty minutes. This was before I found the idea of play in Kyra Gaunt's book *The Games Black Girls Play*, and that extended it to fifty-five. The new piece, *ink*—again, I was like, "Oh, it's going to be fifteen to twenty minutes, here we go." The funny thing is that all of the pieces are fifty-five minutes each, and that wasn't planned.

**No way.**

Yeah, so crazy! When I choreograph a work, I don't look at the time. I'm looking at the way things are flowing. You have to come to grips with the fact that, OK, this work you're doing now, even though it's important to you, it might not travel. It might not go any further than the premiere. Thankfully, all three pieces have been successful, and it's the first season that we're touring all three, which is insanely wonderful.

**Is it intense? As a choreographer, I have so many questions about the rehearsal and direction process, what it must be like to do all three.**

Well, pianist Scott Patterson and I are the only ones that are in all three. Each piece has its own set, cast, and musicians, so it's really a team effort. I'm working on a theater project during the day and then working on *ink* at night. Everyone is not necessarily available at the same time, and that's one of the reasons why *ink* is mapped out the way it is now.

**Mapped out in terms of the seven sections of the work? Like how a practical matter can turn into, "Oh, wait, I really love this"—that kind of situation?**

Yeah, and having an organic space is really helpful for me, because some things, you just have to trust that they're going to land. Most of my dancers are choreographers as well, so it's important for me to make sure that while we are creating, they have their time to create, too. I have to be OK with not having seven people in the room five days a week. And it just started working out.

**Sometimes, that's a weird pressure on the work, to have everyone available all at the same time. I get into a better groove if I am working in that practical way, where I have who I have in the room and I'm like, "OK, great, you're here, so let's work on this," instead of worrying about using everyone's time wisely.**

Yeah, and we have our residencies, so that's the time when we're all together, which is really special because I've been building this thing separately and kind of crossing my fingers, hoping

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that when we all come together, it works. I did the same for *BLACK GIRL*. For the past two weeks, I've been rehearsing different sections, and we're about to come together for the first time and have a full eight-hour rehearsal. I've made significant changes since the last time we've done *ink*.

## **How does the title of *ink* relate to the content of the work?**

It's the newest one, and I'm still writing and finding things to say about it. The name came from the idea, "What does it look like for black people to write their own narratives in this space?" It can take on several different meanings, but that is at the core of why I named it *ink*.

## **In terms of the trilogy, how would you say that the themes are talking to each other?**

I had a performance a couple days ago for the Actor's Fund. I was doing the *TOL E. RAnce* solo—and I was sick, so that was a challenge—and one of my dancers asked how it was. I was telling her that it's so crazy to be in a place of openness and freedom, doing *BLACK GIRL* and *ink* and creating the world that you see, and then going back to the mindset of having to feel oppressed and show what happens when identities are placed on us that we can't control.

It's challenged me as a performer and helped me clarify, in my own dancing and performance, what I'm saying through each gesture. Because each gesture in a specific piece has a very clear meaning, and it's up to us as the dancers to express those meanings in a clear and accessible way. Since this is the first time that we're doing all of them together, I'm still trying to figure out how they're speaking to each other.

Like you said, the practical: Yes it's about identity and stereotypes and the opposition of stereotypes, and black girls' lens and black men's lens, and on the outskirts you can definitely tie in things, but the feelings—even the conversations after the performances, they are completely different based on each piece. So how do you emotionally get ready for the ping-pong that is about to happen?

**I was wondering, going back over the works, if *TOL E. RAnce* coming last might feel, like you said, that you're going backwards in some way, and that it might be an emotional roller coaster to do that.**

They asked me, "What order?" and I said, "Let's do it backwards." It's interesting because I did *TOL E. RAnce* during the rise of reality TV, so my statement was about that. But looking at where we are now, reality TV is kind of a normal thing, and so it's about me also going back

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into *TOL E. RAnCE* and finding ways that we can invite what's happening politically in 2018 into the work. It's about really tuning in. And it's in the second half when we really get more seriously into the actual stereotypes that I'm thinking about it.

I started creating *TOL E. RAnCE* in 2011 and at the same time started pursuing a career in theater. Between 2011 and 2018, I hope that I have learned so much from the experiences that I've had. So to go back into what I did in 2012, I'm reworking with wiser eyes and fine-tuning things I just didn't know at the time. And me just saying, "I now know"—it's actually an acronym that one of my dramaturges, Calvin Wells, says that *ink* can also represent.

**I teach composition to college students and this is on their minds a lot, how we look back at our body of work as we go forward. So it is interesting to hear you discuss stepping back into a work that is incredibly relevant but surrounded by a very different context than when it was created, and how we can stay alert to that. Do you have a process of reflecting back on the work that you've made?**

I do, and some of that comes from schools requesting the repertory. TED just posted a piece that I choreographed in 2006 called *New Second Line*, but from 2006 to 2018, I know so much more about social dance and the idea of individuality. So every time we are stepping into a piece, whether it's from ten years ago or something I'm still changing now, like *ink*—how does it really feel, and is there honesty in every choice? And that's what I want to have.

**Watching a work-in-progress video of *ink* and seeing how intricately you weave the imagery and the gesture into the movement vocabulary, it feels so authentic in terms of creating this precise language, super specific to the work yet incredibly clear at the same time.**

Thank you, I really appreciate that.

**How involved are you in shaping your residencies, like this one in Durham?**

Oh, I'm very involved. I think it's a little reckless to not be involved, because the workshops are reflections of what I believe and what the company does. When Duke was interested in having these workshops, the first people that came to mind were Francine [Ott] and Clarice [Young], and they just happen to be working in North Carolina, which was perfect. They were some of the first people that I set movement on and they would do shows with me. The piece that they helped me create was eventually brought into the Ailey Company's repertory, so the people that are involved are family, people who understand me and know what all of the goals are.

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I wrote a syllabus for them, for Duke, and also for the guys when they do their Black Men Moving workshop. I try to have a balance, so even though I created a syllabus, they don't have to follow it verbatim because, in terms of social dance, each has its own very specific language. Francine's language is more focused on New Orleans and second line because that's where she's from. And Clarice is taking more of the idea of *Soul Train* and the social dance line that used to happen. There is the umbrella idea of social dance in community, but I feel like social dance allows individuals to be themselves, and that's for the facilitators, too.

**I've noticed this across your work, and the way you speak about your work, and the shape of the Duke residency: It is very much about everyone that you're working with being able to shine, to bring their gifts to the table and be a full member of the situation.**

Oh, that's great! And that's true for the **Every Body Move initiative**. Principal strategist Ebony Golden has been phenomenal in helping us make partnerships, and she is working with her team to create a curriculum for other schools and partners to work with while we have workshops in the city. So I feel like each thing is a reflection of the other.

**It also seems like community is important in terms of you being really accessible as an artist. For instance, you have a free talk at the Pinhook this week. And all the things you have written about your work—that struck me, because I don't see that level of transparency regularly from other artists. In *The Mask of Survival: Black Performance in Dance*, you went through each work and were really open, going into detail about how you researched and created. It seems brave, especially because your self is your subject.**

Yeah, I want people in the audience to be themselves. So it's a reflection of that, and also the facilitators, because when I teach, I'm learning, too. If you're not connected to the community that you're visiting, how can it mean something to them? When I was working with a group of girls in Detroit and showing them the Harlem Shake, they said, "Oh, that's The Meat. We call it The Meat here." So I put it in the work the next time we were in Detroit, because I wanted them to know that I saw them. Even though things are definitely choreographed, I try to make room for us to constantly grow. I think the last time we did *ink* was March, and we are completely different people since then. So how do we, as performers, take all of the stuff that we've learned, connect it to a community, and bring that into our dance?

**That vulnerability and generosity goes beyond the work being impactful itself, having a relationship with the audience that deepens the impact. It seems integrated into the way that you exist as an artist all around. But let's go back into the themes of the work.**

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I think really the themes of social dance are there, but in an abstract way. For instance, in *ink* there's a duet called "Balance," and the inspiration is a combination of the Chicago Quickstep, the Hustle, and the Lindy Hop. But when you see the duet, it's not like we're trying to do these forms, it's more inspired by and riffing off of. For the Hustle, for example, it's the idea of whirling around in space, and you don't know where one arm begins and the other one ends.

And that's pretty much what "Balance" is talking about in terms of a relationship—a functioning, positive, healthy relationship, which I was challenged about in terms of black relationships a couple of years ago during a Q and A. An older white man proceeded to tell us about the black family, that it was not together, and broken, and single moms.

**Whoa.**

The stuff that I've heard—yeah. My company and musicians were all there, and most of them came from two-parent homes, and both of the musicians are married with kids. So I proceeded to explain to him that it was not a true narrative, and he just kept saying the same thing. And I said, "Wow, OK ... well, so what does black love look like to me?" And so I decided to create that, and also challenge the idea of patriarchy in terms of where we place certain gender roles, because they can be interchangeable.

In terms of a woman holding up a man—now, physically, she may not be able to carry him, but emotionally she can carry him. And the man can be the nurturer; he doesn't necessarily have to be the strong provider all the time. I believe that the relationship that I would want to be in would be constantly changing; we're constantly lifting each other up. In each section—I mean, I could be here all day talking about each section. There's a specificity and a going back and forth with abstraction, too.

**That ties back into your ability to modulate quickly between clear imagery and abstraction in the movement language that you make with each piece, so I'm really excited to see this one.**

Yeah, especially with the changes. Well, you don't know what it looked like before, but ...

**I don't, but I totally understand that spirit: "No, no, I'm ready to show the new version! The *now* version."**

The *now* version, right. I'm very excited!