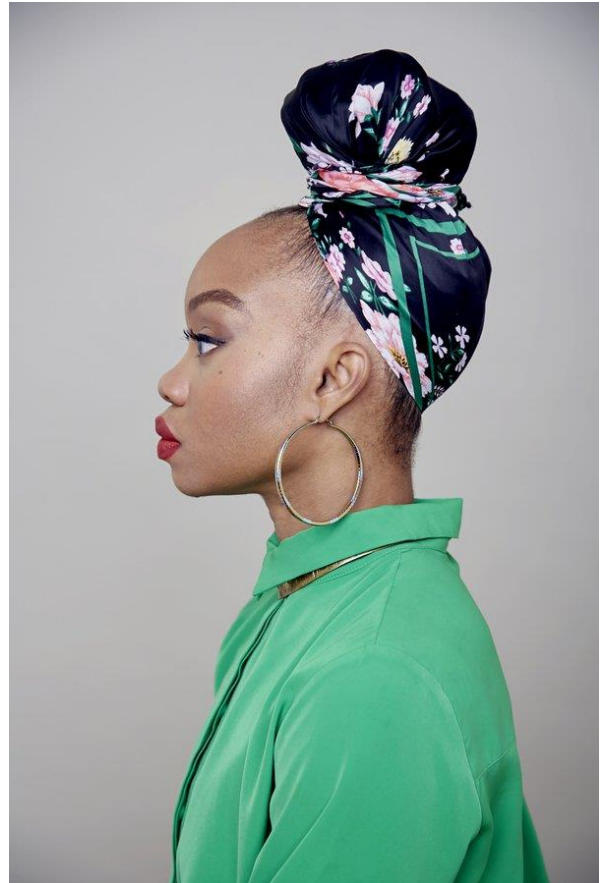


Camille A. Brown Begins Her Duke Performances Trilogy with a Five-Star Ink

BY BYRON WOODS | NOV. 16, 2018

When African-American artists “write their own narratives in dance,” as **Camille A. Brown** put it to the *INDY*—including the interior facts of their relationships with friends, family, and spouses; their coming of age; and their history in the African diaspora—their bodies are the ink. That’s the first in a series of private truths made public in Brown’s *ink*, the revised version of which premiered in Durham last week, part of a series of Duke Performances residencies that will bring us Brown’s whole trilogy this year.

Ink is the concluding chapter in Brown’s first trilogy of evening-length dance pieces, which began with 2012’s *Mr TOL E. RancE*, an incandescent indictment of a century of warped representations of race in popular entertainment, and 2015’s *BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play*, a meditation on the intricate games through which African-American girls learn of the world and come into adulthood.



Brown does much the same for their male counterparts in *ink*’s “Turf” section. Timothy Edwards and Maleek Washington articulate the friendship of teens who first explore the possibilities of the playground, then the larger world around them, longingly gazing up and out at a future they can’t yet reach. In a cascade of recognizable, everyday gestures seamlessly spliced with contemporary and historical social dance forms—a strategy Brown repeats throughout the work—they play each other’s wingman, competitor, confidant, and reality check with moves that span the basketball court and the tandem tap wizardry of the Nicholas Brothers. Ultimately, each must become the other’s protector and guardian as they receive an apparent beating that initiates them into the hard truths of surviving as a black man in America.

INDY week

In her invocation solo, “Culture Codes,” Brown stirs the pot of embedded racial memories, laboring as she mimetically wrings out a figurative tapestry of African history in North America, accompanied by djembe player Wilson Torres. The richness of Washington and Yusha-Marie Sorzano’s duet “Balance” conveys the deep collaboration, compassion, intimacy, and joy in the love of an adult couple before choreographic riffs that take us from the Hustle to the Lindy Hop demonstrate the challenges they find in balancing their relationships. Again, we’re struck by the clearly articulated multiplicity of roles that each plays in their prismatic relationship.

It was unsurprising when, after the performance, Brown name-checked Sara Baartman as an inspiration for Catharine Foster’s jubilant solo in “Milkshake,” which celebrates the African female form. Music director Allison Miller’s quartet expanded on the D.C. go-go riff in subsequent solo section “Go Go Awf.” Perhaps the most somber part was Brown’s duet with Juel D. Lane in “Shedding.” Their bodies bent to a piercing solo violin, showing how, in a society where black men are irrationally targeted and threatened, the women in their lives share their traumatic stress as they try to support and heal with them in private.

In a culture much healthier than ours, Brown’s key statements on the goodness and the multifaceted nature of black love, bodies, and friendships would be universally self-evident. It’s troubling that in our society today, a choreographer of Brown’s vision, scholarship, and taste still feels compelled to devote an evening to demonstrating proof not only of the creativity and history of the African diaspora in the U.S., but also of its cultural integrity and shared humanity.

Brown and her gifted performers hurried to parse those thoughts out loud in a talkback that started the moment the applause concluded, so the audience couldn’t leave with any of it twisted. That makes *ink* a both celebration and a necessary act of opposition, advancing fundamental counter-narratives against representations of race that have turned dramatically more toxic in our culture and our politics over the last two years.