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Choreographer Camille A. Brown: A Queens Girl Who Now Creates Dance Everywhere

[Risa Sarachan](#) | Jan 18, 2019, 09:00am



[Camille A. Brown](#) has made a name for herself as a star choreographer in the dance world, receiving accolades notably but not limited to the [Princess Grace Award](#), [TED Fellowship](#), [Guggenheim Fellowship](#), [Doris Duke Performing Artist Award](#), [USA Jay Franke & David Herro Fellowship](#) and a [Bessie Award](#). She's graced the covers of dance magazines and performed at multiple [TED conferences](#), choreographed for Broadway and television with John Legend's *Jesus Christ Superstar* on [NBC](#). But to speak to Brown, you'd never know it. It's clear that the work itself is the prize she values most, as the soft-spoken Brown lights up with delight when discussing past and future projects.

Her journey was not one of overnight success but one of perseverance and learning that channeling her most personal anxieties and the stories that she found fascinating would open the most doors. Thinking outside of the box of only being a dancer allowed her to embrace all of who she is and Brown continues to expand her talents, pressing up against the confines of the male-dominated world of choreography as a black woman. Currently, Brown's dance company [Camille A. Brown & Dancers](#) is touring the country, stopping at [The Joyce Theatre](#) in New York City in early February. Her choreographic work on the acclaimed show *Choir Boy* written by the Oscar-winning *Moonlight* writer [Tarell Alvin](#) is playing on Broadway. I spoke with Brown about her journey, her training and what advice she'd give to young women who want to succeed in this field.

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Risa Sarachan: Owning your own dance company and achieving the level of commercial success you have is a dream so many strive to achieve. How did this journey begin, where did you train, what kind of access to training and dance classes did you have?

Camille A. Brown: I'm originally from Jamaica Queens, New York, born and raised here. I'm really proud of that. I went to [Bernice Johnson Cultural Arts Center](#) in Jamaica Queens. One of my teachers there, [Carolyn DeVore](#), asked to open up her own school in 1991, so I went over to study with her. I was 11 years old at the time. I was there, and then I went to [LaGuardia High School](#). I started going to [The Ailey School](#) during my junior year of high school. From there I went to college at [North Carolina School of the Arts](#). It's interesting because I've always loved dancing and moving in space. My mom loved musicals and to this day we still talk about all the musicals we love and want to see. She's the one who introduced me to musical theatre. I had gone the concert dance route, and within that time I had a lot of struggles with my body image. I had all kinds of teachers. I had teachers who were and still are my mentors, and I had teachers who were so set on a certain ideal, particularly the ballet teachers. So I had a lot of issues with body image. I struggled a lot with that. I thought college would erase all those struggles and it definitely didn't. My first 2 years I wasn't even called to audition for a lot of choreographers because of my body type, which was very disheartening. My freshman year I called my mom and told her I wanted to transfer. She told me we could talk about transferring when the end of the semester rolled around, but for the time being, I needed to find something I loved. Before she said that, composition and improv weren't things I was into. I didn't understand them because I'd always been in the position where the choreographer shows you the steps and you do the steps. My composition teacher was asking us to create movement based on our own choices. I didn't get that, but I started to gravitate towards that. All of my anxiety and energy I put into creating my own dances. Junior year things started changing, and I was eventually able to work with all these great choreographers which was wonderful because it was what I wanted. At the same time I also discovered this love for choreography. So I was able to stay at school and once I was able to find my way I loved my time there. Students would always say which company and choreographer they wanted to dance with and I never really knew. It wasn't until I saw [Ronald K. Brown's](#) *Disgraced* with [The Evidence Company](#) that I thought, "I want to work with whoever

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put that together, that's just the most beautiful thing I've ever seen." The wonderful thing about it is that after I graduated, I only went to one audition for *The Lion King*. I was standing in a line wrapped around the building. One of Ron's dancers walked by and told me Ron was looking for a woman for his company. He recommended I take one of Ron's classes at [Peri Dance](#). So I left the *Lion King* line, which ended up being for singers, not dancers, so it's good I got out of that line since I can't sing! That would have been a mess. I went to Ron's classes and within the week he had invited me to rehearsals with the company and then soon after that he invited me into the company. Within that first year, I was just focused on being a dancer with Evidence. My friend Amy Page, she's actually the casting supervisor for Hamilton right now, sent me a letter about the [Hubbard Street 2 Competition](#) and I hadn't choreographed in a while but I submitted and got into the competition. That's what started the snowball of me choreographing.

Sarachan: As a choreographer in a male-dominated industry how did you navigate that at the start of your career? I read somewhere you were advised to change your name to a man's name when submitted your work?

Brown: Immediately I thought I'd have to take an alias like female writers used to because they knew that they weren't going to get the same treatment as males. It's a little bit harder to do that and hide as a dancer. So, I did it without an alias. I had to go into it just knowing that the playing field isn't level. People asked me, "do you feel like you've arrived?" I'm still a woman, I'm still black. There are still so many things I want to do and I still feel like I have to work twice as hard to do them. This is very much a grounded reality and awareness that I have. I know people look at my resume and they see all of these awards and see it from that perspective. From my perspective, I have to be ok if I never get another acknowledgment. My intention to create and work has to come from a rooted place, it can't be based on accolades because those, as quickly as they come is as quickly as they can go. You still have to be who you are.

Sarachan: What would your advice be for other female choreographers just beginning their careers?

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Brown: I can't say that I've mastered it, but I think what's worked for me is awareness. If I go in expecting to get the same treatment as male choreographers, then I'm going to be severely frustrated and pissed off all the time because that's not going to happen. But if I go in with the mentality of, they may give me a hard time, and I may have to work much harder in a male-dominated field, that can be useful. The idea of patriarchy has existed since the beginning of time. I think with us female choreographers we just have to be aware, and I think also it's important for us to empower each other too because we are an underrepresented group. At times you may be the only one on stage as a black person or as a woman. When I was talking to the kids at [YoungArts Nonprofit Organization](#), one of the questions a young black woman asked me was how to navigate those spaces when you're the only one. I said that I have felt that I have shrunk myself at times. But I remember that this isn't just about me, even though I may be the only one in this space. I am speaking for and with other black females who are also in spaces where they are the only ones. So I have that type of connection. I'm also speaking for choreographers that were in those spaces that didn't get the acknowledgment that they should have in those spaces. When you start thinking that it's not about just you it almost becomes like an obligation. You're representing something far larger than you.

Sarachan: Who are your choreographic influences?

Brown: I feel like I'm in a place where my influences come from me. When you're younger, you have your influences which may outweigh your actual choreographic voice. I don't ever want to let go of my influences, but I don't ever want them to be larger than my voice. I'm at a point where I can say that the work is coming from me and the stories I want to tell.

Sarachan: What are the first questions you ask yourself when you are commissioned to create new work?

Brown: My first question is am I capable of actually doing this. That's honestly my first question. I ask myself "what are the challenges?" I also ask myself, "what do I want people to walk away feeling?" I have to depend more on a feeling when I'm choreographing my own work. When I compare working in theatre to me building my own pieces, when I'm working in the

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theatre I have a book, I have music, I have everything. When I'm doing pieces for myself, I'm in a sense building those stories and ideas. So it has to come from a personal place to get there. I have to find how I can connect to these stories in a deep way.

I listen to what the music is telling me. For [Choir Boy](#), the music that the men are dancing to are Negro spirituals. So the work that I do that is connected to the African diaspora focuses on spiritual movement language. It was an excellent opportunity for me to dig into that. Just kind of listening to [Jason Michael Webb](#) and how he was approaching the music and the rhythm gave me the idea "oh this would be a great opportunity to infuse in some [South African Gumboot Dance](#) and kind of give a wave to [Fraternity Stepping](#). Also, in the past year, I've really embraced the idea of "I don't know." A couple of years ago I was afraid to say "I don't know what I'm doing or where this is going to go." I found that within the last year or two that, "I don't know" is a place of strength, inspiration and discovery. If you walk in always knowing, then you're missing an opportunity to find something that you would have found had you stayed open. Now I'm not saying "I don't know" as in "I didn't think about this." It's more like, I'm clear about the story, I'm just not sure how we're going to get to that place so I just have to trust that that's going to work itself out.

Sarachan: I loved watching the [Ted Talk video](#) about African American social dance I found when researching you. How does social dance define the way your stories are told through movement?

Brown: I think social dance is one of the most fascinating things ever. How cool is it to do a dance and someone sees it and says "oh, that's the 30s!" For me, since it is rooted in the African American experience, it just gets me closer to the culture and the traditions. It informs my work because my work is about theatre and communication but also about human experiences, and social dance comes from the people. It's an expression of the human experience. They've been doing the Moon Walk since the 30s. I don't think it was called The Moon Walk but you can get some [glimpses](#). There are [videos](#) of things in the 30s doing moves that are similar to the breakdancing that was happening in the 80s. There's such an amazing ping-pong that goes on in

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social dance and then it starts morphing but you see different versions of things. It's important for us to know when those dances actually originated versus when they became commercialized.

Sarachan: How does the music you select inform your pieces? Do you prefer to always use live music?

Brown: I do. I think there's something so special about creating with people. There's a sense of ownership when you're walking into a space, we are all owning it. Everybody on the stage has hashed out every single detail and I think there's something my collaborators and I walk away feeling proud that we can do. If I wanted to shift the mood and change the music, I'd have to find music that was specific to what was in my head as opposed to finding a pianist or a drummer who can work with me on that. People ask all the time, "what comes first the music or the dance?" I always say that for me, specifically in concert dance they work together, which I know is extremely tedious and challenging. Whenever I'm working with any new collaborators, I make it clear that this is going to be a challenge. We're always changing something and I always go back. [Ink](#), which I've been working on for the past year, in the past 4 months we've performed it 4 times and if you looked at those recordings, something is different every time because I'm always working on something. That's the thing about live music, it gives me the opportunity to keep working on it.

Sarachan: Can you tell me a little bit about your piece [Black Girl Linguistic Play](#) and how it explores black female identity and perpetuated stereotypes?

Brown: The concept for that began in my work on [Fortress of Solitude](#). I'd already been working on [Black Girls](#) but I didn't necessarily have a strong theme that I felt confident about. In the beginning, the protagonist goes back to the past in the 70s and 80s and there are 2 black girls who I gave a little double dutch routine before they started singing. As soon as they did it on the stage, I was like, "oh man that's what I can use as a way to talk about black girls as the idea of play." That's what you don't see so much of in the media, you don't see the innocence of black girls. Black girls are sexualized and seen as older. I wanted to do this thing about the idea of play and regardless of how we grow through our teenaged years into womanhood, we're still girls and

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still play just like any other girls. I wanted to use double dutch and gestural language to tell that story. So it actually doesn't have anything to do with the stereotypes. I actually wanted to move away from stereotypes because I had investigated that in my piece before that, [Mr. TOL.E.RAncE](#). This was about providing a space for black girls to be themselves. It's not *the black girl* because black girls are dimensional so when I created it my intention wasn't to show what all black girls do but to instead shine a light on the idea black girls are girls and we go through growing up and walking and falling just like everyone.

Sarachan: How did Kyra D. Gaunt's *The Games Black Girls Play* play a part in the creation of that piece?

Brown: I spoke to a friend of mine, [Amy Cox](#), who is a cultural anthropologist. She introduced me to Kyra's book which talked about black girls and our contributions to hip hop and music. That's the idea I used for one of the sections, I thought, "what if I created this black girl's score where she's creating reggae and hip-hop and African but it's all coming from the movements of her body and the fabric of it is all coming together through double dutch?"

Sarachan: Two major accomplishments for you this past year include opening [Choir Boy](#), which has just moved to Broadway, and choreographing *Jesus Christ Superstar* [Live on NBC](#) starring John Legend. How does choreographing pieces for theatre and television differ?

Brown: I didn't really see a difference until we got on the set because [David Leveaux](#), the director for *Jesus Christ Superstar*, wanted it to be a very theatrical experience. So when we were in the rehearsal studio we were building it as if it was a theatrical show. It wasn't until I saw the set, I realized I had never been on a set before so there was so much that I quickly had to learn. Because it was live television, I had to think of it as a 360 experience. That felt somewhat familiar to me though, because *Once on this Island* was theatre in the round. It was just about keeping that in mind. The wonderful thing about television was there were 2 directors, David Leveaux as well as [Alex Rudzinski](#), the television director. So there was a lot of collaboration which was amazing to watch and be involved in. It helped me to think about my own work in 360 as well. In every experience that I have, I always have a team. I had my main

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associate [Rickey Tripp](#) who I also worked with for *Choir Boy* and *Once On This Island*, and my assistant [Mayte Natalio](#). [Catherine Foster](#) was my assistant for *Once On This Island*. I'm never doing things alone. Yes, I am the choreographer but I have my support system. I think that's important for people to know too, that I'm working with an entire team. There are so many people that contribute to making these things work and fly. I'm extremely thankful for my team because they have helped me in so many ways.

Sarachan: What current work in the dance world is making you excited right now?

Brown: I'm excited about artists creating their stories and being unapologetic about it. It was recently asked of me, "what do you think artists should be talking about?" I said I think they should be saying whatever they want to say. Who am I to dictate what people should or shouldn't say. I wouldn't want anyone doing that to me. I think the fact that we see artists that are confident in telling their stories, that's the most important thing. Even if those stories aren't something we understand, we should always watch those stories because we can always learn something from each other.

Sarachan: Where can people see your work right now?

Brown: They can see it on Broadway for [Choir Boy](#) at the Samuel J. Friedman Theatre, that's really exciting. They can also see my company [Camille A. Brown & Dancers](#) on tour and in New York at [The Joyce Theatre](#) February 5th-10th.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.