



# A Superhero On & Off The Stage, Camille A. Brown Brings ink

By Drew Shade | February 5, 2019



Camille A. Brown's dance company, **Camille A. Brown & Dancers**, tours nationally and internationally and will be presenting six performances featuring the debut of *ink* at **The Joyce Theater NYC Feb 5-10th 2019**.

Propelled by the live rhythms and sounds of traditional African and handmade instruments, Camille A. Brown's *ink* celebrates the rituals, gestures, and traditions of the African diaspora. Highlighting themes of brotherhood, community, and resilience, the work seeks to reclaim African American narratives and is the final installment of Brown's dance theater trilogy about identity.

In addition to her company works, Ms. Brown brings her passion for storytelling to her award-winning choreography for Broadway, Television, and Off-Broadway. Productions include Tony Award Winning *Once On This Island*, (Drama Desk, Outer Critics and Chita Rivera award nominations), Emmy Award Winning *Jesus Christ Superstar Live* on NBC, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Choir Boy*, the upcoming *Magic Mike The Musical*, *PAL JOEY*.

We had the chance to probe a little bit into the world of Camille A. Brown, and we're grateful for the insight and wisdom with which she was able to bless us. Check out the interview below along with an excerpt from *ink*.

**Broadway Black (BB):** After forming the idea, what was the process of building *ink*?

**Camille A. Brown (CAB):** After the creative process for BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play, I held a desire to dig even deeper and tell more stories of ritual, gestural vocabulary, and traditions of the African Diaspora. I was immediately drawn to two albums that had a significant impact on me when I was growing up. The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill by Lauryn Hill, and Like Water for Chocolate by Common. I tasked myself



with creating a movement language that embodied the same raw authenticity, and vulnerability that fuels those lyrics and music.

As I began to develop the concept for ink, I wanted the dancers to represent superheroes. I couldn't figure out why I had the urge to play with this idea until I read Question Bridge: Black Males in America. One of the men interviewed said, "I see Black people as comic book heroes because they always keep rising." That was it! It is about showing that in our basic survival, and natural attributes we have superhuman powers. Powers to shift, overcome, transform, and persevere even within an often hostile environment. The seven sections of ink represent super powers of spirituality, history and heritage, the celebration of the Black female body, Black love, brotherhood, exhaustion, and community. The process involves a deep collaboration with the dancers and my direction is guided by their choice making.

The space is very organic and fueled by research. My dancers, musicians, dramaturgs, and I are in constant dialogue throughout the process about the work and how it's progressing. We don't move forward unless we're all on the same page.

We are building the work together. As a disclaimer, I let everyone know the process will be exceptionally tedious. Like a fine comb, I go through each beat, gage the temperature of storylines, and make sure the movement and music are always in conversation (whether aligned or in contrast).

**BB: What made you want to start your own dance company and how have you sustained?**

**CAB:** I found my love of choreography in college because I struggled with body image, and found that creating my own voice was a safe and empowering space. After graduating, I danced with Ronald K. Brown/Evidence for 5 seasons and during my second year with The Company, a friend from college (Amy Page) sent me a flyer for the Hubbard Street 2 competition which picks 3 choreographers to create work on the Company. I was chosen! That gave me the encouragement to pursue choreography. My first idea was to take an alias like female writers used to do because even at 22, I knew the playing field was not leveled and women (particularly black women) did not get as much exposure as male choreographers. Dance is revealing and vulnerable so taking an alias wasn't a realistic option. People would have to see me as I am, but I also needed the confidence to withstand the obstacles. Not only that, having a company seemed daunting.

Ron wore so many hats. He was the director, choreographer, teacher, and also took on administrative duties. He never got a break. I wasn't confident I could handle all of the duties.

I set work on other companies, but soon realized it wasn't for me. 1-4 weeks working with a Company wasn't enough time for me to really hone my skills, find my voice, and discover my personal creative process. I desired a more intimate relationship and space



with my dancers and collaborators. I had my first show at Joyce SoHo in 2006, and committed to having a company in 2010. What sustains CABD is my team. I have a company agent (Pamela Green), Managing Director (Indira Goodwine), Company Manager (Michelle Fletcher), and a production team who holds things down. In the beginning, I was doing ALL the jobs! As time went on, my team slowly formed. It's really about patience and perseverance. Nothing happened over night and everything is a progression.

**BB: How have you had to be a superhero in your own life personally and professionally?**

**CAB:**

Personally

Last year, I had a life-threatening experience. My appendix ruptured on tour. Appendicitis is when they remove your appendix before it ruptures, but mine actually did and the fluid was in my system for at least a week. I survived the "fatal" stage- which the doctors told me isn't common. This started a very long year and a half which included 4 hospital stints and two surgeries (my second one was in April). This all happened during *Once on This Island* (I was in the hospital the first week of rehearsal and had my first surgery during tech), *Jesus Christ Superstar Live*, and my Company touring. I had to access my "superpowers" and push through, but thankfully I had my team and community to help me. I'm going to be writing about the entire ordeal because it was such an integral part of my life. People see the "success", but if they only knew the hardships I had to overcome to get to the other side.

Professionally

Being a Black female Choreographer and Director is hard. People ask me to do I feel like I've arrived. Absolutely not. I'm still Black and a woman- two underrepresented groups- particularly in theater. The playing field is still not leveled and I'm clear I have to work twice as hard. I've had to build up strength and confidence. It is an ongoing process of gathering those superpowers. In many spaces, I'm sometimes the only woman (I was the only woman on the creative team for *Jesus Christ Superstar Live*), and the only black person in some rooms. Recently two black girls at different events asked me the same exact question: How do you navigate spaces where you're the only one.

It's quite easy to feel intimidated and shrink yourself. I know I have done that in the past. Now, I've found if I think about the black women before me in similar spaces, black women who are currently in similar spaces, and the next generation of black women coming after me, it makes me more confident. When it's not just about you, it becomes a responsibility. And even when I don't feel like I have any superpowers, this happens...and it refuels and encourages me to keep going. Someone is always watching.