

The New York Times

Review: Camille A. Brown's Rousing and Incisive 'ink'

By Siobhan Burke | Feb. 6, 2019



Camille A. Brown and Maleek Washington (jumping) in Ms. Brown's "ink," the final dance in a trilogy about African-American life. Credit Andrea Mohin

The choreographer Camille A. Brown often talks about the struggles she faced with body image as a young dancer, when teachers told her that she didn't have the "ideal" dancer's physique. I hope those people have been following her career, because she has been proving them wrong for about two decades, and continued to do so on Tuesday at the Joyce Theater with the New York premiere of "ink."

The conclusion of her trilogy on African-American identity, with "Mr. TOL E. RAnCE" (2012) and "[BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play](#)" (2015), "ink" flies by, a rousing and incisive final statement. While she has branched out into Broadway and television in recent years — choreographing "Choir Boy," "Once on This Island" and NBC's "Jesus Christ Superstar Live in Concert" — Ms. Brown appears as dedicated as ever to her own company, Camille A. Brown & Dancers, both as a performer and lead creator.

[\[Read about how Camille A. Brown made "ink."\]](#)

Building on "BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play," which depicted everyday activities of black American girlhood, "ink" mines its movement from gestures and rituals of the African diaspora — a broad palette that Ms. Brown, who grew up in Jamaica, Queens, blends with precision and (what looks like) ease. Featuring a propulsive percussion ensemble led by Allison Miller, the show begins with the sound of a single drum and distant chant, a call to the Yoruba deity Eleggba — who, as Ms. Brown notes in the program, "opens and clears the space as guardian, protector and communicator."

That could also describe her own role in the bracing solo that follows, which feels like a culmination and a conjuring. She seems to compress, into minutes, years of effort and research, her compact frame coiling in and striking out from a firmly seated position, or miming actions like scratching a turntable and stirring something thick.

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Mr. Washington, left, and Timothy Edwards collude like exuberant brothers in their duet. Credit Andrea Mohin

What she conjures is a series of relationships, defined by mutual support — and superbly danced. Maleek Washington and Yusha-Marie Sorzano, borrowing from the Lindy Hop, veer between explosive and tender; Mr. Washington and Timothy Edwards collude like exuberant brothers; Beatrice Capote and Juel D. Lane prop up and protect each other; Catherine Foster revels in her own power.

Ms. Brown was inspired by a quote from the book “Question Bridge: Black Males in America”: “I see black people as superheroes because we keep rising.” That rising, “ink” suggests, cannot happen alone. Two collages by David L. Arsenault hover over the space like worn billboards under streetlamps; the faces that gaze out from them could be ancestors or children.

At less than an hour (plus the audience dialogue that caps off all of Ms. Brown’s shows), “ink,” if anything, could be longer. When the lights went down I was fully expecting a second act. But maybe Ms. Brown has said what she needs to say, having honed her own language in the past seven years. “People ask me: ‘What do you do? Is it tap?’ ” she said with a laugh during the dialogue. “And I say, It’s Camille.”