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Choreographer Brown is in a good place — in fact, lots of them

By **Karen Campbell** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MARCH 13, 2014



MATTHEW KARAS

Choreographer Camille A. Brown is juggling many projects.

For the past six-plus weeks, choreographer/dancer Camille A. Brown has been hunkered down in Dallas, pouring heart and soul into choreography for a new musical called “The Fortress of Solitude” for the Dallas Theater Center, co-produced by New York’s Public Theater. Unfortunately, she’s going to miss the work’s opening night Friday. Instead, Brown will be here, as her company makes its Boston debut in a program she not only choreographed but also performs in. She’ll also dance a solo excerpted from yet another new project she’s involved in, a collaboration with DANCECleveland.

It’s an embarrassment of riches for the artist whom World Music/CRASHarts director Maure Aronson calls “one of the most exciting young choreographers working today.” The performances by Camille A. Brown & Dancers Friday and Saturday at the Institute of Contemporary Art are being presented by World Music/CRASHarts.

In addition to her body of work for her own company, Brown has created dances for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Philadanco, Urban Bush Women, Complexions, Hubbard Street 2, and others. Her choreography for the theater includes the Broadway revival of “A Streetcar Named Desire” and Shakespeare’s “A Winter’s Tale” for Princeton’s McCarter Theatre.

It’s a lot to juggle, but Brown isn’t complaining. “I’m negotiating the concert world and the theater world because I love both, and certain things I have to sacrifice — like eating and sleeping,” she says without a trace of self-pity. (She’s squeezing in a phone chat with the Globe during her dinner break.) “On one hand, I’m missing opening night, but my company has this show in Boston. I have theater dance and concert dance opening at the same time. That’s a beautiful challenge.”

The 34-year-old Brown has made her mark with pieces that tap into real-life experience, notably black urban culture and history. “Especially within the past two years I’ve been focusing on social commentary and taking chances that might cause people to disagree or agree. I’m more interested in the dialogue that a work might bring up. I feel like I have to go past just creating dance to try to be an activist, pushing all these conversations forward.”

“Mr. Tol E. RAnce” (2012), an excerpt of which will be presented in Boston, is a perfect example. One of Brown’s most provocative works, it explores stereotypes in black culture using dance, original music, and animation. “Her work really does comment on and ask questions about our society and popular culture,” Aronson says.

But humor plays a vital role as well. “ ‘Mr. Tol E. RAnce’ reminds people that stereotypes may come from a place of pain, but people can change that into a place of humor to allow pain not to overtake them,” Brown says.

After graduating from the University of North Carolina School of the Arts, she joined Ronald K. Brown’s Evidence, A Dance Company, which proved a transformative experience.

“When I was growing up, there was always the question of what was the ideal body, and most of the time, I didn’t fit it. In college, I didn’t get cast the first two years,” she says. “My mom said, ‘OK, you can cry, but you have to keep going.’ With Ron, I learned it’s not about the ideal body type, it’s about the work.”

Those early experiences also led Brown into choreography as a way to express her own voice. “I realized you don’t have to wait for someone to tell you how to speak through movement. You can do that yourself.”

Brown, a native of Jamaica, Queens, has been a guest artist with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and Rennie Harris Puremovement, and she credits Harris with helping her dive into her love of social dancing. She describes her aesthetic as “a jambalaya of a lot of things . . . a combination of African, modern, tap, jazz, and hip-hop all wrapped in one. My work is very character-driven. I look at my dancers as actors. The intention has to be there to communicate through your body.”

The Boston program includes the solo “Evolution of a Secured Feminine,” the humorous “The Groove to Nobody’s Business,” and the Hurricane Katrina-inspired “New Second Line,” which celebrates the people of New Orleans. “I choreographed that the year that my grandmother passed, and in a way it’s in honor of her. She had a bad ankle break as a child and it never healed right. I would say to myself, ‘How would Grandma dance in heaven if she didn’t have that?’ ”

And there’s Brown’s solo from the work-in-progress “Black Girl,” which she says focuses on “the social dances and movements I associate with black girls, what we do, how we made up dances with friends on the street. It’s another example of how I love rhythms — the whole time I’m making sounds with my feet. Every time I do it I think, ‘Now, why do you want to challenge yourself like this?’ You have to be on. You cannot mess up. It’s a doozy.”

But it’s all part of the balancing act to maintain not just her own company, but her performance chops. “It’s hard,” she admits. “Here I’ve been choreographing, but I have this show in Boston. During lunch break, I pop in the music on my headphones, find a corner backstage and rehearse. And dinner break is supposed to be a break, but . . .”

Time to start rehearsal.

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