

Choreographer Ronald K. Brown begins 'Great Mystery' dance residency at Williams College

By Sharon Smullen, Special to Berkshires Week & Shires of Vermont

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WILLIAMSTOWN -- What happens when dance comes into new spaces at a college, into classrooms and centers of faith? Award-winning dancer and choreographer Ronald K. Brown, founder of the dance company Evidence, plans to find out in "The Great Mystery," an extended residency at Williams College funded by the Mellon Foundation.

Brown has embarked on a two-year journey of exploration and discovery with the college community, and he will share his plans for the project this weekend through a series of free talks, demonstrations and workshops open to all.

Over the past year, Brown visited the campus and talked with Williams faculty, students and staff. He was drawn to the college chaplains, in particular lead chaplain Rick Spalding, and visited sacred spaces across the campus.



Ronald K. Brown, artistic director of Evidence, A Dance Company will come to Williams College for an extended residency. (Thos Robinson / Getty Images)

The chaplains attended a rehearsal of his dance company in New York City.

"We started talking about movement [in their religious traditions]," Brown recalled, "and the Jewish chaplain said, 'when we light the candle flame, this is the movement that women do to bring the spirit to you.'"

Inspired by his recent new work "The Subtle One" -- a reference to one of the many Muslim names of God -- Brown arrived at the guiding question for his residency: "How do we live what we believe?"

Spirituality pervades Brown's work; his roots in faith run deep. At age 12 he taught Sunday school at the Pentecostal Church his great-uncle founded in Brooklyn.

Visiting his grandparent's church in North Carolina, his family would say, "Kevin [their name for him], when you walked in the door, we expected you to dance," he recalled. Still, growing up in Bedford Stuyvesant, it wasn't "cool" to be a good student in school or go to dance class, he noted. Now, with his company based in Brooklyn, he performs and teaches around the world -- and gives back to his native community.

Wanting to build on relationships with the Pittsfield community formed during past visits to Williams and Jacob's Pillow, Brown and his colleague Arcell Cabuag will lead a multigenerational "Gate Keepers" workshop at St. Stephen's Church on Saturday, a program inspired by American Indian and West African traditions that he has taught for ages ranging from 3 to 70 from Minnesota to Mississippi.

"It's about bringing generations together to share the idea of caretaking," he explained. "We create a space where we understand the value of each other and our responsibility to each other."

At Williams, his work signals a new direction for the dance community.

"'Choreographers on Campus' is a pilot project for Mellon," explained '62 Center producing director Randy Fippinger, who coordinates the grant program with Williams' director of dance, Sandra Burton, assisted by Marla Robertson. "It started with Liz Lerman at Wesleyan a number of years ago, when Mellon wanted to bring a choreographer out of a theater to work with academics."

Mellon invited five colleges to build on this idea, and Williams chose to use its three-year, \$300,000 grant to work with two artists for two years each with one year overlap -- Brown and Alaskan-born choreographer Emily Johnson.

"One of the reasons why we were attracted to them is that as practicing artists they are very passionate about connecting to people," Burton said. "Their work as choreographers is inclusive beyond the field of dance."

"The intention is for everyone to have a deep experience and to really see what we can learn from one another," she said.

Under Burton's leadership, dance at Williams evolved from part of the physical education program to an artistic and academic discipline in its own right.

"The Mellon initiative will help us on that journey," Burton explained. "We're labs. Our field is changing. All performance is becoming more multifaceted."

Brown will connect dance with many spaces on campus and fields of study. Sunday's Text and Movement workshop at Williams will take place in the Jewish Religious Center.

"I get excited about people going to places that they feel do not belong to them," he said.

In the spring, he will co-teach a course on women's emancipation with Africana Studies professor Gretchen Long.

His Mellon residency will finish with a public performance next fall -- it will let people walk their faiths together, he said.

"I tell people my favorite definition of confidence is, 'I know nothing, and I trust myself completely,'" he said. "With all of these things we are about to unlock, it's an amazing feeling to walk into: 'I don't know, but He does.'"

If you go ...

Public Discussion and Movement Session:

'How Do We Live What We Believe?'

Dance Studio, '62 Center, Williamstown

8:30 p.m. Friday, Sept. 26

Gate Keepers Project intergenerational workshop

led by Ronald K. Brown and Arcell Cabuag

St. Stephen's Church, 67 East Street, Pittsfield

10 a.m. to noon Saturday, Sept. 27

Talk/Demonstration Ronald K. Brown and Evidence

Adams Memorial Theatre, '62 Center, Williamstown

Saturday, Sept. 27 5 p.m.

Text and Movement Workshop on sharing stories

Jewish Religious Center, 24 Stetson Court, Williamstown, noon Sunday, Sept. 28

All events are free and open to all, no dance experience required. For workshop reservations, email marlarobertson08@gmail.com