



# Evidence weaves African movement with contemporary dance



Ronald K. Brown's Evidence, A Dance Company, performs today through Saturday at the University of Notre Dame's DeBartolo Performing Arts Center. Photo provided/RACHEL PAPO

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At age 18, Ronald K. Brown had just earned a journalism scholarship and was headed for a career as a writer.

But after attending a dance event, he realized his calling was to tell stories in a different way. Thirty years later, Brown is artistic director of a thriving dance troupe that melds traditional African dance with contemporary choreography and spoken word.

His stories will be on display when Evidence, A Dance Company, performs today through Saturday at the University of Notre Dame's DeBartolo Performing Arts Center.

Brown was always interested in dance, even as a very young boy, he says in a phone interview from Brooklyn, N.Y., where his company is based and where he grew up. He danced around the house and even created dances as a little boy.

"My aunt took me to a dance class when I was 8. I was the only boy in a room full of girls. It was probably 20 girls, but it seemed like a hundred," he says, recalling the courage it took to be the only male.

His dance training was brief and fell away before he entered junior high and focused on writing for the school paper and yearbook, though he performed in school musicals. With a journalism scholarship in hand, his path seemed clear, but after attending a dance event, his passion for dance returned. "I asked my mom if it was OK to give up a journalism scholarship for dance," and she agreed, Brown says.

By age 19, he had formed Evidence, A Dance Company. He took his first formal dance training since childhood, studying under the modern dance performer and choreographer Mary Anthony, whose technique was inspired by Martha Graham and Hanya Holm.

Brown wanted his dance company to tell stories, focusing on the African diaspora. He was inspired by a poet-activist friend who asked, "Who will tell your grandmother's stories?" he says.

Studying composition in the mid-1980s, Brown saw a disconnect between what he learned in the classroom and what he saw onstage.

"When I studied composition, there were rigid rules: No music with words," he says, giving one example. "But at this time, the concert dance world was exploding with great physicality and emotion."

As a storyteller, Brown started exploring traditional dances, weaving influences from Senegal, Guinea and Cuba into his works, along with ballet and modern dance techniques.

"I am sharing the beauty of how these dances are intertwined," he says. "The rhythm tells a story."

His work gained momentum when he started choreographing for other companies, including Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Ailey II, Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble, the African American Dance Ensemble and Philadanco. His awards include an AUDELCO (Black Theater Award) for his choreography in the off-Broadway play "Crowns: Portraits of Black Women in Church Hats."

Two of Brown's works are on the program at DeBartolo.

"Come Ye," created in 2003, is inspired by the music and legacies of two artist/activists. It includes the Nina Simone songs "Come Ye," "Sunday in Savannah" and "Revolution," as well as the Fela Kuti songs "Kalakuta" and "Coffin for Head of State." It uses African, Caribbean, modern, ballet and social dance styles, as well as a video collage. The story involves warriors, angels and activists as they pursue liberation and peace amid human conflict.

"Somehow we forget that in a time of war, the destination is still peace," Brown says. "We are world citizens; we can solve the world's ills together."

"On Earth Together/Everybody at the Table," from 2011, is set to a wide range of Stevie Wonder songs, including "You and I," "Don't You Worry 'bout a Thing," "Living for the City" and "Higher Ground." The piece is about human relationships, compassion and looking to an optimistic future. This dance also includes people from the South Bend community who auditioned earlier this month to perform in the show.

There's a reason why Brown wants people from the community, of all ages and with no dance experience needed, to participate in "On Earth Together/Everybody at the Table."

"In the song 'You and I,' the lyrics are 'You and I ... we can conquer the world,'" he says. "My dancers range in age from 24 to 48. But if you see a cast of a wider range of ages, it reflects the community; it says 'We can conquer the world.' To see 8-year-olds dancing on stage with someone over 70, it shifts from being a performance to being reality."

After Friday's performance, the public is invited to participate in African drumming and dancing in a free but ticketed event.

When people are dancing and drumming, "it breaks down walls," Brown says. "We aren't 'dancing'; we are just moving together. A drum circle allows that to happen."