

Ronald K. Brown: Listen to the 6 year old

April 13th, 2015 [Olivia Munk '16](#)

At age 19, students often find themselves in a transition—it's hard to feel like anything we do or create right now will last a year, let alone 30. However, that's not the case for choreographer Ronald K. Brown, whose dance company [Evidence](#), started in 1985 when he was just 19 years old, is still going strong 30 years later. Brown has had a wildly successful and diverse dance career, from creating his own company, to choreographing for the [Alvin Ailey](#) company, to teaching at colleges across the country, to choreographing the most recent revival of [Porgy and Bess](#). Last Saturday, Brown conducted a [masterclass](#) with dancers at the college. I spoke with him prior to his visit about being afraid to take dance classes, the evolution of his company and his technique, and how to work with actors who are not necessarily dancers.

How did you get involved in dance as a student?

The story I always tell is that I was the little boy who was afraid to take dance classes. My mom took me to a dance class when I was maybe 8 years old. I said, "Mom, there's 80 girls," which of course there weren't, but as a little boy you feel like that. I was always dancing around the house, so she kept trying to get me into a performing arts high school. They'd already let in the number of kids in from my district, so instead, she was going to take me to a dance audition for the Dancers of Harlem when I was 12 years old. But, when we got to the door of our apartment, she went into labor with my little brother, so I thought, "Forget the dance thing, I'll be a writer!" So I studied creative writing at my junior high school. I worked on the yearbook, and I ended up getting into the High School for Communications Arts, at [Edward R. Murrow](#). I decided I was going to be a journalist. Well, I really thought I was going to be a playwright, but this was going to be my kind of avenue into writing. I got a scholarship to a small school in Vermont called [St. Michael's College](#). I graduated a year early from high school, and decided I'd dance for the summer. I'd been doing musicals in high school, but still, I refused to take a dance class. So at 16 years old, I go to a studio in lower Manhattan where they do [Martha Graham](#) technique as part of the audition. I said to my mom, can I try this dance thing out and give up the scholarship? She said, I told you so! That was the turning point.

Do you see any connection in your choreography and the years you spent studying journalism?

Definitely. I write to help me understand what the work is. The choreography is really physical storytelling. For dancers, it's not just showing technique or that they can dance, but also using the vocabulary as text.

What was it like to start your own dance company?

It was always about stories, and about people. The first concert was in 1985, and then in 1994, after making work as physical as it could be, I made a trio for three women, and they were flipping, and leaping, and turning. And then I shifted into, how intimate can I make social commentary, things like incest and assimilation, so the work became intimate. In 1994, all those things started to come together, and language became more cohesive. Now you look at the work and you see all the evidence of the modern dance training in there, the ballet, the influences of the vocabulary from Senegal and the Ivory Coast, Cuba, Haiti – so all of these techniques inform the work. Now, 30 years later, "it looks like Evidence, it looks like Ron," it's the evolution of the technique.

How does your approach differ from a dance company to a Broadway show?

With *Porgy and Bess*, I had officially two dancers for the Broadway cast and the national tour. "Officially" in quotes. But everyone was going to dance, even if they didn't want to dance. People thinking that they can't do it, but that they want to do it, is almost easier. As long as I'm open, in terms of meeting people where they are, I just create a space where I can say, "We can do it." But people have to be open. I think with actors, for some of my work, I have integrated members of the community ages 8 to 73 – some people who have never danced, some who stopped dancing years ago. So again, you create a space where it's all open, and you can come together. I enjoy it. I think it's because of my journey as a dancer.

What advice do you have for students who want to become professional dancers, or even those who are afraid to try a class, like you once were?

My advice is always to remember when you were an unafraid 6 year old, who said, "I can dance!" I have three godchildren, two little girls and one boy, 6 years old. You cannot tell them they can't dance and sing. Sometimes adults feel like they want to do something, but they doubt themselves. They're afraid. I tell people to not be afraid, and between the two emotions, love and fear, go to the love.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

Ronald K. Brown visited Harvard on March 28, and conducted a masterclass with students. Details about the event can be found [here](#).