



RISING STARS

A CHOREOGRAPHER WITH A TOUCH OF THEATER

BY SANJENA SATHIAN • JUN 13 • 2015

In front of a serious-looking audience sporting lanyards and name tags, Camille A. Brown is sprinting onstage, her brown and blond braids flying, her yellow T-shirt and green pants riotous in the spotlight. You have to do a double take to realize she isn't running on a treadmill as she appears to be, but is in fact miming the movement. More precisely, dancing.

Unless you are a once-in-a-generation star, most [dancers and choreographers](#) barely make it out of the arts and review sections. Brown, who is both, hasn't quite leaped out either, but you never know. At 35, she has put together her own notable company and a long roster of mostly well-reviewed pieces. With flair, she creates concert dance shows (meaning pure dance, no chatter) and choreographs for others, including the Broadway production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and the prestigious Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Her work is both personal and public; the public part is political, often about [race and social issues](#), but also funny, mocking everything from the tribulations of a morning commute to the dark history of black minstrelsy. The uncanny piece with the sprinting was excerpted from her latest, *Black Girl: Linguistic Play*, which will premiere this fall.

Ironically, Brown says she doesn't want to get "too political. I want accessibility. It's really about me being in this body, living in this body, how I move, how I dance." But any good cultural critic would tell you that to be in any body and perform it — especially a black woman's body — has damn sure gotta be political.

Trained in everything from jazz to ballet to hip-hop to modern dance, Brown takes her influence from the writings of W.E.B. Du Bois, historical art forms, reality television and current events. She makes her dancers watch movies; she holds mid-rehearsal seminarlike discussions and speaks to dramaturges, says Francine Ott, one of Brown's rehearsal directors. She especially draws from theater — a lifelong love, inspired by her mother's affinity for it — and, necessarily, intimate emotion. Such a mishmash may sound discombobulated to some, but this is the state of modern dance, says

Brenda Daniels, associate dean of the dance department at the University of North Carolina's School of the Arts (Brown's alma mater). "It's one of the beauties of the form," she says — a form Brown is advancing. Daniels adds that there's something about modern dance which is always personal.

Brown's professional life was born, in part, out of [failure](#). She began choreographing as a student at UNC because she wasn't getting auditions. She was told, as many dancers are at some point, that her body was all wrong. It's a funny characterization: Hers looks like an attainable body on the surface, not toothpick-thin, but packed in her pixelike frame is a visible muscularity, one to incite jealousy among the most athletic. Of course, dancers are often known for cutting fragile figures. Choreography lent "a new sense of freedom," Brown reflects. She took on an interesting double task of representation: She had to create a dance style to accommodate both her and those like her; she later began to do exactly that by trying to re-present standard images of blackness.

For example, take her satire *Mr. Tol E. RAnCE*, which put black performers onstage mocking 19th-century minstrel shows — the piece is fast, set to upbeat jazzy music and might pass at a glance for animation in fast-forward. It also contained hues of modern black comedy, à la Chris Rock and Dave Chappelle. Of course, to call Brown's work all about race would be churlish. It handles the universal quotidian, too — like an annoying commute, or struggles with self.

The only child of a social worker and a parole officer in Jamaica, Queens — where Brown still lives, a few buildings away from her mother — she is a city girl through and through. She's been taking the subway since age 13 and attended LaGuardia High School, an arts school. She took her first dance class at age 3 and by high school was dancing every day. After school, she took classes at Alvin Ailey "to keep up with everyone else."

She's had quite the ascent, and is nearing dancer-retirement-age — though not choreography's end. She's also had her fair share of critics. There's the body stuff, and *The New York Times* found *Mr. Tol E. RAnCE* somewhat repetitive and tiring and has called Brown's work "formulaic choreography," "cluttered" and occasionally "amateur." Reviewers like her less when she's sentimental and more when she's funny.

It seems she likes herself more when she possesses the reins of control the art originally gave her. She found those reins far earlier than college composition classes, though. It was her first-ever recital. Onstage. Huge, bright, blinding lights. She couldn't see any faces. That anonymity seduced. "People sometimes think the majority has the power," Brown says. "But if you change your thinking about it, there's a certain way that you perform feeling like you are in charge."