

# Dance work in Miami shows a new vision of African-American girls

## HIGHLIGHTS

Acclaimed choreographer Camille A. Brown brings 'Black Girls: Linguistic Play' to Miami

New work uses children's games and dances to portray African-American girls

Part of MDC Live Arts In Focus series on art and society



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Camille A. Brown (left) and Catherine Foster in Brown's "Black Girls: Linguistic Play"  
**Christopher Duggan**

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Camille A. Brown has been an acclaimed choreographer for 11 years. But for her latest piece, she went back to a time in her life when moving her body to rhythm was about having fun, not making art. Double Dutch, steppin', ring shout, hand-clap games — and other games and dances she and her girlfriends did together growing up in Queens, New York — became the basis for *Black Girl: Linguistic Play*, which Brown and her troupe will perform Saturday at Miami-Dade County Auditorium.

"It's serious in content," Brown said. "But it's important for us to focus on joy, too. Keep lifting that up."

“When was the last time you saw a black girl playing on TV and exuding joy? Because if you can’t remember, that’s why I did the piece.”

Brown, 36, got the idea for *Black Girl* as she was on tour with another work, 2012’s *Mr. Tol.E.Rance*, which looked at stereotypes in black popular culture and in the history of black performers. During the regular post-show discussions, people in the audience often asked Brown if she would do a show about stereotypes of black women. (The book *Games Black Girls Play*, by Kyra D. Gaunt, was another inspiration.)

But as she thought about those suggestions, Brown realized she didn’t want to delve into those stereotypes.

“People want to put us in the strong black female tropes, the angry black female tropes,” she says. “I’m not saying I’m not angry or strong sometimes. But there are many dimensions to me and you don’t always see the dimensions of black girls — or see them at all.”

Brown herself is certainly a strong, and accomplished artist in the realms of cutting edge modern dance, dance theater and community and social activism through art. A former member of Ronald K. Brown’s Evidence, A Dance Company, she started her own troupe when she was 25. She has choreographed works for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and Urban Bush Women, among many other groups, and for theater and music theater, including *Cabin in the Sky* for New York City Center’s acclaimed Encores! Series. She has received numerous awards and honors, including a Bessie Award for *Mr. Tol.E.Rance* and two Princess Grace Awards, and has been a TED fellow.

As she worked on *Black Girl*, Brown saw the roots of the artist she became in the girl she had been.

“Double Dutch and hand-clap games, these things are highly musical and rhythmic,” she says. “They are seen as trivial because kids do them, but when you dissect it these are musical compositions ... it was about community, definitely about sisterhood, it’s friendship.

“Using your body to communicate — that’s some really strong stuff.”



◀ 1 of 2 ▶

Mora-Amina Parker and Yusha-Marie Sorzano, of Camille A. Brown and Dancers, in Brown’s “Black Girls: Linguistic Play” Christopher Duggan

The games, dances and rhythms in *Black Girl* are played out by three pairs of performers: two who are young girls and playmates; an older, more competitive duo; and another that seems to be mother and daughter. Live musicians and a talkback with the audience are also part of the show.



**Camille A. Brown with Tracy  
Wormworth in BLACK GIRL:  
Linguistic Play (excerpt)**

from Camille A. Brown & Dancers PLUS

Camille A. Brown with Tracy Wormworth in BLACK GIRL:  
Linguistic Play (excerpt) from Camille A. Brown & Dancers  
on Vimeo.

The show, presented by Miami Dade College's MDC Live Arts with the Auditorium, is part of MDC Live's In Focus series of performances dealing with social issues. These have included Holoscenes, which looked at sea level rise during last December's Miami Art Week; and Conscience Under Fire, part of a program on issues faced by veterans.

MDC Live Arts executive director Kathryn Garcia was impressed by how Brown incorporated challenging ideas on many levels when she saw a preview of *Black Girls* at a conference last year.

"I loved the way she was taking social dances and movement she grew up with ... turning the table and incorporating dances that are not usually on stage," Garcia says. "She's taking a look at a lot of stereotypes ... and saying it's much more nuanced and complicated than what the media portrays. I thought it was really important to take that voice and put it front and center."

During their weeklong residency in Miami, Brown's troupe has done workshops with Girl Power Rocks, an afterschool program for at-risk girls; Young Women's Preparatory Academy, and Jubilation, a student dance ensemble at MDC's Kendall campus. On Friday, Brown and her company will perform *Black Girl* for 2,000 high school students, as part of Miami Dade County Public Schools and Miami Dade County's Cultural Affairs Department's Cultural Passport program.

Although Brown's piece is focused on painting a rich portrait of black girlhood, she believes it can speak to anyone. One of the handclap games she and her dancers worked with was Miss Mary Mack, which has been sung by generations of American girls across the country.

"These are handclap games we all knew as kids," Brown says. "The question could be 'When you see the piece *Black Girl*, do you expect to see yourself?'"

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## IFYOU GO

What: Black Girl: Linguistic Play

When: 8 p.m. Saturday

Where: Miami Dade County Auditorium, 2901 W. Flagler St., Miami

Info: \$25 plus fees, or \$10 MDC students; 305-237-3010 or mdclivearts.org

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