MONDAVI CENTER UCDAVIS

ArtSmarts

2002-2003 Wells Fargo School Matinee Series

Ronald K. Brown/EVIDENCE

April 25, 2003 11:00am
Jackson Hall, Mondavi Center

Dear Teachers:

We hope you will find this Teacher's Guide helpful in preparing your students for what they will experience at the ***Ronald K. Brown/EVIDENCE*** matinee. The guide provides background information on Ronald K. Brown, choreographer, dancer, founder and artistic director of the dance company EVIDENCE. The ***Ronald K. Brown/EVIDENCE*** matinee, which is specially designed for student audiences, will present Brown's unique performance style that incorporates African dance, ballet, and hip-hop with modern dance. Enjoy the show!

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Ronald K. Brown/EVIDENCE

Over the past several years Ronald K. Brown has emerged as one of the country's hottest choreographers. The Brooklyn, New York native delighted audiences with his original commissioned work "Grace" for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Acclaimed for his distinctive style of high-energy choreography that merges African dance, ballet, hip-hop and sensuous modern dance, Brown often combines spoken word and movement to address important social and cultural themes such as racism, AIDS, love and loss.

When Ronald K. Brown formed his own dance company in1985, he named it "Evidence" for a very specific reason. Brown wanted his dancers to provide "observations of life" through work that "discusses issues of race, class, gender and assimilation." While these concerns are certainly not unique to Brown or his company, Brown has become a modern master at what he calls "kinetic storytelling." As noted critic Anna Kisselgoff of The New York Times has observed, Brown is "in a class by himself. Few today can match the depth of his ability to marry message and medium."

Since starting Evidence at age nineteen, Brown has matured into what the Times calls "one of the most popular choreographers of his time." Brown has created dances for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Ailey II, the African American Dance Ensemble, Philadanco, Dayton Contemporary Dance Company, Jeune Ballet d'Afrique Noire and many others, as well as for his own company. Evidence has performed and toured widely, appearing at such prestigious events as Jacob's Pillow, the National Black Arts Festival and the American Dance Festival.

Brown's work has been influenced by such legendary choreographers as Katherine Dunham, Alvin Ailey, Martha Graham and Pearl Primus, but he has made every effort to create his own unique voice in the dance world. As Brown explained to a writer last year, "I felt I could tell

stories and inspire awareness through the language of dance. I came to believe I could create a dance folklore for the Afro-American community."

The "dance folklore" Brown has created is an inclusive amalgam that encompasses not only classical and modern dance conventions, but also traditional West African dance and such "street" forms as hip-hop and break dancing. Brown feels a special connection to Africa and, in fact, says his choreographic vision did not really begin to jell until his first trip to Africa in 1994. His style and sense of movement changed dramatically after that visit, and Brown has subsequently returned several times, especially to Senegal and the Ivory Coast.

Brown has put his diverse influences to good use, creating such memorable works as GRACE (premiered by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1999), UPSIDE DOWN, WALKING OUT OF THE DARK, INCIDENTS, BETTER DAYS, DESTINY and HIGH LIFE, which Kisselgoff called "a brilliant essay on migration, focusing on images of Southern blacks moving to the North, but also hinting at corresponding journeys from village to city in Africa."

Now in his mid-30s, Ronald K. Brown has been described by Dance Magazine as "provocative and likeable." He has had an ardent following in the east for several years, but rose to national prominence four years ago with the Ailey commission and premiere of GRACE. Brown has received numerous honors, fellowships and awards for his work, including a Choreographer's Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Black Theater Alliance Award and a New York Dance and Performance Award.

The accolades are welcomed and useful as marketing tools for Evidence, but Brown remains most concerned about connecting with his audience. He wants people to "get it." Brown is, at heart, a storyteller, and the stories he tells are of the African diaspora-of black life, art, history, music and culture in both America and Africa. He wants his audiences to understand these stories, which he calls "his grandmother stories." But he worries about a disconnect he sees between modern dance and everyday life.

"What I miss about dance here in the States," he says, "is that we don't see its connection to life. We don't see it in our neighborhoods. It's kind of shifted to what ballet was and fine art is. So keeping dance and art connected to people, making it an expression of our lives and what people are going through, is important. Dance is a form where the spirit speaks."

Brown's work is speaking to an ever-larger audience and, according to recent reports, an audience that is younger and more diverse than is usually found at a formal dance performance. The last time Brown/Evidence appeared at Stanford, the San Francisco Chronicle approvingly noted that the company "drew anything but the conventional dance audience." The review further described that audience as "stirred up to a fever pitch [by] the dancing." That's the kind of connection Brown is seeking.

Ronald K. Brown/Evidence is often compared to the Alvin Ailey company, for reasons both superficial and more substantive. While both companies feature marvelously talented and athletic dancers and share deep roots in the vernacular music of Africa and America, there are countless differences.

Evidence is probably the more adventuresome of the two companies, in part because Brown acknowledges no limits on his choreography. Brown credits that openness to his first African trip. "I decided then," he says, "it was okay to pull from whatever vocabulary served my particular dance. I just let myself dance as the man that I am, and that's where I create from."

Ronald K. Brown and his boundary-stretching company Evidence is suddenly one of the hottest tickets in modern American dance, but Brown is anything but an overnight success. He has been working toward this point since 1985, and he's well prepared for the spotlight. A charismatic performer, heralded choreographer and masterful teacher, Brown certainly appears to be poised on the brink of greatness.

–Excerpted from the ***artsWORD*** article by Jon Hartley Fox (02/03)

SELECTED REPERTORY DESCRIPTIONS

Below are descriptions of the two dance pieces that will be performed for the school matinee.

WALKING OUT THE DARK (2001)
Walking Out the Dark's central metaphor is a spiritual awakening that occurs after a period of contemplative isolation. The piece is performed in three sections: the first culminates with a shower of soil from above, symbolizing burial; the second and third sections are danced on the earth that remains on-stage. The movement vocabulary is drawn largely from the dance and music of the Gullah culture of the United States, Cuba, and Guinea, West Africa. *Walking Out the Dark* features an original vocal score by Philip Hamilton, and additional music by Sweet Honey in the Rock, M'Bemb Bagoura, and Ensemble Cutumba Ballet Folklorico de Santiago (Cuba).

HIGH LIFE (2000)
High Life is built on images of migration and discovery of decadence. This dance looks at the movement, stories, and music that describe the journey of the American Negro from the rural south to the north. The work also examines music, fashion and culture which developed in West African cities as young people and families left their villages making their way to the dreams and aspirations pregnant in developing metropolises. The implications of new-found freedom and self-determination are addressed in this dance, where celebration and new beginnings are examined alongside the traditional and cultural values that are lost during the discovery of so- called liberation. The music score includes Oscar Brown Jr., Nikki Giovanni, The JB's, The Nkengas, The Ashantis, Fela Anikulapo Kuti, with original music by Wunmi Olaiya.

Modern Dance

The roots of modern dance in the United States and Europe date back to the late 19th century and evolved as a protest against both the balletic and the interpretive dance traditions of the time. The forerunners of modern dance in Europe include **Émile Jaques-Dalcroze**, proponent of the eurythmics method (where body movements represent musical rhythms) and **Rudolf Laban**, who analyzed human motion. A number of the modern dance movement's founders were American women. **Loie Fuller,** an American actress turned dancer, first gave the free dance artistic status in the United States. Her use of theatrical lighting and transparent lengths of China-silk fabrics won her acclaim from artists as well as general audiences. She preceded other modern dancers in rebelling against formal technique, in establishing a company, and in making films.

Dance was only part of Fuller's theatrical effect; for another American dancer, Isadora Duncan, it was the prime resource. Duncan brought a vocabulary of basic movements to heroic and expressive standards. She performed in thin, flowing dresses that left arms and legs bare. Her choreography of powerful, simple movements made an impression on dance that lasted far beyond her death.

Formal teaching of modern dance was more successfully achieved by **Ruth St. Denis** and **Ted Shawn**. St. Denis based much of her work on Eastern dance styles and brought an exotic

glamour to her company. Shawn was the first man to join the group, becoming her partner and soon her husband. Non-balletic dance was formally established in 1915, when they founded the Denishawn school.

From the ranks of Denishawn members, two women emerged to initiate modern dance proper. **Doris Humphrey** emphasized craftsmanship and structure in choreography and **Martha Graham** opened up fresh elements of emotional expression in dance. Humphrey's dance technique was based on the motions of fall and recovery; Graham's on expressions of contraction and release. At the same time in Germany, **Mary Wigman**, **Hanya Holm**, and others were also establishing comparably formal and expressionist styles. As in Duncan's dancing, the torso and pelvis were emphasized as centers of dance movement. Horizontal movement close to the floor became as integral to modern dance as the upright stance is to ballet. In the tense, often intentionally ugly, bent limbs and flat feet of the dancers, modern dance conveyed certain emotions that ballet avoided. Furthermore, modern dance dealt with contemporary concerns in contrast to the formal, classical, and often narrative aspects of ballet.

A new revolt against Graham's expressionism was led by **Merce Cunningham**, who rejected psychological and emotional elements in choreography. Cunningham's dance technique began to incorporate as much ballet as it did modern dance, while his choreographic methods admitted chance as an element of composition and organization. Also in the 1950s **Alwin Nikolais** developed productions in which dance was immersed in effects of lighting, design, and sound, while Paul Taylor achieved a generally vigorous and rhythmic style with great precision and theatrical projection in several works responding to classical scores.

Cunningham was a prime influence on the development of "postmodern dance" in the 1960s and later. In New York City, a large number of new dancers and choreographers began to abandon virtuoso technique, to perform in nontheater spaces, and to incorporate repetition, improvisation, minimalism, speech or singing, and mixed-media effects, including film. Out of this context emerged such artists as **Twyla Tharp**, who gradually reintroduced academic virtuosity, rhythm, musicality, and dramatic narrative to her dance style, which was based in ballet and yet related to the improvisatory forms of popular social dance.

Since its founding, modern dance has been redefined many times. Though it clearly is not ballet by any traditional definition, it often incorporates balletic movement; and though it may also refer to any number of additional dance elements (those of folk dancing or ethnic, religious, or social dancing, for example), it may also examine one simple aspect of movement. As modern dance changes in the concepts and practices of new generations of choreographers, the meaning of the term will certainly enlarge. Ronald K. Brown's EVIDENCE company has certainly left its formative stamp!

–Adapted from the *Encyclopædia Britannica*

THINK ABOUT IT!

Dear Students:

Talking with your teacher, friends, and family about a performance after attending the theater is part of the experience. When you share what you saw and felt you learn more about the performance. You can now compare ideas, ask questions and find out how to learn even more. Here are some questions to think about:

1) How would you describe the *Ronald K. Brown/EVIDENCE* performance to a friend?

2) What did you like best about the performance and why? Was the program different from what you expected? How?

3) Pretend you are a reporter for the *Sacramento Bee* newspaper. Write a cultural review of the matinee for the Arts section. Describe the dancing, musical scores, costumes, and props with as much detail as you can remember. Then discuss what you liked best about the performance and why.

4) Discuss the differences and similarities of modern dance and ballet.

This Teacher's Guide was written by ANETT JESSOP,
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ATTENDING THE THEATER

What is expected of student audiences at the matinee:

- Enter the auditorium quietly and take seats immediately *(note that all matinees now have reserved seating)*;

- Show courtesy to the artist and other guests at all times;
- Demonstrate appreciation for the artist's work by applauding at the appropriate times;
- Refrain from making unnecessary noise or movements;
- Please eat lunch before or after the performance to avoid disruption;
- Relate any information acquired from the pre-matinee discussion to the new information gained from the matinee;
- Please do not use flash photography.

What you can expect of your experience in a performing arts theater:

A theater is a charged space, full of energy and anticipation. When the house lights (the lights that illuminate the audience seating) go down, the excitement level goes up! Theaters are designed so that the voices of the singers and actors and the music of the musicians can be heard. But this also means that any sound in the audience: whispering, rustling of papers, speaking and moving about, can be heard by other audience members and by the performers. Distractions like these upset everyone's concentration and can spoil a performance.

The performers on stage show respect for their art form and for the audience by doing their very best work. The audience shows respect for the performers by watching attentively. Applause is the best way for audience members to share their enthusiasm and to show their appreciation for the performers. Applaud at the end of a performance! Sometimes the audience will clap during a performance, as after a featured solo. Audience members may feel like laughing if the action on stage is funny, crying if the action is sad, or sighing if something is seen or heard that is beautiful. Appreciation can be shown in many different ways, depending upon the art form and the culture(s) of the people in the audience. While the audience at a dance performance will sit quietly, other types of performance invite audience participation.