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BLVCK BRILLIANCE: A Celebration of Melanin

👤 Staff Reports 🕒 July 15, 2021



Melvin AC Howell is an international dancer and choreographer. His goal is to spread "positivity, love, guidance, and encouragement through dance." Photo: Tanja Kuic Photography

Melvin AC Howell is a 26-year-old dance teacher and choreographer from Asheville whose journey into dance began when he taught himself at a young age.

His family couldn't afford studio dance classes, but that didn't stop him.

"I actually danced out in the hallway of the apartment building that we lived in, and I used the reflection in the window as my mirror. I would search up some of the pioneers and the OGs of different dance styles on YouTube, and I would just train for hours on end, bettering my technique."

Now, joined by a talented and supercharged cast of local Black dancers and a violinist, he is bringing a unique and joyful production to the Diana Wortham Theater at 18 Biltmore Avenue in downtown Asheville. The one-night performance—a world premiere presented by Asheville's fabled theater arts collective, Different Strokes Theater Company—takes place **Saturday, July 24 at 7 p.m.** To help prevent the spread of Covid-19, only 150 tickets will be available, and masks covering the nose and mouth must be worn. There will be no intermission.

BLVCK BRILLIANCE uses a variety of movement styles and music to celebrate and elaborate not on the trauma and struggles of being Black, but of the strength, resilience, and pride Black people possess despite those obstacles. As a choreographer with international experience, Howell has been transforming and molding lives, while evolving the art of dance, for over 13 years. He says, "BLVCK BRILLIANCE is more than entertainment, it's an experience that is meant to celebrate Black People, Black culture, and Black excellence."

Howell continued, "Authenticity in hip-hop and street dance culture, a lot of it is about telling a story, showing facial expressions, showing emotion. It is about vulnerability. I think a lot of the time there's this misconception that hip-hop is about levels and a certain amount of bounce and rock but that's just the tip of the iceberg... When you see hip-hop culture, where hip-hop started back in the day, a lot of dances started in the streets—they started as dance battles, and if you watch these dance battles they are conversations from one dancer to the next and one artist to the next... There is an extreme amount of vulnerability in that, in letting your guard down and putting it all out there."

Howell has given lectures and led seminars with the University of Pennsylvania in which he explains and demonstrates "how healthy and beautiful dance is, as well as how it can be used in everyday life to self-regulate, be more mindful, and to develop one's emotional intelligence. He has taught dance in Guatemala, where he made an even deeper impact on the lives and locals by building a house with his friends, family, and team at Call In The Cavalry, supporting a family in need. The family helped by the group comprised a single mother with six children—one of them handicapped—who had no plumbing or basic living necessities.



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Howell describes his teaching and performance as having a single goal: to spread positivity, love, guidance, and encouragement through dance. He calls it “The Positivity Movement.” Nor is formal, choreographed dance his only passion. He works with many underserved youth in the community and has noted their lack of self-confidence and healthy, positive self-esteem. He is determined to turn their self-belief to “THEY CAN,” rather than the notion that has been drilled into their heads, that “THEY CAN’T!”

He says, “Many of our Black youth have little to no positive and constructive outlets, with little or no access to these outlets that are necessary to lead a healthier, stronger, and happier childhood. I have a deep-rooted passion for roller skating and notice the profound need for it in Asheville and western North Carolina in general. Roller skating reduces stress and builds on confidence.

“Thus,” he continues, “I am currently in the process of working with the community, locals and leaders, to open an indoor-outdoor Roller Skating Rink here in Asheville!” Howell plans to host a Skate Party Fundraiser in August as the first all-inclusive fund-raising event to make a Black-owned rink a reality for Asheville.

About Different Strokes Performing Arts Collective

Different Strokes Performing Arts Collective is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization committed to making theatre, building community, facilitating awareness, and changing the world, one play at a time. Motivated by the belief that the arts are capable of bridging cultural and social gaps, we work to increase and sustain opportunities for diversity within the Western North Carolina performing arts community, and to present works that confront issues of social diversity in a provocative way.

Visit www.differentstrokespac.org.

BLVCK BRILLIANCE will be presented by Different Strokes! Performing Arts Collective on **Saturday, July 24, 2021** beginning at 7 p.m. at Diana Wortham Theatre, 18 Biltmore Ave. in Asheville. Tickets are \$20, available at www.worthamarts.org, or call 828-257-4530.