

'It's like becoming a toddler again': Ronald K Brown on the stroke that almost killed him

By: Kat Lister
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Dance is keeping me alive

After a life of movement, a stroke left Ronald K Brown unable to walk. Now recovering and choreographing at Sadler's Wells, he's in no mood to slow down
By Kat Lister



It was an April morning in 2021 when Ronald K Brown realised he couldn't get up from his living room floor. The choreographer and dancer had curbed off this simple movement a million times, but all of a sudden his mind was blank. His brain couldn't figure it out. One minute he was king of the knee, and the next he was in an emergency room being told he had suffered a stroke, and would need to undergo a risky but potentially life-saving procedure to remove a blood clot from the right side of his brain. The surgery was successful, but the doctors warned his family it would take him a year to learn to walk again. "I was walking after four weeks," Brown tells me with pride two years later, on a video call from New York. He sneezes, may take a little more effort these days, but his eyes are sharp, his gaze unequivocally fixed. Narrowing the vibrant, floral shirt he's chosen to wear this afternoon, there is a vivacity to his conversation that reflects the unstoppable energy of his 58-year career. "No major choreographer has worked harder to bring spiritual awareness to the human heart than Ronald K Brown," *The Washington Post* wrote of his work in 2021. Raised in Brooklyn in the late 60s, the 57-year-old has spent a lifetime advocating for the growth of community in African American dance, using his hybrid choreography as a way to illuminate the beauty of traditional African forms and rhythms. Next month, London audiences will get a glimpse of this dazzling synthesis when Brown's 2023 work, *Dancing Spirit* is reprised at Sadler's Wells by the Alvin

Alley American Dance Theatre, a company that was founded in 1983 to bring African American dance to all audiences. Set to a soundtrack of Duke Ellington, Wynton Marsalis and Radiohead, *Dancing Spirit* says tribute to Alvin's artistic director Judith Jamison (recognised as one of the most prominent figures in modern dance) and her autobiography of the same name. "It's a choreographer who believes that dance and music belong together," Brown says, sitting in his office at the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, a community development in his home borough of Brooklyn. Recovery from his stroke is both a "blessing" and a "fight", he says. Indeed, it's required a level of patience that many would struggle to summon, let alone sustain. "It's like becoming a toddler again - I'm forgetting everything from scratch," he says. At the beginning, the needles in his left foot made it too painful to stand. Nevertheless, he persevered, little by little: 350 feet at first, then 25 more. A week after he was discharged, he needed to get back to work. Only now could he rehearse the company from his wheelchair. "The wheels were replaced with an amulet in the corner of his studio from which he was able to give his verbal cues. "At one point, I couldn't move my left leg at all, and my therapist told me, just move it on a molecular level. It was an interesting reply to a choreographer who would often give this same rehearsal note to his dancers. "We forget how many things the brain controls," Brown says. His sense of intuition and perceptiveness have increased, he tells me, expanded not only how he thinks, but how he feels. Emotions swell suddenly. "Now you're crying for reasons you might not understand." An audience needs to see evidence

of themselves in an auditorium in order to imagine the possibilities in their own lives, he says, and adds that he never wants people to look, or dance, the same. Sometimes people come up to him after a performance and say: "She reminds me of my aunt, or that looks like my uncle." That kind of recognition is what he craves, and outreach schemes knit it into its surroundings. Slowly, the attitudes that made the young Brown self-conscious are shilling. Only last week a 13-year-old student told his mother he no longer wants to be a firefighter after attending one of Brown's classes. Now, his dream is to be a dancer. "That's the change," Brown says. With dates coming up at Brooklyn's Bklyn Theatre, and a revival at Sadler's Wells to mark 65 years of the Alvin Alley American Dance Theatre, life is as busy as ever for Brown. He's even made a few changes in *Dancing Spirit* this decade. He tells me it's not something he's been eager to do in the past, but maybe he's heard something from the circles. "It's OK to look at something fresh," he says, almost tentatively, as if still reconciling this new perspective. "Does he have less fear?" "My goodness!" he replies, before alerting me to the possibility of a few tears. "Fear is one of the deepest parts of recovery." "Maybe it's not pain like I used to know it, maybe it's a new feeling, a new pain, and so the fear of it is something to squash and overcome." In spite of the struggles, or perhaps because of them, he's celebrating every accomplishment. "We started taking steps without my cane," he tells me with a smile. "And it's not as smooth as I want it to be - or as fast as I want it to be. But I'm taking those steps."

I couldn't move my leg so my therapist said just move on a molecular level
Dancing Spirit is on at Sadler's Wells Theatre, London, from Wednesday 15 to September 17

Podcasts

Intrigue: The Immortals



Some of the more optimistic billionaires of Silicon Valley aren't content with just having an outsized influence on the world today. They're using their limitless cash and clout to try to hack human aging, and attempting to keep their influence and money forever. The methods range from the tricky to the cranks: there are blood transfusions, implants and a post-human future. But, as they point out, the average global life expectancy has doubled in the last century. Why not try to live forever? Tech reporter and psychologist Alex Frostick meets the people who think they can cheat death, and cautions people alarmed at what a class of not-quite-human tech billionaires means for the rest of us. Tom Nicholson

The weekend's television

Emily Baker
Slow and steady wins the race for Mortimer and Whitehouse

Mortimer and Whitehouse: Gone Fishing BBC Two, 8pm ★★★★★

Sunday night's TV gave us two options of middle-aged blokes winning each other up against a backdrop of a beautiful part of the world. On ITV, Gordon Ramsay, Gino D'Angelo and Paul Whitehouse were back in the British countryside showing off their fishing skills. These alpha males in a constant competition of one-upmanship, or two genuine pals making silly jokes and catching fish? A no-brainer, as far as I'm concerned. **Mortimer and Whitehouse: Gone Fishing**, now in its sixth series, is the best programme of its kind.



Paul Whitehouse and Bob Mortimer have lost none of their charm

Two delighted to report that watching the comedians waste through Britain's rivers has not lost any of its magic. In the opening episode, the pair were back in Wales, hoping to catch some chub along the charming banks of the River Wye. Conversation flowed as easily as the river, both Mortimer and Whitehouse settling back into their well-worn routine. Mortimer, the vice chairman of the *Wye Fishermen's Association*, has managed to overcome the difficulties of small talk (which led to a discussion of what constitutes "large talk"), while Mortimer adds any resemblance to a politician and fishing in a game of darts. It's all the easygoing on a conversation in the pub, one that made you desperate to join in. It didn't take long for the pair to be back to their typically surreal, this time in the case of Tony's 10th birthday. The equally senior (who belongs to one of the programme producers) once again joined Mortimer and Whitehouse on their trip, settling in with them at their stunning accommodation, only to disrupt the peace with one of his apparently legendary and messy birthday parties. While the comedians tried to relax and enjoy the day, I can't help but feel that, as with their previous series, those who should engage with the message behind the programme. It's hard and fast, there's beauty and peace to be found in taking it at a steady pace.

There aren't many programmes that treat the countryside with the respect it deserves

As ever, the pair welcomed a guest to the riverbanks for a chat. This time it was the impressive David Lloyd, an ex-cricketer who founded the charity, *Teaching Minds*, which introduces the autistic, making word of fishing to people struggling with social issues and mental illness. That's a story as brilliantly touching as *Gone Fishing* makes time for such stories in its first series, and Lloyd's story only reinforced the comedians' message: spending time in nature is healing and restorative. Aside from *Ant and Dec's Countryfile* and *Springwatch*, there aren't many programmes that treat the British countryside with the respect it deserves. Baking, brooks and pastures of sheep are given the David Attenborough slow-motion treatment - it makes you wonder why on Earth you're sitting inside watching *Gone Fishing*. Instead of looking in the pastoral splendour of our underappreciated landscape. Of course, it's September now and already dark by 8pm. There are those who find the slow pacing and unmissable *Gone Fishing* being that part of those who should engage with the message behind the programme. It's hard and fast, there's beauty and peace to be found in taking it at a steady pace.