

June 28, 2010 1:17 PM

Summer Arts review: Urban Bush Women

By [Donald Munro](#) | [1 Comment](#)

The joke around Summer Arts parts is that Fresno doesn't really get hot until the annual festival begins. Summer Arts director Jim Spalding, in his annual welcome to the Sunday opening-night audience, told an amusing story about getting blamed for the heat by a woman at the reception beforehand. The good news, he told the audience, is there's an ice-cream social after the show. "Come fast because it's going to melt," he said.



Photo: New York Times

Summer Arts, which is in its 12th year of being hosted at Fresno State, is celebrating a big anniversary this year: its 25th. By coincidence, so is Urban Bush Women. The group has been to Summer Arts before, and is a good choice to open the festival. They put on a rousing, peppy, sweaty outing with lots of female empowerment on display. True to form, the company stomped its way to a raucous standing ovation.

The performance kicked off with a first-rate solo number titled "Body Talk." Dancer Kanisha Brown performed to Wynton Marsalis' "Ajeseke/Jookin'," off his "Congo Square" album, a work written by Marsalis with Ghanaian drum master Yacub Addy. (Congo Square was the only place in America where African slaves were allowed to perform their own music and dance in the 1700s-1800s, establishing the roots of American music.) An intriguing blend of African rhythms with an enthusiastic big-band sound, the music -- and the choreography -- was exuberant. Brown, wearing a ruffled skirt and midriff-baring top, shimmied and strutted to the beat with a ferocious, leonine intensity.

What struck me about "Body Talk" -- and also "Naked City," the second work on the program -- is the remarkable connection between choreography and text. There were moments in which the dancer's body itself, so finely tuned to the music, seemed to be "producing" the vocals, even though it was obviously a pre-recorded soundtrack. Choreographer Jawole Willa Jo Zollar in these two numbers connected words with movement in big, flagrant ways.

In "Naked City," which Zollar explained was a reference to the old TV series set in a vibrant Manhattan, the textual emphasis is taken to an even greater extreme, with the dancers erupting periodically in gibberish. (Their physical movements mirrored the vocals.) Six dancers, all clad in shimmering, sparkling costumes that suggested formal evening-gown attire, embarked on an

extended version of give-and-take as they navigated both what we assume is the "city" and also their interactions/relationships with each other.

This was not a gentle, peaceful exercise in womanly togetherness -- forget the image of the "fairer sex" cooperating in tandem. Instead, I was reminded of a sense of big-city territoriality. In a city, you're fiercely cognizant of your personal space and you instinctively protect and even defend it, and as the women took turns stomping their assertiveness, I thought of the intensity and bustle of rush hour. Still, I think it'd be too easy to read big-city isolation as the only theme of "Naked City." How much is pro-forma bluster and how much is genuine? For there are many intense interactions and relationships suggested on stage through movement. I found the whole thing vibrant.

I wasn't as enamored with the third and final piece of the evening, titled "Walking With Pearl ... Southern Diaries," a tribute to groundbreaking choreographer pearl Primus. Perhaps it was a case of how the concert was programmed, but the assertive, pounding themes of worship-style enthusiasm wore thin and predictable. I was moved by the prowess and intensity of dancer Christine King, at 40 years of age and a 20-year veteran of the company, she roused the audience with her ferocious stage presence, but the piece lost its emotional impact for me early on. What seemed so fresh and raw earlier in the evening felt more stilted and conventional later on.

Your thoughts: As always, I'm curious what other Summer Arts audience members and participants feel about the various events. Post your comment on this post or email me.

1 Comment



By **Armen D. Bacon** on **June 30, 2010 10:31 PM** | [Reply](#)

As a returning student to SA, first let me say what a gift this program is to Fresno. I was thrilled to see a sold out theatre at this first, breath-taking performance. Our writing class debriefed and marveled at the courageousness of these dancers to be so vulnerable in public, to carry so much history in their bodies, and then to share so many moments of "ecstatic release."

Most of us are quieted by our inner-censors - these women were explosive with beauty, each of them sharing a special story packed with emotion. And to think, this is only Week 1 of Summer Arts. Fasten your seatbelts, Fresno.

Armen D. Bacon