

FSU dance professor Jawole Zollar 'the best of the best'

[By Doug Blackburn and Mark Hinson](#) • DEMOCRAT SENIOR WRITERS • Published: April 22, 2011 12:13PM

In the mid-'90s, dancer and choreographer Jawole Willa Jo Zollar got an offer from “a university in the frozen north” to come teach dance when she wasn’t busy working with her acclaimed New York dance company Urban Bush Women.

Zollar approached her former graduate professor, Nancy Smith Fichter at Florida State University’s dance department, and asked her to write a letter of recommendation.

“Nancy said, ‘Well, Jawole, if you want to teach, why don’t you teach here?’ ” Zollar, 60, said on Friday from New York City where was rehearsing for a concert with Urban Bush Women.

“When I visited the other university — which I’d rather not name — it was 30 degrees below zero. The next week I came to FSU and it was 75, so that helped make up my mind.”

Climate and compatibility aside, Zollar and FSU’s dance department clicked.

Described as “a national treasure” by Sally McRorie, dean of FSU’s College of Visual Arts, Theatre & Dance, Zollar earlier this month received the highest honor available to a faculty member at FSU: She has been named the 2011-12 Robert O. Lawton Distinguished Professor.

Some might say it pales in comparison to the national Guggenheim Fellow she was awarded in 2009, but not Zollar.

“It’s quite an honor because it’s your peers recognizing you,” Zollar said. “It’s exhilarating.”

FSU English professor David Kirby, the 2003-04 Lawton recipient and a member of the selection committee that chose Zollar, regards Zollar as “the best of the best.”

“Jawole is a paradigm-shattering choreographer, a splendid colleague and a warm, wonderful friend. The only thing that’s wrong with her is that name doesn’t begin with an A.



Urban Bush Women founder Jawole Zollar shows a movement to her FAMU class on Wednesday afternoon.

“Our committee went through the alphabetical list of nominees with great care, and since they’re all at the top of their game, it took us a couple of hours to get to Jawole Zollar. Once we got there, though, there was no question.”

Psychology professor Thomas Joiner, the 2010-11 Lawton winner, applauded his successor. “She is very deserving for many reasons; a main one is that she combines academic excellence with wide public reach. Either one of those alone is hard enough to achieve; their combination, extremely rare.”

Zollar, a native of Kansas City, has been dancing almost since was able to walk. She earned a bachelor’s in dance at University of Missouri before coming to Tallahassee for a Master of Fine Arts degree with Fichter, the only other dance faculty member to receive the Lawton Award (1991-92).

Zollar moved to New York in 1980, where she studied under Sounds in Motion Dance Company artistic founder Diane McIntyre, before forming Urban Bush Women in 1984.

UBW, a predominantly black and female modern-dance company that recently celebrated its 25th anniversary, was selected last year by the U.S. State Department to be a cultural ambassador in South America. Zollar and her company spent one week each in Venezuela, Colombia and Brazil.

Zollar is a devoted teacher and mentor.

“She’s really helped so many young dancers propel into their professional careers, and make connections with dance troupes nationally and internationally,” McRorie said.

Zollar calls it a two-way street. “Anytime I’m mentoring, I am being mentored, too. It helps me grow as an artist being in touch with these fascinating minds,” she said. Fichter is delighted to see her protégé receive the Lawton Distinguished Professor award.

“Jawole Zollar’s artistic brilliance is strongly supported by a keen and developed intellect. Her creative accomplishments are internationally acknowledged and admired,” Fichter said. “She brings all these gifts to FSU with consistent generosity and effectiveness.”

Paul Cottle, a physics professor at FSU who was on the seven-member selection committee for this year’s Lawton award, is far from an aficionado when it comes to dance. But he knows excellence when he sees it — or reads about it.

“This is what hooked me: A New York Times review of ‘Fly: Five First Ladies of Dance,’ which included Professor Zollar, called her and the other four women in the show ‘contemporary dance royalty.’ I don’t really know anything about dance,” Cottle said, “but it is clear even to me that Professor Zollar is a transformational figure in contemporary dance.

“That’s what the Lawton professorship is all about.”

<http://www.tallahassee.com/article/20110422/BREAKINGNEWS/110422005/FSU-dance-professor-Jawole-Zollar-the-best-of-the-best-&TPS=3624bcd2d94e976580ab36921d3e0f93&sharesource=email>

Zollar is also well known for community engagement. She will be taking the Urban Bush Women to New Orleans this summer, as she did last year, as the troupe works to make a difference in the lives of everyday citizens.

Every trip concludes with Zollar returning to Tallahassee, her home for the past 14 years — and for the foreseeable future.

“I’m extremely happy at FSU. There’s no chance I’m going anywhere,” she said. “We have amazing collegiality in our department and that’s worth its weight in gold.”