



[ACCESSATLANTA-SHARING](#) 11:43 a.m. Friday, January 21, 2011

Three questions with Jawole Willa Jo Zollar

By [Lynn Peisner](#)

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Jawole Willa Jo Zollar founded the seven-member company Urban Bush Women in 1984 with high expectations about what dance could achieve.

The troupe is still strong, pushing boundaries with dancers who challenge body stereotypes of the waifish ballerina and revealing choreographies that play out more like anthropological expressions of African-American histories than they do dances. UBW will be performing three pieces at the Rialto on Saturday that exemplify Zollar's ideas of social change through movement.

Q: What principles were at work when you founded UBW?

A: We were pursuing a certain kind of gritty storytelling that wasn't so much known at the time. We were a voice that was, and still is, needed because we focus on stories that are less comfortable for people.

The arts are very powerful in addressing social change, and it's not where people often look first. But the arts connect people not to how they think about social issues, but to how they feel about them. Once you're clear about how you feel, then action becomes more of a possibility.

Q: Can you talk about the storytelling audiences will see at the Rialto performance?

A: In "Body Talk" we look at the idea of the movement of the mother tongue. We know the ways we were trained to dance, but what were the ways we danced before we were trained? "Walking with Pearl...Southern Diaries" is more of a story exploring [dancer and anthropologist] Pearl Primus' relationship to the South and the time she spent there learning the history of sharecroppers. Picking cotton is a physical action. The way the African-American population brought ecstatic praise to this country, that's a physical action. Primus told stories in her dances. One of her dances, "Hard Time Blues," we staged as the centerpiece of "Southern Diaries." In her movement, she talks about the plight of poor people.

Q: Your choreographies range from titles such as "LOL!" to "Rage and Power." How do you slip from whimsy to rage in a few steps?

A: That's the human condition, but particularly within African-American culture, we laugh inside of sorrow. Life is about finding joy. Even in the worst situations, it's about finding moments of joy and moments of beauty. One of the things that strikes me about African-American culture are big, boisterous laughs that are very much a part of culture. Falling down on the floor, crying and laughing. For me, comedy and sorrow go hand in hand.

Urban Bush Women. 8 p.m. Jan. 22. \$37 -- \$61. Rialto Center for the Arts, 80 Forsyth St., Atlanta. 404-413-9849. tickets.rialtocenter.org.