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Urban Update

Urban Bush Women rework classic pieces for 25th anniversary

By [Susan Reiter](#)



Photo by Rose

Eichenbaum.

Twenty-five years is an impressive anniversary for a contemporary dance company to attain—especially a company as politically and socially engaged, idiosyncratic and feisty as Urban Bush Women. In planning how to mark the occasion, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar (the troupe’s founder and artistic director) has revisited and re-examined specific aspects of the rich UBW repertory. For *Zollar: Uncensored*, the program that launches the anniversary celebration at Dance Theater Workshop next week, she turned to works, mostly dating from the mid-1980s through mid-1990s, that explore women’s bodies and sensuality, as well as the ways in which women recover from trauma.

In addition to selecting a specific area of the repertory, Zollar aimed to place the pieces in a new context, shaping them into what is essentially a new work. “I wanted to really look at how to tie them together thematically by taking different sections, like a collage, and putting them in to a new conceptual framework,” she says after UBW’s six dancers and three singers complete a day of rehearsal.

There are a couple of complete works, as well as segments from others. Text and song are incorporated along with the potent, African-derived movement to evoke dramatic, deeply human situations—some searing, some celebratory—that resonate powerfully.

In some cases, the works Zollar is revisiting are ones that were not performed for very long, because touring opportunities during that touchy time often necessitated putting certain types of work aside. Works that included nudity and explored female body issues were not requested by the presenters at venues where UBW performed. “At a time after Karen Finley and Robert Mapplethorpe, people became more afraid of works that were evocative of, or focused around, sensuality,” Zollar recalls. “They were more comfortable with the political, angry work than with those. The nudity was presented in the context of a woman being the powerful person. Presenters became frightened, if they got any NEA money. They would say, ‘we can’t really deal with the nudity’ and would ask for other pieces from the repertory.

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“One of the things I realized is that I stopped a certain kind of investigation of the politics of the body, and politics of the self. And I think that’s the worst effect of censorship, you start to censor your creative impulses. I think that’s a much worse effect than someone censoring you. That’s the damaging part of it. I’m talking about where the core of your artistic heart and impulses—someone says: you can’t do that.” Going back to those earlier works has given Zollar a chance to revisit the company’s earlier years in the context of present-day sensibilities and priorities. “It’s really interesting because the world has changed, but at the same time, the world hasn’t changed. We’ve got a show like *Fela!* on Broadway, which would not have been possible at that time. In my work, movement from the pelvis has always been a centerpiece. At one time, we would get people who were afraid of that. And I think that’s changed. At the same time, there’s more objectification of that in music videos. So it’s expected, and more out there, but it’s also in some ways more objectified.”

As a counterpart to *Zollar Uncensored*, she has in mind a second anniversary program called *Zollar: Rage and Power*.

“We’ll look at the political, fiery work,” she promises. But that probably won’t come to fruition until next year, because UBW’s dance card is so full for 2010. In March, it spends three weeks in South America as one of three companies selected for DanceMotion USA, a new State Department-sponsored cultural exchange program designed to reach out to international audiences by sharing and exploring the contemporary American dance experience. Also on the calendar is a six-week European tour of *Les Ecailles de Memoire*, the troupe’s collaboration with Senegal’s Compagnie Jant-Bi that proved so riveting and memorable when seen at BAM in November 2008. So Zollar has much reason to look ahead, as well as much reason to celebrate and reaffirm what has gone before.

>Urban Bush Women

Jan. 20-23, Dance Theater Workshop, 219 W. 19 St. (betw. 7th & 8th Aves.), 212-924-0077; \$25.