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Dance

Dance Review | Urban Bush Women

Urban Bush Women, Moving Through a Defiant Past



Andrea Mohin/The New York Times
Paloma McGregor, center, and other Urban Bush Women dancers in “Zollar: Uncensored.”

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Anniversaries are opportunities for pomp, circumstance and celebration. There was some of that on Wednesday night at [Dance Theater Workshop](#), when the Urban Bush Women, led by its founder, [Jawole Willa Jo Zollar](#), kicked off its 25th-anniversary season with “Zollar: Uncensored.” [Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater](#)’s artistic director, [Judith Jamison](#), gave a postshow toast; audience members were pulled up onstage for an impromptu dance party.

But there was also a hearty streak of defiance, sometimes even anger, running through the erotically charged program, which featured Ms. Zollar’s early investigations (largely from 1985 to 1995) into female sexuality.

This defiance can perhaps be traced, at least partly, to Ms. Zollar’s program notes explaining that the evening “is a collage of excerpts that connect to this area of my work that I eventually abandoned or that was diminished when the full brunt of the ‘Helms era’ of censorship frightened presenters and funders.” Worse, she added, “I began to censor myself.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/22/arts/dance/22urban.htm>

In 2010, years removed from the culture wars, it is difficult to imagine the material in this 70-minute show as controversial, though its depictions of female desire and torment are frank. In the 1987 piece “LifeDance II ... The Papess (mirror in the waters),” performed by the powerful Catherine Dénécý, a lone woman undergoes a ritualized transformation, stripping off her green stilettos and wrap dress and smearing her naked, writhing torso with raw egg. Having seemingly been done wrong, she seems ready to do wrong, pulling a knife from a hidden holster and menacing an invisible foe.

Instead of carrying out revenge, she is joined by a sisterhood, or perhaps worshipers. The other dancers emerge in a processional, bearing baskets of apples and white flowers. Ms. Zollar, who originally danced this work, draws a serpentine figure on the floor in chalk.

This sense of rising above pain through fellowship, and of individual hurt being subsumed in larger cultural and historical turmoil, runs throughout the show. Earlier, in “Womb Wars,” Ms. Zollar, hunched over with a naked dancer, Samantha Speis, pressed against her back, cuts a slow, lurching diagonal across the stage. Her arms outstretched, her voice hoarse, she narrates a short, brutal story of rape and other physical violence at the hands of strangers and relatives alike.

Ms. Speis, left alone in the center of the stage, throws herself into a series of awkward, hurtling leaps, crashing to her knees and beating her breast. Soon enough she is comforted by the other dancers, who clothe her in an outfit identical to their own: a white midriff-baring tank and a diaphanous length of pale blue fabric looped about her waist. (Matthew Hemesath and Ms. Zollar designed the costumes.) Soon enough all are dancing, their tight phalanx of bodies spreading across the floor in weighty, undulating rhythms, as one of the three vocalists sings of the dreams and tears of a people. These striking vocalists (the guest artists Somi and Pyeng Threadgill, and the company member Christine King) are onstage throughout the performance, along with the percussionist Beverly Botsford, augmenting this potent society of women.

But Ms. Zollar’s material is rarely as potent as its translators. It feels young, and rather stock, whether in verbal depictions of a woman as dry, cracked earth awaiting her lover to come like the rain, or in “When Harry Met Sally” moments involving orgasms over cupcakes. Had the “Helms era” not forced Ms. Zollar to walk away from this direct interrogation of female eroticism, struggle and empowerment, perhaps she might have broken through to richer storytelling means. As it is, in the intervening years since most of this material was made, she has found her way to a wonderfully textured, important body of work. It doesn’t yell, but it speaks much more forcefully than “Zollar: Uncensored.”