

## Urban Bush Women at Dance Theater Workshop in New York City

By [Robert Johnson/The Star-Ledger](#)

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**Where:** Dance Theater Workshop, 219 W. 19th St., between Seventh and Eighth avenues

**When:** Friday at 7:30 p.m.; Saturday at 7:30 and 10 p.m.

**How much:** Tickets are \$25. Call (212) 924-0077.

A woman's body can be a receptacle for pleasure or for pain. The dancers of Urban Bush Women tell the whole story, baring more than just their hearts in "Zollar: Uncensored," the striking 25th-anniversary program that this clear-eyed female ensemble began performing on Wednesday at Dance Theater Workshop in New York.

The absorbing evening, provocative with its candor but never prurient, offers excerpts from works by choreographer and director Jawole Willa Jo Zollar. Bits of dance and text both sung and spoken, some dating to 1985, are assembled fluidly. The dancers appear wrapped in diaphanous fabrics that reflect the light, and propelling them are the shimmering rhythms of percussionist Beverly Botsford, an animated musician who plays bells, rattles and drums, and who occasionally spins a disc. A quartet of female vocalists adds another layer, yet the stage never grows crowded.

Holding it all together is the sense of purpose embedded in a phrase from Zollar's 1995 vampire ballet "Bones and Ash." "We came here for the dreams," the four scarlet-draped (and presumably immortal) singers explain, "and in the dreams we find ourselves." Theatrical dreams can offer enlightenment, and for Urban Bush Women, self-knowledge is the key to redemption.

Gazing into hand-mirrors at one point, the dancers erupt in charmed laughter. The same spirit of affirmation resides in the self-pleasuring moans and cries of "My Female Hand," and is at the center of "Batty Moves," Zollar's notorious dance in praise of large buttocks. Far from idle vanity, this attitude makes a riposte to a culture in which a woman's self-image and physical integrity are often threatened. In her impactful opening solo, Zollar gets straight to the point. She leans back at first, bathing in the radiance of a light from above and brushing her skin silkily with her fingers. The atmosphere changes, however, when an unseen presence intrudes upon her idyll and the pressure of her hands increases anxiously.

This part of the solo anticipates a more painful episode from "River Woman," in which Zollar hobbles across the stage, her bent figure cupped by that of another dancer. Samantha Speis, who is nude, detaches herself gradually from Zollar as, in a halting and mechanical voice, the choreographer recounts a rape and multiple beatings.

With this simple yet eloquent image, Zollar shows us a personality split in two, and a woman alienated from her own body by the horrors visited upon it.

Urban Bush Women's goal here is to make body and mind whole again through dances and theatrical rites that heal. The most spectacular of these, in "Zollar: Uncensored," is the concluding hymn to the Afro-Haitian deity Damballah Weddo, in which initiates bring flowers and fruit, while Catherine Dénécy breaks a raw egg on her chest, and Zollar traces a voodoo symbol with chalk on the floor.

Equally effective, however, are the dances in which the women's hips circle and thrust. These weighted movements come from a deep, interior place that is the home of freedom and conscience. For 25 years now, Zollar has managed to convey righteousness without smugness, delivering her message without fussiness or sentimentality. Those are great achievements indeed.  
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