

Phenomenal Women

by *Michelle Vellucci*



Urban Bush Women in costumes from "Walking with Pearl...Africa Diaries"

When a 2005 student survey revealed negative feelings about life on campus, the University of California, San Diego, turned to nine women from Brooklyn to help turn things around.

The university teamed up with Urban Bush Women, the internationally acclaimed dance company led by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, to implement a project called "Place Matters." The idea was to help students use movement to create a meaningful connection to their school, where a vast, 1,200-acre campus and rigorous academics left many feeling isolated and out of touch.

Over the course of five months, students delved into the university's history, including the civil rights work of Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, for whom one of UCSD's colleges is named. They wrote poetry based on their academic work, then translated it into movement. They shared stories about their own histories and passions, and debated the concept of "place." Members of Urban Bush Women visited often to facilitate the work, and distill the experience into a series of performances.

"Place Matters" had a profound impact on both students and faculty. "It did something to me that I have a hard time describing in words," says Gabriele Wienhausen, an associate dean in the Division of Biological Sciences. A biochemist with no dance background, Wienhausen became deeply involved with the program, from teaching a related academic course to dancing in the culminating performances. As for the students who participated, she adds, "I think it changed their lives."

From performing onstage to revitalizing communities, Zollar and the Urban Bush Women are a versatile group. Zollar has created 32 works for her company, in addition to choreographing for others like Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and Philadanco. Since 1996, she has split her

time between Brooklyn and Tallahassee, Florida, where she is a tenured professor at Florida State University. The company leads an annual Summer Institute, and the dancers teach in schools and conduct master classes. As Urban Bush Women prepares to celebrate its 25th anniversary, we take a look at this multifaceted company and its many contributions, onstage and off.

Telling Stories

Born and raised in urban Kansas City, Missouri, Zollar spent her childhood training with Joseph Stevenson, who was a student of Katherine Dunham. Her mother was a dancer, singer and musician, and the young Zollar grew up steeped in African-American art and culture. She studied dance at the University of Missouri–Kansas City, and in the late 1970s earned an MFA in dance from FSU.

Realizing early on that she didn't have the body to be an Ailey dancer, Zollar sought another way to carve out a place for herself in the dance world. Drawn to Dianne McIntyre, whose thought-provoking dances depicted ordinary lives, Zollar moved to New York City in 1980 to study with her. Four years later, she founded Urban Bush Women.

From the beginning, Zollar knew she wanted to create a company that could wed artistic expression with social activism. She cites as influences Pearl Primus, Anna Halprin and McIntyre, who helped shape her vision of how a dance company should look and the role its dancers should play. “[McIntyre] did not want cookie-cutter dancers who looked or danced a certain way,” Zollar explains. “She wanted them to have their own sense of style and figure out how that would merge into the group’s style, like the way jazz music is structured.”

Zollar’s style is a mixture of African, modern, jazz, street dance and pedestrian moves. By combining movement, spoken word and music, her works tell stories that explore African traditions and social issues ranging from racism to reproductive rights. The work gives voice to the disenfranchised, whether it’s the homeless woman in *Shelter*, or the people of *Dixwell*, a work created in collaboration with members of a New Haven, Connecticut, community who were being pushed out by gentrification.

More than vessels for Zollar’s choreography, the members of Urban Bush Women are collaborators and co-creators of the work. “Dancers are still trained to duplicate steps, and being in a collaborative, investigative process is for the most part a new experience for many of them,” she says, “particularly if they come from a classical background.”

The company members acknowledge this as one of their primary hurdles. “It’s been a challenge to dig deep and discover myself within Jawole’s movement,” says Samantha Speis, one of four dancers who gathered in the Urban Bush Women Brooklyn office to talk about the company. Paloma McGregor agrees: “I feel like I’m just coming around to infusing my creative self into someone else’s work.”

McGregor describes Zollar’s choreographic process as very research-oriented. “It’s both academic and experiential research,” she says. “Like, ‘Let’s go to a plantation and be on the soil and see what that brings up for you.’” Afterward, the dancers are given freedom to create, either on their own or in groups, based on what they turn up. “It’s kind of like, let’s see what everybody brings into the kitchen, and then Jawole will start choosing the ingredients.”

Sometimes, Zollar brings in choreography and asks the dancers to do problem-solving on a phrase. “Other times, I put on a piece of music and ask, ‘What does it raise for you?’” she says. “It’s really a question of listening and being open to where the creative process takes you.”

Engaging Communities

Collaborative problem-solving is also key to Urban Bush Women's work outside of the studio. The company's two primary programs are community engagement residencies like "Place Matters" at UCSD, and the Summer Institute, which trains both artists and non-artists in community engagement practices.

Community engagement residencies deal with issues that are important to the host area. "Place Matters," for instance, was originally created with artists and activists helping to rebuild post-Katrina New Orleans. The company has done similar work in Tallahassee, where the focus was HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention, and in Flint, Michigan, in the wake of GM plant closings.

During these residencies, Urban Bush Women partners with local artists and residents through dance classes, workshops, trust-building exercises and a creation process that culminates in a community-wide performance. The content and goals are largely decided by the community itself, and laid out in extensive pre-planning sessions.

"You bring people who represent different aspects of a community and talk about what is important to them, what they would like to see addressed and celebrated, and how we can have a process of mutual collaboration," Zollar says. "We try to establish a common language around issues that affect the community: racism, systemic poverty, who has power and who doesn't. It's a common establishment, through a creative process, of what determines a community's identity."

The dancers insist that what they do is engagement—not outreach. Outreach, they say, implies that the recipient is helpless on its own. Engagement is about putting power in the hands of the community itself. In other words, Urban Bush Women treats the host communities as Zollar treats her company members: as equal collaborators and co-creators.

In 1997, the company began training other artists and community leaders in this process in its Summer Institutes. For 10 days each year, artists and non-artists alike gather in Brooklyn to learn how to use artistic expression as a vehicle for social activism and civic engagement.

The Institute itself mimics a community engagement residency, right down to the culminating performance, so participants learn by doing. One facet of this process is asset mapping, which involves identifying a community's existing resources and how they can be used to deal with a particular problem. "The big show we put on at the end is built on the skill set of this community that's gathered at the Institute," says Cathy Draine, program manager at Freedom House, a Boston social justice agency for African Americans. "Whatever happens in that process is exactly what happens when you do the work in a community. So you literally understand it."

Last year, 57 people from 18 U.S. states, as well as Kenya, Brazil, Canada, Venezuela and the UK, came to Brooklyn to take part in the Institute. In addition to daily dance and conditioning classes, they attended workshops in asset mapping, creating public dialogues, principles of effective community organizing, undoing racism and generating choreography, text and music. Some company members teach movement classes, while others, like McGregor and Maria Bauman, lead workshops on facilitating dialogue. This year's Institute will take place in New Orleans.

It's not unusual for attendees to describe the experience as life-changing. But the company members themselves also find the process moving, particularly when it comes to the non-artists who arrive at the Institute with reservations about their own artistic capabilities. "The Institute

takes legislative, social and justice issues and finds artistic ways to address them from a lot of vantage points, and those vantage points come from the people who are in the room,” says McGregor. “Seeing how the Institute opens people’s eyes to the ways in which they can use artistic tools to draw more out of their communities is really amazing. Even though I know how it works, and I’ve done it for the past four years, it’s still magical every time.”

Putting It All Together

Throughout the year, Zollar and company stay busy with many other projects, both as a group and on their own. Last November, they wrapped up a 24-city tour of *Les écailles de la mémoire* (“The scales of memory”), a collaborative piece with Senegal’s Compagnie Jant-Bi, and in January they set off on another tour of their own work.

When touring, company members hold master classes and residencies. At home in Brooklyn, they teach in local schools and have launched a project called B.O.L.D. (Builders, Organizers & Leaders through Dance) to help young people develop leadership and problem-solving skills. Project Next Generation commissions a new work every other year by an emerging female choreographer. Recipients include Bridget L. Moore and Camille A. Brown.

Zollar, meanwhile, can often be found at FSU, where she teaches technique and repertory. She says the job provides balance to her work in New York. For one thing, it allows her the luxury to mold students over several years. “Teaching in New York, you can’t really push the group because you have a population that’s constantly changing,” Zollar says. She adds that the support of fellow faculty members is invaluable. “In Tallahassee I’m working with peers, a lot of whom are older than me. It’s really different from talking to another dancer in my company.”

For the company’s 25th anniversary, Zollar will create at least four evenings of thematically linked work to be performed over a two-year period. The first will be “Zollar: Funny Side Up.” “I deal with a lot of humor and comedy, yet I don’t think that’s how people think of Urban Bush Women,” she says. The other themes are “Zollar: Black Rage and Power,” “Zollar: Uncensored,” covering erotic and sensual work, and another evening based on a capella work.

In the meantime, the company is searching for permanent studio space; its headquarters in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, houses offices only. “That has hindered our ability to do as much as we would like to do,” Zollar admits, adding that the company hopes to get more involved with its own community. “Dance is by nature a communal form,” says Zollar. “And dance is part of community building. It’s part of keeping the cultures of communities connected.”

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