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An Active Anniversary

As Urban Bush Women turns 25, the company is nowhere near slowing down

[By Susan Reiter](#)



Urban Bush Women Associate Artistic Director
Christine King. / Photo by Carol Rosegg

In early 2010, [Urban Bush Women](#) launched its local 25th anniversary celebration with an intriguing program at Dance Theater Workshop that revisited earlier works exploring female eroticism. At the time, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, the founder, artistic director and primary choreographer of the ensemble, alluded to a companion program she hoped to present this year as a counterpart, focusing on “the political, fiery work” from their rich repertory. That program—titled *Resistance and Power*—is being offered this week by Harlem Stage, as a culmination of UBW’s busy, geographically adventurous anniversary year.

As she did last year, Zollar has selected excerpts and, in some cases, created “collages” out of sections from earlier works. The program includes dances dating from 1987 to 2008. “I chose sections of works that I felt demonstrated the idea of embodied resistance. There are ways that people put resistance to oppression in their

bodies, and that’s what this really is exploring,” says Zollar. The program’s one complete work is *Walking with Pearl...Southern Diaries*, which won a 2006 Bessie Award.

Bitter Tongue, from 1987, is represented by a solo that she originally performed, which has been transformed into a quintet. Zollar has combined that with two excerpts (“The Memory Solo” and “Women’s Resistance”) from *The Scales of Memory*, her riveting full-evening collaboration with

Germaine Acogny, which was last seen at BAM in 2008. The resulting collage, its material resonating across two decades, is titled *Embodied Resistance*.

In the middle of the past decade, Zollar created two powerful, thought-provoking dances inspired by the pioneering work of Pearl Primus, a seminal black modern-dance choreographer and anthropologist who kept diaries of her research during her travels within Africa and through the South during the 1940s and '50s. *Walking with Pearl... Africa Diaries* was seen at the Joyce Theater when UBW marked its 20th anniversary, and this occasion marks a welcome opportunity to revisit its eloquent counterpart.

On Friday, Zollar will participate in the 92nd Street Y's event marking the publication of *The Dance Claimed Me*, a new biography of Primus by Peggy and Murray Schwartz. The free noon program includes performances of three Primus solos, and Zollar will read excerpts from the new book. "When I was starting the research for *Walking with Pearl*, Peggy was just starting to think about the book. So we were on the same journey together," she says.

As part of its anniversary year, UBW was one of three dance troupes selected to participate in Dance Motion USA, a State Department-sponsored cultural diplomacy initiative. Last March, the company went to Colombia, Venezuela and Brazil, performing, teaching and engaging in community events. "That was pretty amazing. We knew more about Afro-Brazilian culture, but we really learned about Afro-Venezuelan and Afro-Colombian cultures. We don't know very much in this country about the Afro-descendant populations. They have a rich heritage," Zollar says. "This tour particularly put us in touch with those populations, so we could learn from one another. The thing that I liked is that it really was an exchange; it was not all one-way. We were learning from and about them, and they were learning from us and about us. This was in community settings, concerts, lectures, workshops—in all different settings."

Urban Bush Women's mission includes reaching out into and impacting communities through the arts, and an annual Summer Leadership Institute is going into its 11th year. They are about to launch a new initiative, the Center for Creative Social Change. "We won't be touring very much during 2012, as we get that program going," Zollar notes. "It's going to be based in New York, but we will be doing nationwide programming—particularly a lot of programming in New Orleans, where the Leadership Institute is based. We want to take the work that we're doing in our summer institute and make it year-round, and go deeper and look at how we can be involved with shifting power and affecting power, as artists.

"I think the arts are in a unique position; we affect the hearts and minds. The policy makers, the campaigns, we need that. But what we do in our workshops embodies the learning process. I think that takes it deeper, so people are more willing to continue to act on it, when it's really connected to their feelings, and not just to their thoughts."

[Urban Bush Women](#): Resistance and Power

Through May 1, [Harlem Stage Gatehouse](#), 150 Convent Ave. (at W. 135th St.), 212-281-9240, ext. 19 or 20; \$35.

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