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DANCE REVIEW

Sisters Standing Up to the Man



Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

Urban Bush Women, led by their associate artistic director, Christine King, at the Harlem Stage Gatehouse.

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There's a particularly physical way in which long-withheld emotion escapes the body's controls. It surges spasmodically, turning the torso into an accordion and sending the limbs out in unpredictable arcs and jerks. It's not beautiful in the conventional sense, but it stops you, makes you take it in.

Such an insistence on being seen — sometimes while bearing witness — runs throughout "Resistance and Power," a program of works performed by the Urban Bush Women on Thursday

night at the Harlem Stage Gatehouse. (The evening featured a lone man: the writer and performer Carl Hancock Rux, paying tribute to the troupe through his resonant voice.)

“I know something about that resistance,” Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, the company’s founding artistic director, said as part of a running commentary between dance pieces. She talked of what it signified to look white people in the eye while growing up during segregation, and of present-day struggles.

“Just watch,” she said. “It’s out there in the streets. Did you see it in Egypt?”

Ms. Zollar’s choreography thrums with historical references, but it doesn’t typically offer linear narratives. In “Embodied Resistance,” a new arrangement of sections from “Bitter Tongue” (1987) and “Les écailles de la mémoire” (Scales of Memory, from 2008), the troupe’s powerhouse women, led by the regal company veteran [Christine King](#), might have been the battered remnants of a civilian defense.

They advanced along tight diagonals, feet stamping and crouched torsos undulating. Tight phalanxes, individual sentries, rhythmically propulsive lines: maybe they wouldn’t escape this fight alive, but not without making their adversaries take note.

In “Hands Singing Song,” an excerpt from “Give Your Hands to Struggle” (1998), Marjani Forté paid sculptural tribute as a list of recorded names reverberated in the theater: Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass. She curled in and peeled open, arms belling out as if supported by this rich lineage. Her raised fist returned to her heart, seeking a touchstone.

This road between weary resistance and defiant pride is well trodden, of course, and “Resistance and Power,” which doesn’t offer any especially innovative takes on this journey, suffers from a predictable thematic narrowness. There is, too, a danger in conjuring up such primal, specific emotions within a theatrical setting, where the heartfelt can easily succumb to showmanship.

The evening ended with [“Walking With Pearl ... Southern Diaries”](#) (2005), which did not entirely escape this danger. (Devotional church scenes are tricky to pull off without succumbing to stock portrayals.) But at a certain point the proscenium trappings fell away, as those strangled tidal waves of feeling found their way through. In the final section the women gather close, stamping, clapping and singing in a syncopated chorus of support as individuals moved into the center of the semicircle for ecstatic solos.

“I feel like I wanna say yes,” Ms. King sang. A person can only resist for so long.

“Resistance and Power” continues through Sunday at the Harlem Stage Gatehouse, 50 Convent Avenue, at 135th Street, Hamilton Heights; harlemstage.org.

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