

'Uncensored' bares essence of women

REVIEW Urban Bush Women brought a powerful, controversial piece to life at Ted Mann Concert Hall.

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In the 25 years since Jawole Willa Jo Zollar founded the dance troupe Urban Bush Women, she has seen many changes in the political landscape, including a backlash against artistic expression led by Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., in the late 1980s and early '90s.

Her transcendent 2010 work "Zollar: Uncensored," performed Sunday night at Ted Mann Concert Hall, is an updated amalgam of earlier creations celebrating female eroticism that the choreographer hesitated to tour outside New York during the Helms era because some presenters were concerned about drawing unwanted attention for booking provocative performances.

At the post-show discussion Zollar said she always wanted to explore the "whole experiences of women in a full-bodied way," still a radical act in the 21st century.

"Zollar: Uncensored" boldly unpacks the burdens placed upon women of the African diaspora through centuries of gender inequity, racial injustice and now the complexities of an American culture constantly confused about the relationship among sexuality, sensuality and morality. The work places a high value on physical and emotional freedom through its strong feminist perspective.

The most striking aspect of the work is its seamless integration of movement and song. Guest artists Pyeng Threadgill and Somi, along with longtime company member Christine King, unite their voices in jazz-inspired harmonies, vibrant spoken word, breathy sounds and soulful harmonies, impressively accompanied by percussionist Beverly Botsford. "Close your eyes," the singers repeat, inviting us into a more uninhibited realm.

The seven powerful dancers offer another dynamic facet. Dressed in sequined dresses, they hold mirrors to their faces, but this behavior doesn't feel narcissistic. They're falling through a looking glass, and the remainder of the performance suggests a winding metaphorical journey defined by sensual delights and tragic events. The work also challenges the blame perpetually placed on Eve for humanity's fall from grace, and promises spiritual redemption through healing rituals.



Jawole Willa Jo Zollar

Photo by: Ayano Hisa

"Zollar: Uncensored" is about baring the self (literally and figuratively), without worrying about who tries to stand in the way. Meaningful artistic works can usually withstand the test of time. Political posturing -- at least the Helms brand -- is thankfully more fleeting.