

21 May 2010

On Tour, U.S. Dancers Embrace Latin Rhythms

Urban Bush Women dance troupe visits Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela



New York's acclaimed Urban Bush Women dance company performs "Southern Diaries," a choreographed work by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar.

By Lauren Monsen
Staff Writer

Washington — For more than two decades, New York's Urban Bush Women (UBW) dance company has dazzled audiences with its emotionally powerful dance routines that celebrate survival and empowerment, telling stories about the struggles of disenfranchised people. Founded in 1984 by choreographer Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, the all-female troupe is "dedicated to exploring the use of cultural expression as a catalyst for social change," according to the UBW website.

The ensemble's dynamic dance narrative explores African traditions as well as modern-day social issues, so UBW were ideally suited to touring Brazil, Colombia

and Venezuela — three countries with sizeable populations of African descent — under the U.S. State Department's DanceMotion U.S.A. cultural exchange program. Invited to join the program, UBW dancers boarded a plane in March, bound for Venezuela. Zollar, who serves as artistic director of UBW, recently recalled the highlights of her company's 28-day trip to South America.

Right away, the UBW troupe felt an affinity for the region, said Zollar. "Each country we visited describes its culture as a blend of three cultures: European, African and indigenous," she said. "South America's history is really close to U.S. history," in terms of ethnic diversity and cross-cultural influence. "And I loved the fact that the [DanceMotion U.S.A.] tour was really set up as a learning exchange," so UBW dancers were able to absorb their host countries' unique dance traditions while sharing their own techniques at workshops, master classes and public performances.

"There was a sense of commonality" between the New York dancers and their South American peers, Zollar remembered. Not only did local dancers from each country teach UBW colleagues the basics of their national dance styles (samba in Brazil, different types of salsa in Venezuela and Colombia), but the U.S. visitors discovered a shared sense of purpose with their hosts. "Arts programs in these countries are seen as a way to help young people escape from poverty — and to save their kids," said Zollar. This mission overlaps with UBW's community-focused philosophy of using dance to give a voice to the marginalized, she observed.

"One thing that surprised us is the degree to which men dance in the three countries we visited," said Zollar. In South America, "dancing seems to be such a central part of their culture, and everyone participates," whereas in the United States, she said, dancing is often perceived as a mostly female-oriented art form.

UBW dancers surprised their hosts, as well. "Audiences really saw a distinct American identity in our dances," said Zollar. "People responded to our connection to Africa, and they also saw an American style to our dancing, in terms of our very direct approach. At the same time, they saw that we had different body types onstage; that was a revelation to them." The UBW company is not made up exclusively of women who have typically lean dancers' bodies, Zollar explained.

South America left an indelible impression on her dancers, said Zollar. She cited one episode that still tugs at her heart: a visit to a dance school in Colombia, run by choreographer Alvaro Restrepo. At one point, the Colombian dance students — all from underprivileged backgrounds — lay on the ground, completely motionless, "and it was a moment of understanding the power of silence, and connecting with themselves," said Zollar. That peaceful moment offered a fleeting refuge from the chaos and disorder of poverty that surrounds these youngsters in their everyday lives, she said. "It was a profound thing to witness."

Another memorable event, Zollar said, was the company's visit to the Afro-Brazil Museum in São Paulo. "We got a private tour with the museum's founder and director," she recalled. The museum's collections are housed in "a four-story architectural marvel," she added. "And the museum itself is huge, and so comprehensive in its scope. It covers visual art, dance and music." The museum, a local landmark, stands as a monument to the creative brilliance of Afro-Brazilian artists.

"We took part in a Brazilian street parade," said Zollar. "They were inaugurating an arts center run by women drummers. We danced to their drumming all around the community. Lots of things happened that were so spontaneous, and people received us with such generosity."

In Venezuela, she said, UBW dancers were introduced to the "boogaloo" salsa, an ultra-fast-paced variant on more conventional forms of the dance. Venezuelan dance students executed the boogaloo steps with a flourish, demonstrating the fancy footwork required by the pulsating rhythms of salsa music.

As her dancers moved from country to country, "we were struck by the role that arts play in keeping a community uplifted, in maintaining hope," said Zollar. "The importance of arts in these cultures can't be underestimated."

Throughout the tour, "we felt we were building bridges," she reflected. "Even a small bridge can have an impact. Someday, I'd love to go back to South America. We're really united as human beings, and we tend to forget it. But the arts remind us."

(This is a product of the Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State. Web site: <http://www.america.gov>)



UBW dancers join a lively street parade in São Paulo, Brazil, dancing to the accompaniment of a local all-woman drumming group.