

## Dark Magic: Urban Bush Women's *Zollar: Uncensored*

Jawole Willa Jo Zollar's newest revisits the choreographer's erotic and political dances

By [Deborah Jowitz](#) Tuesday, Feb. 2, 2010

The mid-1980s scarred the dance world's soul. The number of deaths from AIDS was on the rise. Under the [Reagan administration](#), government funding for artists was drying up. The uncertain times coincided with a renewed interest in narrative and emotion among adventurous choreographers who'd done their teething on [Merce Cunningham's](#) the-movement-is-the-meaning credo and the formal experiments of such choreographers as [Trisha Brown](#), [Lucinda Childs](#), and [Laura Dean](#).

When Jawole Willa Jo Zollar founded Urban Bush Women in 1984, a black feminist dance group was something new and bold. And in *Zollar: Uncensored* at Dance Theater Workshop, part of the group's 25th anniversary season, she has chosen to look back on her output of the past two decades and interweave excerpts from pieces that may

have been too erotic or too political for some audiences. The resultant anthology alternates between grabbing and shaking you and uplifting your spirits. With the exception of a brief scene from Zollar's 1995 *Batty Moves* and a scene in which one woman, moaning orgasmically in the darkness, turns out to be consuming a cupcake, there's more pain than the gritty kind of humor that Zollar also excels at revealing.

All of Zollar's works send messages about female power, about post-diaspora struggles of black women, and about spirituality. When I first saw UBW in 1985, the company was something new on the New York scene. Its six members had a raw power and conviction. They eschewed artifice and glamour. They howled and gasped and sang and smacked the floor with bare feet. But they were also tender with one another, whether they were performing some kind of ritual that alluded to African roots or more personal rites. I remember watching transfixed while one woman painstakingly dug a comb into the scalp of another—perhaps her child—curled up against her. She took her time searching for lice, soothed the sore places with ointment, pinned the other's hair back up, and tied on a headscarf. The image has stayed with me to this day.



Yi-Chun Wu

Urban Bush Women of today are equally tough, brave, spunky, sensual, and occasionally concerned with "femininity." In *Zollar: Uncensored*, the choreographer presents them in overlapping vignettes, illuminated by [Susan Hamburger](#)'s sensitive, cross-cutting lighting and buoyed by the wonderful music created by singer-composers [Christine King](#), Somi, and [Pyeng Threadgill](#) and lively, versatile percussionist [Beverly Botsford](#). The musicians move among the dancers, part of the tribe—their harmonies sweet and rich.

Zollar's opening solo is about searching, about remembering, about bringing the past out of the shadows, out of dreams. We hear the singers offstage—sometimes only breathing their rhythm. Zollar often stops, fumbles, stares into the darkness. Some of the scenes she summons up are benign. Three women (Marjani Forté, [Catherine Dénécy](#), and [Paloma McGregor](#)) wearing white midriff-baring tops, with fluffy diaphanous material draped around their hips, parade on slowly, enjoying the sensual sway of their walk, while they contemplate themselves in hand mirrors. They—plus [Samantha Speis](#), [Keisha Turner](#), and [Bennalldra Williams](#)—also burst into spates of gutsy, down-to-earth stepping and lusty jumps. And they make "Shake What Your Mama Gave Ya" from *Batty Moves* into a delirious competition in butt-swinging.

But the lengthier dark scenes predominate. Zollar walks slowly, bent over, her voice hoarse, the words halting, as she tells of being raped and beaten and beaten again. It's as if her brain has been dulled. The younger self (Speis), clinging to her back, falls away and, naked, writhes and screams. The river that Zollar speaks of may never wash away her rage and suffering, but her comrades soothe her, dress her, and groom her. In part of the 1987 *LifeDance II . . . The Papess (mirror in the water)*, a solo originally performed by Zollar, Williams begins with her back to us, swaying. She wears a headscarf but also a tight, shiny green dress and high heels; when she turns, she reveals dark glasses and green lips and brandishes a knife to the sound of W.C. Handy's "[St. Louis Blues](#)." But after biting an apple, the snake's lure to [Eye](#), she disrobes, and—stripped to the waist, with the headscarf wrapped around her hips—becomes a priestess invoking the serpent god Damballah. While the others, dressed in white, bring fruit and flowers and Zollar draws a serpentine symbol on the floor, Williams breaks an egg on her chest and smears it until her body glows golden with yolk and sweat.

Taken as a whole, *Zollar: Uncensored*—powerful as it is—doesn't have some of the nuances of this bold choreographer's most recent works, but that's because it's part of a retrospective trilogy. *Zollar: Laugh Out Loud* and *Zollar: Resistance and Power* tell other stories. Maybe, one day, we'll get to see them all. Bring lunch and dinner. Rejoice.