

Dance

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Beat around the Bush

Urban Bush Women return to the Joyce with some Pearls of wisdom.

By **Gia Kourlas**

Ever since Jawole Willa Jo Zollar started her legendary company, Urban Bush Women, in 1984, she has been on the forefront of African-American dance. Beginning Tuesday 8 at the Joyce Theater, Zollar reprises her Bessie Award-winning hit of last year, *Walking with Pearl... Southern Diaries*, inspired by Pearl Primus, an anthropologist and choreographer who used dance to create awareness about social issues. (An excerpt of her *Hard Time Blues*, from 1945, based on a song about sharecroppers, is included in *Southern Diaries*.) The season spans several generations of choreographers: Along with a new work by Camille A. Brown (until recently a dancer with Ronald K. Brown) and the revival of Blondell Cummings's 1981 *Chicken Soup*, there's the UBW classic *Batty Moves*, a biting humorous look at the size of female buttocks. Zollar, recently back in New York after a semester at the dance department of Florida State University, where she is a professor, spoke to us near her Park Slope apartment.

Why did you become so interested in Pearl Primus?

It was kind of a fluke. When I was in graduate school, part of my thesis involved her research. I knew about her, and I went to hear her speak, and I was blown away. That was all in my background. Later, Peggy Schwartz at Five Colleges asked me if I would restage one of her pieces, *Bushasche*. I said, "I'm not a restager." So she restaged it, and I created a piece around it and became intrigued with her life and this process of taking a piece and creating a world around it within African-American culture.

When did you hear Primus speak?

I think it was in the mid-'80s. One of the things that she talked about resonated: How it was good for people to study the dances of Africa but that it would also be really powerful if we were to study the dances that had come up in African-American culture in our history here. She said that it would be impossible to ignore the influence of the slave ships and the plantations—because it's just embedded. In January,



FEMININE MYSTIQUE
Members of UBW perform *Southern Diaries*.

during a performance of *Southern Diaries*, the dancers just started moaning. I was in the audience, and I thought, Pearl's right.

Music was a huge part of your vision behind Urban Bush Women. Do you remember what the initial spark was in forming the group?

I'm not sure I fully know. I had a perspective that I thought wasn't represented, which was growing up in segregation in Kansas City, where I was immersed in African-American culture and social dance forms. I also knew that I had met these really sassy, strong, impossible women, including my mother, who had shaped my life. I wanted to give voice to those kinds of women who were often glorified and vilified. I wanted to explore, in a contemporary way, some of those stories. And I knew I wanted to work with voice. I don't do it as much as I used to; we used to do a lot of a cappella singing, but when you have turnover, and you need a soprano, your pool becomes so small. I let go of some of the folklore and focused more

choreographically. I think the thing I was most clear about was that I wanted to work in an ensemble approach. I didn't want a collective.

"I wanted to give voice to women who were glorified and vilified."

You wanted to be in charge.

Absolutely. Collectives... well, I lived through the '60s! The first piece we rehearsed for a year. I think that really helped me find a voice. Everything doesn't have to be big and splashy. I guess if there's anything I could say to younger choreographers, it's stay underground longer and find the vision, the voice.

And learn your history?

Some of the history isn't out there. I was inspired by Baryshnikov's "PASTForward" program to do something with black choreographers

from the '70s and '80s. That's why I'm going to do *Chicken Soup*. I feel like there's a generation of young artists who need to see the explorations that were done.

In 2002, you presented *Hair Stories*, which is about society's view of nappy hair. What did you think when you heard Don Imus's comments?

I don't know what he was thinking! I think he thought he was being on the inside. In all cultures, there's the notion of insider/outsider. I've made similar kinds of mistakes, and that's the complexity of the debate that we really didn't tackle. Whether he should have gotten fired? I don't know. The money pulled out. But I was concerned that nobody addressed "nappy-headed." I was like, Isn't somebody going to address whether that part was an insult? [Laughs] If it's going to make rappers more accountable for what they're saying? I'm all for that.

Urban Bush Women is at the Joyce Theater Tue 8-May 13.