

SOCIETY OF DANCE HISTORY SCHOLARS

PROCEEDINGS

**Twenty-Fourth Annual Conference
Goucher College
Baltimore, Maryland
21 - 24 June 2001**

Proceedings

Society of Dance History Scholars

Twenty-Fourth Annual Conference

**Goucher College
Baltimore, Maryland
21 - 24 June 2001**

The Society of Dance History Scholars is a constituent member of the American Council of Learned Societies

This collection of papers has been compiled from files provided by individual authors who wished to contribute their papers as a record of the 2001 Society of Dance History Scholars conference. The compiler endeavored to standardize format for columns, titles, subtitles, figures or illustrations, references, and endnotes. The content is unchanged from that provided by the authors.

Individual authors hold the copyrights to their paper.

Printed by The Printing House, Stoughton, Wisconsin
2001

Published by Society of Dance History Scholars

Conference Papers Table of Contents

SDHS Conference 2001

21 - 24 June 2001

Baltimore, Maryland

Juliette Crone-Willis, Compiler

1	Peter Bohlin <i>A Fight for Women's Rights: A Moment From Stockholm, 1650, and the Coronation Festivities of Queen Christina of Sweden</i>	1
2	Lynn Matluck Brooks <i>Recovering Meaning: Documents and Interpretation</i>	5
3	Renée Camus <i>Cancan: Blurring the Line Between Social Dance and Stage Performance</i>	6
4	Alexandra Carter <i>Changing Views: A Critical History of Second Wave Feminist and Post-Feminist Debate and Its Manifestation in Writings on Ballet</i>	11
5	Elizabeth Cooper <i>Dances About Spain: Guns & Castanets and Adelante</i>	16
6	Roger Copeland <i>Dancing For The Digital Age: Merce Cunningham's Biped</i>	23
7	Michelle Ferranti <i>A Different Expression: Recognizing the Work of Oskar Schlemmer</i>	29
8	Anita Gonzalez <i>Urban Bush Women and the Continuum of Black Performativity</i>	35
9	Naomi M. Jackson <i>Rethinking Humanness: The Place of Automata, Puppets and Cyborgs in Dance</i>	39
10	Suzanne M. Jaeger <i>Dancing in a Virtual Moment: Look Mom No Flesh!</i>	43
11	Angela Kane <i>American Dreams: New Frontiers in 21st Century Dance</i>	49
12	Nancy Kane <i>Architecture and Icon in Caroso's Nobiltà Di Dame</i>	55
13	Rebekah J. Kowal <i>"From Remembrance Came a Dance": The Cultural Meanings of Narrative in Donald McKayle's Early Choreography</i>	60
14	Allana Lindgren <i>"Pointe of Law": The National Ballet of Canada and Kimberly Glasco Legal Arbitration Case</i>	63
15	Vida Midgelow <i>The Erotic and the Exotic in Swan Lake as Reconceived by Shakti: Some Difficulties of Interpretation and Evaluation</i>	70
16	Lisa Naugle <i>Reinterpreting Choreography: Motion Capture Data as Historical Information</i>	76
17	Ann Nugent <i>Seeking Order and Finding Chaos in the Choreography of William Forsythe</i>	81

18	Gunhild Oberzaucher-Schüller	Introducing Rosalia Chladek	86
19	Tate Osten	Autographs. Early Works of Boris Eifman	91
20	Ken Pierce	Choreographic Structure in the Dances of Claude Balon	101
21	Tresa Randall	Populism, Avant-Gardism, and Hanya Holm: An Analysis of Dance of Work and Play (1938)	105
22	Val Rimmer	Collaborations Between Dance and Technology as a History of the Present	111
23	Jane Scott-Barrett	"Marketable Radicalness" and the Dynamics of Inclusion and Exclusion in Examples of American Post-Modern Dance	116
24	Cheryl Smith	Matrons and Patrons: Behind the Scenes in Three Canadian Ballet Companies .	122
25	Iro Valaskakis Tembeck	Of Names and Things: Image Makeovers in Some Montreal Dance Institutions.....	127
26	Sharry Traver Underwood	Narration for the Video of the Lost Dances of Ted Shawn	132
27	Cynthia J. Williams	Fokine's Forgotten Puppet.....	136
		Program	145

Urban Bush Women and the Continuum of Black Performativity

Anita Gonzalez

Today I will be speaking about the Urban Bush Women, the African American dance company whose photograph appears on the front of your conference program. I would like to discuss how this particular dance company creates a narrative that emerges from the African American experience, yet responds to the historical and critical moment of the company's appearance on the New York stage. Urban Bush Women gained national notoriety in the late 1980's by performing dances that created a visceral audience response to the energy and cultural specificity of their work. Typical reviews used adjectives like "vibrant," "feisty," "sensual," "bold," "folkloric," "sassy," "poignant," and "joyous" to describe the dancing. However, the ethnic vitality of this dancing was later tempered by the inclusion of more linear and extended modern dance movements. These movements helped to locate the repertory as contemporary dance group.

The company, like a crystal with many facets, has been received and analyzed within a variety of critical frames. The work has been placed within the context of post-modern dance expression (Banes 1994)¹, African American women's autobiography (Goler 1994)², community empowerment (Aduonum 1999)³, and radical feminist performance (Chatterjea 1996)⁴. Seldom has the work been critically examined in its most obvious context: as an extension of African American nightclub acts, floor shows, and vaudeville formats that were developed and popularized by the TOBA circuit.

Viewed through this lens the Urban Bush Women become a part of a larger panorama of African American stage work that re-imagines folk and pop cultural forms. Their work moves beyond the broad category of the vernacular to embrace specific symbolic icons of the African American experience. Even though the company uses gospel rifts, communal chanting, fancy footwork, seductive hip shaking, and high-energy dance to create rousing shows that appeal to a cross-section of Black and White audience members, they also draw from less obvious spiritual and cultural paradigms as they shape their repertory.

I identify five specific African American aesthetics that define the Urban Bush Women repertory: Africanist artistry, the jazz aesthetic, theatrical storytelling, community empowerment, and religious and spiritual ecstasy. By Africanist artistry I refer to the qualities of African American performance that have been analyzed by Robert Farris Thompson, Brenda Dixon Gottschild, and others and that includes concepts of dynamic tension, juxtaposition, ephemerism, poly-rhythm, and the aesthetic of the cool.⁵

The jazz aesthetic refers to the use of jazz formats and improvisational music as both a method for determining choreographic structure and as mode of musical accompaniment. Kansas City Jazz shaped and nurtured Zollar's early dance expressions. Her mother was a musician and entertainer who played the nightclubs of the Midwestern town during an era when African American music styles set the pace for the city. Traditional jazz dancing encompasses a variety of forms ranging from Big Band dance hall music to nightclub blues to rousing vaudeville routines. Jawole's early experiences of dancing within these settings and later, working with Joseph Stevenson on floor shows irrevocably shaped her aesthetic. Jazz music and dance were not esoteric traditions for Zollar, rather, they were a way of communicating to an audience through the cadence of the music.

When she first arrived in New York in the early eighties, Jawole selected Dianne McIntyre's Sounds in Motion Studio as the site of her apprenticeship. Dianne was then most known for her ongoing work with jazz musicians and for her commitment to using music as a generative force for the development of choreographic works.⁶ The association with Sounds in Motion was ideal for Jawole's continuing incorporation of the jazz aesthetic into her work. In the studio dancers played like instruments; voice and body uniting to produce a variety of pitches tones and melodies. In rehearsals the dancers were encouraged to improvise within set structures, then to hone the material so that it consistently communicated a unique response to a musical impulse. The jazz sensibility was consequently imbedded in the substance of each developing performance work.

Urban Bush Women dances are often narratives that include theatrical storytelling. Like the African Griot or storyteller the company communicates with their audiences through language sound, and gesture. The movement, although sometimes abstract, is designed to send an emotional message to viewers that reflect the content of the African American experience. Recurring themes are oppression and abuse. Often the central characters are transformed through interactions with a women's community until, eventually, they experience healing or spiritual growth. The incorporation of theatrical staging techniques has evolved over time. In the early works the theatricality of the dance emerged from the process of establishing relationships between the dancers. Later, in projects like, *Praise House*, *Song of Lawino*, and *The Gilda Stories*, literary works were creatively used as a spring-

board for dance theater projects. Eventually Urban Bush Women began to employ professional directors to help craft the material into more mainstream theatrical formats.

Community Empowerment refers to both the empowerment of the individual dancers through the community of the company and to the codified community workshops the company sponsors while on tour. Zollar strives to revitalize the vernacular vocabulary and to remain connected to the African American (and other) communities through local public encounters. She responds to the community of company members, the community of practicing artists, the *amateur* or arts lovers who attend her performances, and local community constituencies that she engages as participants in her empowerment projects.⁷

Finally, the Urban Bush Women, under Zollar's leadership ground their work in spiritual and religious experiences that extend from Africa Diaspora religions. The spiritual component of the company's work is the least written about. Zollar has lived a life filled with adverse circumstances and her personal experiences with pain have resolved into a fascination with the way in which people transition out of pain, into acceptance, and ultimately into peace. Many of her works are grounded in healing spiritual experiences that extend from Africa Diaspora religions, but expand to include Native American, East Indian, and Euro-American forms of "magic."

Jawole describes Eleggba as a god who opens the door and clears the path for others to follow. She sees her own life's work in these terms. After her mother's death in 1977 she experienced a series of depressions that she now reinterprets as "diving for pearls." She says: "from a very young age I experienced a lot of death. Some people would say that's really depressing, but this is also my life, and death has been as much a part of my life as anything else. I think that's why it's reflected so much in my work." Part of her personal healing process is the exploration of various healing traditions that appear as symbols and characters in her choreography. *River Songs*, for example, was spurred by a dream that Jawole had about her mother's death. A central image that propels the work is the dancer's struggle against an overwhelming current that threatens to drown them. In the dance the dancers resist and survive the deluge through collective effort—they link arms and fight with their chests thrust forward to defy the current.

Dreams are but one component of the spiritual experiences that she interprets. Transformation of the spirit, either collective or individual is apparent in dances like *Transitions*, *Bitter Tongue*, *Girlfriends*, *Praise House*, *Shelter*, *Bones and Ash*, and all of the *Life Dances*. Frequently her dances depict anger, dramatize a moment of cathartic release, then resolve with the performer moving into a state of peace or spiritual clarity. Stages of spiritual awareness are marked by symbolic props—crosses, blue fabric, knives, totemic figures. Dressing and undressing is repeatedly used a symbolic metaphor for the process of trans-

formation—in *Girlfriends* the women don negligees, in *The Papess*, Jawole sheds a blue raincoat, in *Praise House* the grandmother puts on her white dress. Each undressing marks the beginning of a new cycle of spiritual growth.

These five components, Africanist artistry, the jazz aesthetic, theatrical storytelling, community empowerment, and spiritual and religious ecstasy provide one critical context for analysis of the Urban Bush Women work. However, it cannot be ignored that the Urban Bush Women is most often described as a feminist dance theater company. While the company certainly profiles the work of Black women and supports feminist notions of the subversive body, the choreographic work was not conceived as a feminist project. Original company members were gleaned from the pool of available artists at Sounds and Motion who were available and willing to work. They happened to be women. Once the company was constituted with women dancers the work was labeled feminist because of the many images of strong women that appeared onstage. However, in the case of Urban Bush Women, the representations of fiery Black women may be more easily linked to a social history of African American women as survivors than to the tenets of 1980's feminist activism.

Let us imagine the body of the Bush Women repertory as a broad avenue that flows down the central street of an American town. On one side of the avenue stand the African American vernacular performance styles that enliven and provide a context for the dance vocabulary. The other side is an audience forum, a composite of the historical time period and popular tastes that partially determines the aesthetic and critical reception of the work. As the company dances flow through the central channel of this binary universe, interpretive perceptions of the choreographer's work shift. Zollar's work surfaced during a historical moment that celebrated the "personal as political." Postmodern artists had paved the road for positive reception of multi-cultural art through previous experiments in modern dance form and structure. At the same time, the choreographer's dance experiences had been honed in the cabaret performance styles of her mother's nightclub acts and her mentor's floorshows.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that the first performance of Urban Bush Women was staged at the Ethnic Folk Arts Center in New York City. The company premiered as a dance ensemble on June 30, 1984, in a downtown loft in Soho. The evening length show called "Homegoings" included a dance suite called *River Songs* that depicted communal gestures of women soothing, raging, chanting, bathing, and nurturing on the banks of an imaginary river. From this initial impetus the company embarked upon an eighteen-year journey that transported the group to national and international performance venues.

The first show was a deliberate move from the relative isolation of the Harlem community into the cauldron

of downtown performance art. I remember this first presentation as a transformative event. Company members had been rehearsing at Dianne McIntyre's "Sounds in Motion" studio in Harlem for several weeks. Most of the performers were scholarship students at McIntyre's and our access to the rehearsal space eased production costs. When Jawole announced that we would perform downtown we were excited about the possibility. "Downtown" meant White people, a higher public profile and possible press. The rehearsal period was intense because Jawole insisted that her performers invest in an emotional presence that included both improvisational and technical expertise. She selected a summer performance date hoping that the absence of other "major" company performances would increase our visibility. Production funding came from a minor inheritance that her uncle had left to her.

The first weekend of performances at Ethnic Folk Arts was for small audiences of about thirty people. Company members included Teri Cousar, Christina Jones, Janice Reed, Viola Sheely, Carol Webster, and myself with music by Carl Riley, Ghanniyya Green, Tiye Giraud, and Pam Patrick. Marlene Montoute created the set and Robin Wilson, who had participated in the rehearsal process, watched with her newborn daughter Asmahan. On the following Monday, dance critic Jennifer Dunning published a review in the *New York Times* that brought audiences flocking to the theater. I specifically remember arriving at the loft space and seeing a line of strangers wrapped around the block waiting to attend the show.

The Dunning review was pivotal for the critical reception of the company's work and for its later appeal to a cross-section of audiences. The company's work was grounded in the Black experience, yet it premiered during a time when the arts community was particularly receptive to new forms of Black art, a time that Sally Banes describes as a "return of the oppressed" in terms of character, mood, emotion and situation⁸ During the 1980's notions of the "personal as political" held sway within the arts community of New York. Treading paths opened by the Judson Church artists, performance artists experimented in lower Manhattan performance spaces like PS 122, Franklin Furnace, Dance Theater Workshop, St Mark's Place, and Dixon Place. While experimentations with forms and structures were common, the trend was autobiography expressed through collage art, text/movement, and monologue performance work. Urban Bush Women appeared at the peak of this movement. The all-female dance company seemed a confirmatory testament of the relevance of Black feminist performance to a universalized multi-cultural women's community.

Like other African American performers who work within political and social frames that dictate to some extent the production, reception, and aesthetics of their public work, Zollar has, over time, shaped and honed her

material to better accommodate the downtown public that now shares in her artistic vision. In a recent interview Jawole says:

I forget that a lot of my experiences were outside the mainstream. So, when I'm presenting them, people are thinking, I'm trying to be provocative, or I'm trying to be an outsider. I'm just working from the experiences that I know of growing up in an all black community. Where the only white people I think were storeowners.... It took me a long time, and it still is taking me, to figure out white codes that people take for granted. And I'm sure that it takes white people a long time to figure out black codes. I think I'm starting to master now, what I call, white cultural language.⁹

The company's marketing of its own self-image is partially determined by African American self-consciousness. Urban Bush Women fortuitously premiered during a historical moment that was uniquely receptive to popular and folk-based art. Its birth into the cauldron of downtown postmodernism propelled the company in to its commercial success. Early advertisements were more ethnic and emphasized the Afrocentricity of the company's work. More recent graphics (like the one on your program) depict linear and extended movement with a contemporary flair.

The work of Urban Bush Women continues a historical pattern of theatrical mediation by African American woman. Black female artists develop and market artistry during historical moments when there are economic and social resources to support the work. I mention the Whitman Sisters, Katherine Dunham, Pearl Primus, Dorothy Dandridge, and Josephine Baker (to name just a few), all artists who flourished when critical and commercial venues allowed for public acceptance, and faltered when their creative impulses grated against the shifting borders of artistic trends. Like many ethnic artists, African American choreographers walk through a rather narrow aesthetic path that requires them to adapt the veracity of Black gesture to appeal to a commercial, and frequently uninformed audience. These artists in some ways conceive and market their work to accommodate to mainstream expectations.

As a comparative case study I use Sissieretta Jones, a late nineteenth-century artist who was also known as "Black Patti." Her performance vehicle, Black Patti's Troubadours, achieved critical notoriety for their rousing renditions of Black popular culture. The company director, trained at the New England Conservatory, strategically included familiar schtick and scenes from plantation life that appealed to American audiences into her presentations. Later, to underscore the technical virtuosity of her artists, she added an "Operatic Kaleidoscope" into her act.

As a result, Jones was frequently equated with the Italian opera singer Adelina Patti. For Black Patti's Troubadours, the minstrel show was an aperture for the commercial display of crafted African American performance vocabulary.

Critical responses to Sissieretta Jones performances were mixed. While some critics wrote: "In addition to her beautiful voice and exquisite art, nature has endowed her with a bright intellect and queenly form,¹⁰" others recorded "As is usually the case with Negroes, when they are elevated or try to play the part of a Negro, they overdo the thing and are unnatural and unreal. The majority of the performers last night were not real, however, there were several who 'were' Negroes and the comic dialects furnished by them were much enjoyed."¹¹ Like much of the Urban Bush Women repertory, the performances partially affirmed expectations about Black performance and partially introduced new performance paradigms to the viewers. Both Sissieretta Jones and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar transform African American vernacular performances into effective vehicles for universalizing their unique cultural perspective. Working though public expectations about folk art, they shape and hone their material for commercial and critical success.

In the case of Zollar and the Urban Bush Women, the company has changed its public face over the years to accommodate to its increasing popularity as a feminist modern dance company. Public imagery surrounding the work of the Urban Bush Women increasingly responds to postmodern and modern dance paradigms partially determined by the historical moment of its popularity. Over time, as Zollar writes and rewrites her personal and cultural experiences, she craftily weaves a narrative of African American woman's experiences into a unique tapestry of more universal multi-cultural female artistry.

Endnotes

1. Banes, Sally. *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism*. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994.
2. Goler, Veta. "Dancing Herself: Choreography, Autobiography, and the Expression of the Black Woman Self in the Work of Dianne McIntyre, Blondell Cummings, and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar." Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1994.
3. Aduonum, Ama. "Urban Bush Women: Building Community and Empowering the Disempowered Through a Holistic Performing Arts Medium (African Americans, Social Change, Community Building, Empowerment, Activism)." Ph.D. diss., Florida State University, 1999.
4. Chatterjea, Ananya. "Butting Out, Embodying Multiple Significations: Reading the Female Body in the Choreographies of Two Women of Color, Chandralekha and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar." Ph.D. diss., Temple University, 1996.
5. Dixon Gottschild, Brenda. *Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000, pp. 11-16.
6. For more information of McIntyre's choreography see West, Cynthia. "Dianne McIntyre: A Twentieth Century African-American Griot," *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical, and Philosophical Inquiry*, edited by Kariamu Welsh Asante, Trenton: Africa World Press, 1996, pp. 131-143.
7. For further information about the process and politics of the com-

munity engagement projects see Aduonum, 1999.

8. Banes, pp. 335.
9. Zollar, Jawole. Interview with the author. May 7, 2001.
10. *Morning Post* [Raleigh] 25 Apr. 1905:2. Quoted in Wilson, Paul. "North Carolina Opera Houses, 1878-1921: A Sourcebook of Local Theatrical History." Ph.D. diss., Florida State University, 1995.
11. *Charlotte News* 19 April 1905:7. Quoted in Wilson, Paul. "North Carolina Opera Houses, 1878-1921: A Sourcebook of Local Theatrical History." Ph.D. diss., Florida State University, 1995.

Copyright 2001, Anita Gonzalez