

## **JAWOLE WILLA JO ZOLLAR**

By

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### **Artistic Influences and Company Development**

Jawole Zollar was born in Kansas City, Missouri where she was one of five children. As a youngster, she was fascinated by the music and dance that everyone in her family seemed to embrace, and she began creating her own dances at an early age. Her earliest formal training consisted of ballet lessons at a local studio, where she and her sister were among the three black students in attendance. After a brief and disappointing period there, Zollar began studying with another local teacher, Joseph Stevenson, who was a former student of the pioneering African-American dancer, choreographer, and anthropologist Katherine Dunham (1910 – 2006). Dunham had studied the dance traditions of the African diaspora in the West Indies beginning in 1935. Consequently, by studying with Stevenson, Zollar was introduced to the cultural continuum of black dance that she would later contribute to so profoundly.

Zollar received her undergraduate degree from the University of Missouri at Kansas City, where she also began to sense major differences between her approach to dance performance and those sanctioned by her teachers. She was not primarily interested in creating abstract dances, and her musical interests also led her in a different direction than her teachers' preferences; more specifically, she was interested in using jazz music to accompany her choreography. She encountered similar problems when she undertook her graduate studies at Florida State University in Tallahassee, Florida. But at both universities she suppressed—to a certain extent—her cultural, social, and political interests in regard to her art, and she absorbed what the departments had to offer that was beneficial to her. On the other hand, in both situations she found valuable support for her other artistic impulses by connecting with black arts organizations outside the universities. This desire to build bridges between mainstream aesthetics and the vitality of black communities is something that would remain with her throughout her career.

In 1980, after receiving her Master of Fine Arts degree, she moved to New York City to begin the next phase of her career. Within the lively cultural scene of the time, she gravitated toward an artist who would become a major influence in her artistic development. Dianne McIntyre was among the few black women in the city who had her own studio and her own company, Sounds in Motion. As the name of her company indicated, McIntyre believed in creating dances in which the movement and the music were a part of a single creative expression that acknowledged the organic connections between the two art forms. As dance historian Veta Goler states in her discussion of the two artists' relationships:

Zollar was attracted to McIntyre because of the latter's philosophical conceptualization of the relationship between dance and music. McIntyre's perception of dance as music moving and music as the sound of movement resonated with Zollar, who sees music and dance as essentially the same thing. Zollar also appreciated McIntyre's proclivity for jazz. To Zollar, who had always listened to and enjoyed the music, the incorporation of live avant-garde jazz music both aesthetically enhanced McIntyre's work and reflected a form of black artistic expression that she and McIntyre found fulfilling.<sup>1</sup>

During the four years that Zollar studied with McIntyre, she only performed with the company intermittently, but the positive atmosphere in the studio provided a nurturing training ground for the younger artist to begin fully exploring her choreographic voice. She had recurrent opportunities to create works on the other dancers and present them in small concerts. In this respect, McIntyre nurtured the artistic experimentation that would lead Zollar to create her own company.

Composed mostly of students who were studying at Sounds in Motion, the company—Urban Bush Women—was established in 1984. From the outset, the company held the unique position of being composed entirely of women of color. (The company has always been predominately African American, but there have been African and Cuban dancers in the company and, most recently, an Asian dancer.) With this foregrounding of gender and race, the company became a vehicle for telling the stories of women of African descent—their dreams, their struggles, and their ultimate triumphs.

Drawing on material from literature, history, and folklore, Zollar has created dances that cover many aspects of women's lives, including reflections on traumatic events such as rape, incest, and abortion. These darker subject matters have seldom been dealt with in concert dance, but Zollar investigates them in order to address the oppression of women in various societies throughout the world; in order to jolt audiences' indifference to that fact; and in order to move women toward healing and empowerment. In this sense, her women-centered works are highly political, and she takes up the banner of earlier modern dancers of the 1930s and 1940s, who used their art to help fight social and political oppression.

Over the years, this sociopolitical edge in her work has manifested itself in other ways. Urban Bush Women is noted for its community engagement projects where Zollar and the company live and work in local communities for several weeks, leading workshops in dance, improvisation, poetry reading and other activities that involve participants in building self esteem and empowering themselves. She introduces participants to the use of dialogic learning processes for art-making and civic engagement. Again, this approach foregrounds Zollar's strong belief in the use of art for social change.

In 1997, at her alma mater in Tallahassee, Florida, she began conducting a Summer Institute that shared her way of working with a broad constituency of students, artists, faculty members, and community activists. More recently, she has established a similar institute at Long Island University in Brooklyn, New York where her company is based.

Speaking of a 2001 residency in New Haven, Connecticut, one dance critic summed up the company's community engagement process: "Urban Bush Women excels at establishing trust with community members, enabling participants to shape their story according to community priorities, not those of the company. It's a process that requires sensitivity, acceptance, and risk-taking."<sup>2</sup>

To create her dance works that draw upon the realities of women's lives, the history and folklore of African-American people (and all people of the African diaspora), and the humanist concerns that are of universal significance, Zollar has developed a unique process. She often "workshops" her pieces by engaging her dancers in intense periods of group sharing and introspection. Through thoughtful discussions, the themes of the work are explored in relationship to the individual experiences of the dancers. They share details from their lives and use these to flesh out the thematic trajectory of the evolving dance. Just as these personal reflections are shared, movements and gestures are also shared as the dancers use improvisation to create dance expressions. The movement, consequently, parallels the themes that have been explored in the discussions. It is ultimately Zollar's guiding hand that brings the various elements together to meet her vision of a particular work, but her creative process most often includes this productive "give-and-take," and it reflects the artist's strong belief in the value of communal dialogue.

The movement vocabulary that Zollar draws upon makes use of her wide-ranging background in dance. This includes her grounding in black vernacular dance as a youngster, her early studies of Dunham technique, her training in modern and postmodern dance during her college days and her early years in New York City, and her continuing exploration of African and West Indian dance—the movement languages of the African diaspora. Most of these influences come together in the seamless amalgam that characterizes so many African-American concert dance artists of today, but Zollar has a completely unique approach to this aesthetic, with movement that ranges from haunting lyricism to fiery and visceral percussiveness. In addition, her company has always been noted for its embrace of vocal material. The dancers speak, sing, shout, and moan. A performance may include the recitation of poetry, the singing of spirituals, or simply the guttural vocal outbursts that spring from an intensely emotional moment in a work. All of the elements described above circle back to acknowledge black performance traditions that have existed since slavery and beyond.

### **The Making of *Walking With Pearl***

Dance historians have recorded many instances of the influences that artists of different generations can have on those who come after them. Sometimes, these dynamics occur when younger artists have their first glimpse of a great performer and are influenced to dedicate their lives to a particular art form. At other times, there is the direct and powerful influence that a young artist can receive by studying with or being in the

company of an individual who leaves an indelible impression on their evolving artistry—such was the case with Jawole Zollar in relationship to Dianne McIntyre. Another type of influence is the spiritual force that drives an artist's life and work and inspires the generations of artists that come after them. This type of influence is not necessarily passed through direct contact with the preceding artist; it does not depend upon physical proximity in a studio or on the stage; but it can be just as powerful as those direct experiences. It is this latter type of influence that is central to the relationship between the two great African-American dancer/choreographers—Pearl Primus and Jawole Zollar.

Zollar's connection with the project involving Pearl Primus's legacy came about in the year 2000 when she was asked by Peggy Schwartz, director of the Five Colleges Dance Program in Amherst, Massachusetts, to create an original work inspired by Primus's existing work, *Bushasche*. This dance had previously been performed at Five Colleges during the time that Primus served as artist-in-residence and professor of ethnic studies from 1984 to 1991. Through a grant from the National College Choreography Initiative, Zollar was invited to "re-imagine" *Bushasche* through her own creative voice.

During this period, Zollar was also struggling with the decision of whether or not to dissolve her company because of the organization's extreme financial difficulties. When she initially accepted the work in Massachusetts, she admits having had no exceptional interest in the project; it was just one of many jobs she was undertaking at the time to "make ends meet." But she soon found that stronger and more profound reasons would emerge and eventually lead her toward an expansive vision of a new dance-theater piece entitled *Walking With Pearl*. The project would also play a role in connecting her with ancestral spirits in a way that encouraged her not to disband the Urban Bush Women.

The project at Five Colleges necessitated working with students to help them grasp the intensity, passion, and spirituality of an aesthetic they were unfamiliar with. Primus had based the original version of *Bushasche* on a Bantu dance from Zaire, Africa which was performed every twenty years to diffuse the destructive impulses that would lead a society to wage war on others. It was not a war dance; it was a dance to *prevent* war. Because of the complexities of the cultural expressions involved, the project took on the kind of research component that is a key element in much of Zollar's creative process. An added element was the fact that the group began their work shortly after the tragedy of 911, and all of the issues they discussed in the workshop took on additional meaning in light of the recent destruction of the World Trade Center.

Through this initial work with the students, Zollar began to feel a strong kinship with Primus that guided her and inspired her to probe more deeply into the life of an artist who had traveled throughout the African diaspora on a life-long journey of self-discovery through dance. The parallels between the two artists' work become more apparent when one considers that both Primus and Zollar have dug deeply into their Africanist dance roots; and they have unearthed aesthetics that have proven to be markedly different from those of other mainstream modern dance innovators. They have explored new territory for female dancers moving on stage, going beyond the traditional parameters of what is considered appropriate movement for women to perform. From martial arts exercises to



a long-jumper's peddling propulsion through the air, many types of movement become fair game for these artists' choreography.

Zollar remembers that during the early days of the company her dancers were sometimes accused of "dancing like men" because of their unapologetic boldness, aggressive directness, and powerful attack. During the 1940s, Primus was not directly accused of looking masculine, but her athleticism, her astounding leaps and her explosive energy were often singled out for special comment. Dance critic and historian Margaret Lloyd, in her 1949 book, *The Borzoi Book of Modern Dance*, quotes Primus as referring to African culture as a "muscular culture." Then Lloyd goes on to comment, "Something of this [Primus] declares in her "Dance of Strength," in which the warrior beats his muscles to display his power, a custom common in the Sierra Leone region [of Africa]."<sup>3</sup>

Dance historian Veta Goler also emphasizes sheer, physical strength when she mentions Jawole Zollar's approach to dance: "In addition to celebrating black women's beauty, Zollar's work affirms various forms of black women's strength. Physical strength is evident in the great power, virtuosity, and stamina that dancers exhibit in performing Zollar's choreography."<sup>4</sup> And mostly recently in a review of *Walking With Pearl*, dance critic Sid Smith of the *Chicago Tribune* also alludes to the strength of Zollar's dancers: "In many ways, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar is a down-to-earth, grounded artist, peopling her Urban Bush Women troupe with tough, muscular women ... [who produce] ferocious cascades of fervor and emotion, arranged and played out with their own logic and visual surprise."<sup>5</sup>

As Zollar proceeded with the project, she knew that she wanted to incorporate Primus's solos, *Strange Fruit* and *Hard Time Blues* into *Walking With Pearl*. The two solos are short and would easily fit within the evening-length work that was being envisioned. She also knew that the work would be an impressionistic rendering of the other artist's journey through her life and career. But she was somewhat daunted by the complexity of Primus's life.

Any quandaries Zollar might have felt were solved when she turned to a type of source material that she had used in a number of her dances—literary works. Primus had been a prolific writer, and Zollar was able to recover archival material that documented details of her travels in her own voice. From the outset of her career, Primus had kept journals and notebooks and written of her journeys through the southern United States in 1944 and through Africa beginning in 1948. This resulted in the first section of the dance being entitled *Walking With Pearl—Africa Diaries*.

As a foundation for the dance, Zollar began by examining the emotional impact that Primus felt when she first departed from Africa to return home to the United States. During the early period of work-shopping the piece, Zollar and her dancers worked with themes of separation and loss. They explored the idea of a daughter being separated from her mother, as Primus was separated from Mother Africa. A continuing dialogue was built around those themes, and shared experiences became the raw material for the dance.

In *Walking With Pearl*, this exploration was translated further into a glowing solo for company member Rhea Patterson who is surrounded by a circle of the other company members. Individual dancers interact with the soloist—the initiate—teaching her, guiding her, and bringing her into the community of womanhood and self-love.

Initiation into womanhood is a recurrent theme in many of the dances Zollar has created. Writer Lowery Stokes Sims alluded to the company's connections with traditional initiation practices when he likened their work to "African women's societies, creating and nurturing ... from a collective experience, a group, a common history."<sup>6</sup> These and other themes create the impressionistic weave of *Walking With Pearl*, which critic Sid Smith describes as "Zollar's lustrous poetic and hidden elusive meanings ... [that are] somehow about magic, mystery, and wonder."<sup>7</sup> And throughout the dance, one is also reminded of the magic, mystery, and wonder of generational connections when Jawole Zollar speaks the words of Pearl Primus:

Dance is my medicine. It is the scream which eases for a while the terrible frustrations common to all human beings .... Dance is the fist with which I fight the sickening ignorance of prejudice .... Instead of growing twisted like a gnarled tree inside myself, I am able to dance out my anger and my tears.

Dance has been my teacher, ever patiently revealing to me the dignity, beauty and strength in the cultural heritage of my people as a vital part of the great heritage of *all* mankind.<sup>8</sup>

## NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Veta Goler, "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. dissertation, Emory University, 1994] p. 141.
- <sup>2</sup> Kate Mattingly Moran, "Dancing the Voice of the People," *Dance Magazine*, Oct. 2001.
- <sup>3</sup> Margaret Lloyd, *The Borzoi Book of Modern Dance* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Book Company, reprinted 1987), p. 272.
- <sup>4</sup> Veta Goler, "Dancing Herself," p. 166.
- <sup>5</sup> Sid Smith, "Pearl Glows with Energizing, Vivid Movement," *Chicago Tribune*, April 30, 2004.
- <sup>6</sup> Lowery Stokes Sims, "Heat and Other Climatic Manifestations: Urban Bush Women, Thought Music and Craig Harris and the Dirty tones Band, *High Performance* (Spring 1989), p. 27.
- <sup>7</sup> Sid Smith, "Pearl Glows with Energizing, Vivid Movement."
- <sup>8</sup> Pearl Primus, "My Statement," (reprinted in *Caribe* 7, nos. 1 & 2).