

Urban Bush Women
Are We Democracy?

By Kathie deNobriga
Arts & Democracy Project
Center for Civic Participation

“I’m curious about the catalyzing moments for people. How can those moments take us beyond victimization to become activists?”

-- Jawole Willa Jo Zollar

Throughout its 23-year history, the Urban Bush Women performance ensemble has resolutely danced the road less traveled. Company founder Jawole Willa Jo Zollar wanted to create a company that could explore the use of cultural expression as a catalyst for social change, and today that company — sassy, strong, and relevant, as proclaimed on its website — combines movement from a multiplicity of dance styles with music and storytelling infused with the spiritual traditions of African Americans and the African Diaspora. All this, and community activism, too.

“We do [all] this from a woman-centered perspective, in order to create a more equitable balance of power in the dance world and beyond,” Zollar says.

UBW’s extensive community-based programming acknowledges cultural activity as an inherent part of community life. The company partners with local presenters, area artists, and community residents to reveal and honor the untold and “under-told” stories and histories of their communities through performance. Although these stories may originate in the African-American experience, the emotional truths have universal resonance.

The community engagement activities inspire artistic ideas and, in return, the art stimulates public dialogue and exchange. For example, the high-spirited and soulful *HairStories* of 2001, a major concert work for the company of seven, was based on the dancers’ personal stories about hair. The accompanying community activity (known as “Hair Parties”) began as a way to collect stories and present works-in-progress in an informal setting, but UBW soon realized that the parties could provide a framework for substantive discussion about deeper topics such as class, race, and gender, and thus forward UBW’s goals of social change. Hair Parties are held in homes, offices, senior centers, community centers, and hair salons, where small groups of men and women (sometimes mothers and daughters) share personal stories about images and identities evoked by hair, see performance excerpts, participate in games and exercises, and engage in deep dialogue about the cultural, political, and social implications of hair. The UBW dancers and staff have trained to become more skillful facilitators, to encourage multiple points of view, and to maintain the distinctions between debate and dialogue. The development of this internal capacity was supported in part by UBW’s participation in

Americans for the Arts' Animating Democracy Initiative, a four-year effort to explore arts-based civic dialogue.

Using techniques honed through the Hair Parties, Urban Bush Women has recently expanded its civic dialogues to include an exploration of positive body images. "Batty Parties" combine discussion, improvisation, audience participation, dialogue, and performance excerpts from the critically-acclaimed *Batty Moves*, an homage to the female form. ("Batty" is a Caribbean term for buttocks).

In addition to projects on specific subjects, UBW has also created workshops and institutes to establish long-term relationships with community members. In 1997 UBW established a Summer Dance Institute in partnership with Florida State University (FSU), where Zollar has been on the faculty since 1996. Entitled *A New Dancer for a New Society*, the Institute offered four weeks of intensive training for young dancers and cultural workers with leadership potential interested in a community focus in their art making. The Institute became one of the few places in the US where the socially- and politically-aware could find professional development that equally addressed their artistic, social, and political concerns. UBW expanded the training of this generation of performers beyond the dance studio and into the street, conducting a full range of residency activities with Institute students participating alongside community residents.

During the three years that the Institute was held at FSU, it responded artistically to the issues of local Tallahassee partners, specifically AIDS and HIV+. Then the Institute took a hiatus until UBW re-established it in their new Brooklyn home, with the culturally vibrant and racially diverse Fort Greene neighborhood as the backdrop. Zollar says it felt natural to focus on voting in the spring and summer of 2004, and UBW began to participate in the non-partisan advocacy effort National Voice. A coordinated series of national conference calls were invaluable, says Zollar, to educate UBW members about voter education and voting rights and to help them understand the limitations on a nonprofit organization's political activity.

Are We Democracy? became the theme of UBW's 2004 Institute. During the 10-day Institute, UBW worked closely with Demos, a non-partisan organization committed to building a robust and inclusive democracy with high levels of electoral participation and civic engagement. Demos combines public policy research with advocacy, focusing on four overarching areas: supporting voting reform (including restoration of rights and voter registration); expanding economic opportunities (addressing the decline of a middle class, the rise in personal debt, and predatory lending practices); restoring trust and respect for public service and rebuilding the public sector; and promoting new ideas and policies in public conversations.

Demos led workshops on voter education in the morning, and dancers translated the information into movement in the afternoon, using the dance vocabulary and creative practices developed as part of UBW's artistic processes. Demos armed people with information to go back into their communities and help with voter registration or train as

poll monitors, and many became more active in the fall elections in their home towns. One dancer got involved in helping blind and disabled people to vote; many of these people did not realize that they could legitimately ask for assistance in the voting booth.

But Zollar knows that voting is only one part of the democratic effort. “We can’t think that voting is enough - what does it mean to do something beyond voting? That’s why we’re thinking about returning to the theme, *Are We Democracy?*, in the 2008 Institute. As preparation, we will focus in 2007 on what it means to be activists and artists. I’m curious about the catalyzing moments for people. How can those moments take us beyond victimization to become activists?” Zollar notes the tension between strategic thinking and planning and a survival mode. “All too often, we’re in a reactive place demanding immediate action — things get thrown at you, so all you can do is react. But a major theme in my work is *recovery*: What makes you get up when you’ve been pushed down?”

One of UBW's constant themes is “oppression and the will of the people to transcend it.” Zollar feels that issues of race, particularly internalized racial inferiority and superiority, can threaten any significant social movement, and UBW has embedded an anti-oppression component in all its trainings. “One of the resources we’re found useful is the methodology from the People Institute for Survival and Beyond. We bring them in for part of every Institute, whether it’s a full two-and-a-half day training, or an afternoon. In addition to their political, economic, and racial analysis, we’ve appreciated their other tools such as asset-mapping, learning what resources you have around you.” Other sources of learning and inspiration are artists such as Liz Lerman, John O’Neal, Celeste Miller, Cornerstone Theatre, Michael Rohd of Sojourn Theatre, and Rha Goddess.

On a larger scale, Zollar is looking for connections between community-based artists and the broader movements for progressive social change that don’t necessarily connect with the arts. “This is one of the big gaps — they’re not connecting to us, we’re not connecting with them. Sometimes as artists we’re in a cocoon,” she says. One of her dreams for UBW is a convening that would bring together former Institute participants with social change movements.

Creating a home base in Brooklyn has given UBW a chance to be more accountable and to move beyond just doing a performance about an issue. “One part of activism can be doing a performance that raises awareness that shouldn’t be dismissed, it’s very powerful. But on a local level, I’d like us to really dig into an issue — be present as citizens of a community, not necessarily as artists.” With this goal in mind, UBW designed a program called Builders Organizers and Leaders through Dance (BOLD), which takes place in a Fort Greene public housing complex. Featuring weekly classes with young women ages 7-14 and quarterly public showings, BOLD is intended to develop participants’ skills in problem solving, consensus building, and leadership through dance training and choreographic development. UBW has also conducted Empowered Youth Workshops, which are intensive weekend trainings for high school seniors and college underclassmen preparing to work as summer camp counselors with children and teenagers.

The Pratt Center for Community Development has been a resource for UBW in its own backyard. Pratt works specifically on housing issues, including gentrification and displacement, by finding people on the ground in the community and then working with them. Zollar reports that her work with Pratt has emboldened her to speak up in forums where the needs for low-cost housing are often not represented or even acknowledged. UBW's 2006 Institute, *Place Matters*, explored what artists can do as activists when poor people are displaced from their homes, seeing the Katrina disaster as one of many examples of dislocation.

Looking to the future, Zollar ponders whether being more strategic in social change might mean more local initiatives. "What if every dance company had a local initiative, and became a deep, integral part of the community's fabric?" she wonders. She feels that the field of art and civic engagement also needs convenings and good quality exchange "with lots of local people — and folks who are committed to connecting cultural work with activists and groups on the ground," citing the relationship between the Highlander Center and Carpetbag Theatre. She would also like UBW to share with groups what they've learned, to "help those organizations who have good intentions but are still talking about 'outreach.' That word implies that we have something that the community doesn't have, that we have to 'reach out' to the community. If anything, we have to reach in."

UBW has performed extensively in New York City and has toured throughout the United States and in Asia, Australia, Europe and South America, and has been commissioned by presenters nationwide. But in addition to its worldwide artistic acclaim over the years, UBW has also received notice for its belief that deep community engagement can co-exist with undiminished artistic excellence. That belief, and the work that it has engendered, has helped set the standards for exemplary community residency projects.

Kathie deNobriga has been a director, performer and producer of theatre in TN, NC and GA. A founding member of Alternate ROOTS, deNobriga is now an independent arts consultant and on the City Council of Pine Lake GA.