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POSTED: FRIDAY, OCTOBER 23, 2015, 3:33 PM

The Inquirer

Urban Bush Women are in the house!


In its 30-year history, the Brooklyn-based dance company Urban Bush Women has performed their black, female, Africanist and Americanist take-no-guff style on all the continents. Founded by Jawole Will Jo Zollar and nurtured by multiple other mothers and sisters over the years, its repertoire mourns for and celebrates the dancing bodies of African American women in their struggles and triumphs. The company opened Annenberg Center Live's dance series Thursday night.

They began with *Mash Up*, a pastiche of some of the iconic Zollar moves that UBW audiences have come to expect and love. In stark contrast to Scarlett's O'Hara's velvet drapery outfit, the six women wear frayed black and white checkered curtain-like cloth by Naoke Nagata, variously fashioned around their bodies, carrying themselves as if wearing haute couture.


Chanon Judson lead off with twisting vertical solo while the names of notable African Americans throughout history were narrated, and included recently shot and killed unarmed young black men. The other five women of the troupe join and they form a military drill of sorts in 4/4 cadence, calling out drill commands, not taking it too seriously. They turn to us asking, "Y'all ready?" and announce, "Urban Bush Women are in the house!" A delightful and varied demonstration of botty, the Jamaican term for "shake your booty" closes the piece.

Choreographer Nora Chipaumire reworked her 2005 *Dark*


About This Blog




Toby Zinman's night job since 2006 is theater critic for the Inquirer where she reviews New York and London as well as Philadelphia. Her day job: Prize-winning prof at UArts, author of five books about modern and contemporary drama, and doer of scholarly deeds (winner of five NEH grants, Fulbright lecturer at Tel Aviv University, visiting professor in China). She was recently named by *American Theatre* magazine "one of the twelve most influential critics in America."



Wendy Rosenfield has written freelance features and theater reviews for The Inquirer since 2006. She was theater critic for the Philadelphia Weekly from 1995 to 2001, after which she enjoyed a five-year baby-raising sabbatical. She serves on the board of the American Theatre Critics Association, was a participant in the Bennington Writer's Workshop, a 2008 NEA/USC Fellow in Theater and Musical Theater, and twice was guest critic for the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival's Region II National Critics Institute. She received her B.A. from Bennington College and her M.L.A. from the University of Pennsylvania. She also is a fiction writer, was proofreader to a swami, publications editor for the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and spends all her free time working out and driving people places. Follow her on Twitter @WendyRosenfield.



Jim Rutter has reviewed theater for The Inquirer since September, 2011. Since 2006, he covered dance, theater and opera for the Broad Street Review, and has also written for many suburban newspapers, including The Main Line Times. In 2009, the National Endowment for the Arts awarded him a Fellowship in Arts Journalism. Thames & Hudson released his updated and revised version of *Ballet and Modern Dance* in June, 2012. From 1998 to 2005, he taught philosophy and logic at Drexel, and then Widener University. He also coaches Olympic Weightlifting for Liberty Barbell, and has competed at the national level in that sport since 2001.



Merilyn Jackson regularly writes on dance for The Inquirer and other publications. She specializes in the arts, literature, food, travel, and Eastern European culture and politics. In 2001, she was dance critic in residence at the Festival of Contemporary Dance in Bytom, Poland; in 2005, she received an NEA Critics' Fellowship to Duke University's Institute for Dance Criticism. She likes to say that dance was her first love but that when she discovered writing she began to cheat on dance. Now that she writes about dance, she's made an honest woman of herself, although she also writes poetry.

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ENTERTAINMENT

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*Swan* for several companies to the familiar Camille St. Saens' score for *The Dying Swan*. The UBW version had me near tears as the dancers began trembling for many minutes before beginning a difficult bourree in reverse on their heels. The raw symbolism of this negative of the white swan romantically roaming the stage en pointe as she dies created one of the most poignant moments in dance I've seen.

These women not only don't die but in the next section, they live to dance to Maria Callas's "Casta Diva" from *Norma*, once more cheating another white, romantic death. Slipping their hands down the front or backs of their costumes, cupping their breasts and genitals, sexy without really being lewd, they are paragons of feminine strength and sensuality.

In 2014's *Hep Hep Sweet Sweet*, in a Kansas City night club, Tendency Mas sings as powerfully as she dances. She is joined in singing and dancing the stories of the Great Migration north from the Jim Crow south, by Courtney J. Cook, Du'Bois A'Keen, and indie jazz vocalist Pyeng Threadgill. The night was a roller coaster of pain wrung out with joy, middle fingers upraised.

Merilyn Jackson

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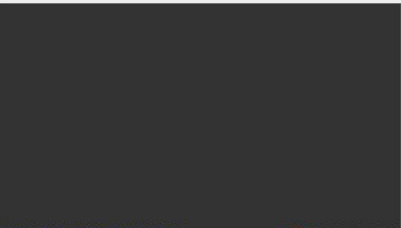
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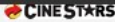
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