

Burrows, Jonathan. *A Choreographer's Handbook*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2010.

Page 40:

Choreography:

My current definition of choreography is this: 'Choreography is about making a choice, including the choice to make no choice.'

Or perhaps is this: 'Arranging objects in the right order that makes the whole greater than the sum of the parts.'

Or this: 'The meaning or logic that arrives when you put things next to each other that accumulates into something which makes sense for the audience. This something that accumulates seems inevitable, almost unarguable. It feels like a story, even when there is no story.'

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Other bodies:

There are other ways of experiencing or thinking about the body than steps or movement.

Many dance and performance practitioners build their relationship with the performing body upon other, perhaps less easily definable, approaches and strategies.

These include working with experimental or imagined states of being – physical, emotional, or mental.

Also socially and politically motivated work, for instance that dealing with gender, minority rights or specific cultural issues.

Or more philosophically and conceptually driven pieces, where the body may become a site for representation and reference, rather than physical invention.

Each of these bodies demands its own approach to time, space and continuity, and each of them can arrive at something that we recognise as a choreography.

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Dancer or choreographer?

Sometimes circumstances ask us to define whether we are a dancer or a choreographer – this often happens at some point during our training. What might a choice like that mean?

Would it help you to define your role now, or would you rather keep your options open?

Nadine, George-Graves. *Urban Bush Women: Twenty Years of African American Dance Theater, Community Engagement, and Working It Out*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010.

Pages 3-5:

Introduction

Working Dance

I chose the title *Urban Bush Women: Twenty Years of African American Dance Theater, Community Engagement, and Working It Out* because *Urban Bush Women*, one of the most important contemporary dance/theater companies, “works” on many levels, and my project here is to analyze and contextualize these different levels. “Working” became the major motif as I was writing this book. First, I am interested in the ways the company’s founder and artistic director, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, works on (i.e., develops) choreography. Second, I want to analyze what “works” choreographically in her aesthetic and why. Finally, and most importantly, I am interested in how she works through choreography, uses dance to dialogue with society, and “works” an audience. Critics and scholars of *Urban Bush Women* generally argue that the company’s repertoire is politically activist and resistive. This is certainly true, but I believe the work is much more complex. *Urban Bush Women* forces us to view/read/understand dance differently by using dance as a mechanism to work through important issues. In *Urban Bush Women*’s repertoire there exists a physical rhetoric or corporeal argumentation that attempts to activate audiences to attend to the complexities of daily life in terms of race, gender, spirituality, social relations, political power, aesthetics, and community life when we are often reluctant to do so. The strategies by which Zollar opens up these dialogues I term “working.” *Urban Bush Women*’s choreography is emblematic of how individuals and communities work through social anxieties using layers of performance. In other words, *Urban Bush Women* is changing what it means to watch certain bodies perform. Performing artists can speak politically or socially and culturally in a way that no others can.

Black female herbalist healers are also called root workers because they take what nature provides and work it into healing substances. I argue that dance, particularly the work of *Urban Bush Women*, has a metaphorically similar impact. When we talk about healing, we talk in terms of the body—illness, health, scars, fitness, et cetera. We also talk in terms of the soul—spiritual and emotional wellbeing. Likewise, the dances of *Urban Bush Women* attend to the bodies and souls of individuals and communities. Healing happens when one works the roots, works the body, works the soul, works the tangles out. Perhaps this is too intangible a prospect for an academic investigation. Nevertheless, I detail

how the Urban Bush Women's choreography is political, unapologetic, provocative, and ultimately healing.

"Working" is also central to the way Zollar conceives choreography. In the autobiographical and improvisational piece *Working for Free*, Zollar uses choreography to explain her methods for working a movement. Zollar uses the spirits of music, mood, and rhythm to work through movement, which she ultimately shapes into choreography that works on audiences. For example, in the first section of the piece, "The Spirit of Music," Zollar begins by walking around the space. She states "I feel the spirit of music move me. . . . I gotta move" and begins walking around in circles, creating sinuous shapes. Though there is no music playing, she moves to the music inside of her, experimenting with movement. The audience sees her thinking through movement, using the spirit of the music in her head to inspire her. She tests various combinations and then goes back to simply walking in a circle. Unafraid to show an audience a stage in her work in which she has nothing but a tune in her head, Zollar urges attention to the impetus, the first steps that lead to the journey. Similarly, in the second section, "The Spirit of a Mood," Zollar uses emotions as the impetus to guide her discovery of movement. She says: "Sometimes I'm moving and feel a mood come down on me. . . . When the spirit of a mood comes down, you just gotta ride it out." She poses with one hand on her hip and the other over her head and face. She looks to the side and walks around, anxiously wringing her hands. Her energy heats up as she flails her arms, confronting an unseen force. She says, "Forget you!" as she stops, with her arms akimbo, staring down her enemy. She switches and begins exploring a seductive mood but cuts it off abruptly, saying that she can't get too far into that one. By taking an emotional exploration to the edge and a bit beyond, Zollar exposes a vulnerability avoided by many contemporary choreographers and highlights it as an essential ingredient in working choreography.

Finally, in "The Spirit of Rhythm," she talks about the uncontrollable feeling one has when a rhythm grabs hold. One cannot help but move. She vocalizes "ah"s as she plays with rhythm by snapping and bouncing up and down.

She says "Some brothers got the omni-directional rhythm" and begins moving in a slick strut. Further experimenting with the embodiment of gender, she claims "Men from St. Louis got a special kind of cool" and shifts her rhythm accordingly. She goes on to explain and work the rhythms of Kansas City, St. Louis, and New York. Here Zollar argues that, as opposed to psychological realism methods, a corporeal-focused technique can also get at character. It is from the body that she finds these different types of men.

After singing and dancing to a P-Funk song, like she is in her living room rather than on a concert dance stage, she reveals a bit of herself and explains that funk makes her think of childhood memories and the stories her grandfather told her. This revelation of personal memories in the form of verbal storytelling is central to the work. It is another way to connect to the audience that resists distance and detachment. It requires investment not only in the movement but also in the emotions. Zollar often works out of her childhood memories and finds ways to validate what others might not recognize as valuable, like childhood ways of moving and the profundity in “simple” reasoning (right and wrong and the ways we should treat one another). These moral lessons might be passed down through the generations, and this traditional history becomes both oral and physical epistemology for Zollar. She acknowledges that there are bodily ways of knowing, with sense memories that speak to truth, inspire, and influence.