

The New York Times

November 29, 2017



A Raw, Pointed Revival From Alvin Ailey

Jawole Willa Jo Zollar's 'Shelter,' a work about homelessness, speaks strongly to the anxieties of the moment.

By BRIAN SEIBERT

In the big, light-filled studios of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's luxurious Midtown home, many of the company's women have been playing games. A dancer falls, and everyone else has to catch her: a trust-building exercise, common in acting classes and corporate retreats.

At a rehearsal last week, the raucously laughing dancers were having such a good time that anyone outside the studio might have been surprised to learn that they were preparing "Shelter," a work that frankly addresses the pain and isolation of homelessness.

Created in 1988 by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar for her company, Urban Bush Women, "Shelter" was first performed by the Ailey troupe in 1992 and remained a popular work in its repertory for much of the next decade. After a 15-year break, the company is bringing it back on Dec. 12.

That's right in the middle of the five-week Ailey season at City Center (Wednesday to Dec. 31), which, as usual, boasts a few world premieres: "Victoria" by the Spanish choreographer Gustavo Ramirez Sansano; and "Members Don't Get Weary," the first piece for the company by one of its star dancers, Jamar Roberts. But for a repertory company like Ailey, revivals can be as important as attention-grabbing debuts. The decades-old "Shelter" may be the work that speaks most strongly to the anxieties of the moment.

As Ms. Zollar recalled after coaching the Ailey dancers last week, the original Urban Bush Women production of "Shelter," half of a larger work called "Heat," arose from her shock at the prevalence of homelessness in New York City — and more, from her shock



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREA MOHIN/THE NEW YORK TIMES

'I ask the dancers to go beyond their endurance. We are exhausted by the forces that try to crush us, but we push through.'

JAWOLE WILLA JO ZOLLAR
CHOREOGRAPHER

at losing that sense of shock. "I realized that as a coping mechanism I had stopped seeing the people who were homeless," she said. "That was more dangerous, because it was a loss of humanity."

"Shelter" was a way of directing attention, and not just to the problem and the pain. "I would look at the same people for years, surviving," Ms. Zollar said. "I started to see a resilience." And so "Shelter," set to the sound of drums and poetry, became about that strength, too. It begins with six women in a pile, thrown together and yet isolated, and builds to explosions of power and solidarity.

But for the piece to be effective, the extremely successful Ailey company, with its fancy headquarters and glamorous galas, has to create a credible sense of "there but for the grace of God go I." If audiences are to feel that "it could happen to you" — as the work's recorded text insists while the dancers point implicating fingers at viewers — then the strong Ailey dancers must be believably beaten down. That's where the acting exercises come in.

They weren't part of the process for the first Ailey production in 1992, though it was greeted as a brave and welcome departure for the troupe. Along with the difficult subject matter, critics at the time noted the rawness of the aesthetic — the unbound hair, the absence of makeup, the emotional exposure. Ailey dancers past and present are also quick to characterize the work as "raw." Danni Gee, a member of the first Ailey cast, remembered how she and her fellow dancers labored to "take the Ailey sheen off" and how they cried after every performance.

That didn't mean sacrificing Ailey projection and impact. On the wall of the childhood bedroom of Camille A. Brown was a photo of Toni Pierce in that first Ailey production of "Shelter," leaping with legs split and toes pointed with nothing but air beneath her. "When I grow up, I want to be like that," Ms.



JACK MITCHELL/ALVIN AILEY DANCE FOUNDATION INC./SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

Brown remembered thinking. These days, Ms. Brown is a leading choreographer who has made work for the Ailey company.

And these days Ms. Zollar is a revered dance matriarch, honored for lifetime achievement at this year's New York Dance and Performance Awards, also known as the Bessies. But in 1992, her company was young and no other troupe had yet danced any of her works. The invitation from Ailey was a huge break.

"I was so intimidated," Ms. Zollar re-

called. "I just gave the steps, and I didn't really know how to coach. It prompted me to figure out what the Urban Bush Women methodology is." Now she has a method: "I call it an actor's process through a dancer's physicality with a community organizer's analysis." The actor games are a crucial part of the approach, she said. "That's how we get to an authenticity, a truth, which is the most important thing for me."

At the rehearsal last week, it was easy to see what Ms. Zollar meant. Like anyone



Top, Ghrai DeVore, left, and Rachael McLaren rehearsing "Shelter" at the Alvin Ailey studios. Above, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar created the piece for her own company, Urban Bush Women, in 1988. Left, Toni Pierce in the first Ailey production of "Shelter" in 1992.

else, she was impressed by the Ailey dancers' power. When Jacqueline Green marched with her long legs and flexed feet scything instantly to the level of her head, over and over, even the air seemed to rush out of her way. Ms. Zollar greeted the sight with incredulous awe. But she wanted to push the dancers past their comfort and control; firmly and warmly, she did.

The fall-and-catch sequences, which are in the choreography as well as in the preparatory exercises, should not become rote, she said. The dancers must forget that the falls are coming. Even more important, she urged the dancers to use their own exhaustion, rather than hide it or "indicate" it.

"I ask the dancers to go beyond their endurance," she explained later. "We are exhausted by the forces that try to crush us, but we push through. The exhaustion is very important."

The work is certainly demanding. Linda Celeste Sims, a member of the current cast and the kind of dancer who seems incapable of fatigue, said, "It seems simple at first, but I'm tired all the way through." She continued, "You get exhausted from being exhausted."

For Robert Battle, Ailey's artistic director and the person responsible for choosing the repertory, "Shelter" has taken on new meaning. "It's hard to watch the news lately," he said last week. "I watch and I feel afraid."

In this context, Ms. Zollar's dance isn't only about homelessness. "It's about the shelters that are disappearing," he explained. "There used to be an expectation that people could come together after a disaster or a mass shooting, but I feel less of that now." By giving expression to this fear and a resistance to it, Mr. Battle says he hopes "Shelter" can provide audiences with "a shelter in the theater."