

THE KITCHEN

512 West 19th St. (Btwn 10th & 11th Aves) New York, NY

by Patrick Kelly

Heat
Urban Bush Women
at The Kitchen, NYC
October 3

Just exactly what is an Urban Bush Woman? The twinned polarities in the name—could two words be further apart?—was immediately defined in Jawole Willa Jo Zollar's latest theatre dance piece *Heat* at The Kitchen. The seven Urban Bushwomen dancers and the three members of the performance poetry group "Thought Music" came together to form an ensemble that easily moves back and forth between the primitive tribal community rich in Afro-Haitian dance and ritual, and the environment of city sisterhood with its red high heels, get-down talk, and wrap around shades. The two contexts blend because the impulses that rule in these seemingly contradictory communities co-habit comfortably. You understand both the term urban and the term bushwoman as well as the third hybrid term of Urban Bush Women.

Their life acknowledges prior existence but is also always moving forward into an explorative existence that is procreative and ongoing. Their sexual attitudes serve as example. The "Heat" portrayed is powerfully sexual as well as determined, but the sexuality is instinctively natural and the determination is much more a question of assertion against oppression than anything purely angry-hateful or destructive. No moral values have been placed. We simply feel the strife of living—mismatched passions, lost homes, hungry mouths.

The opening imagery is markedly strong. The Bush Women prepare for the hunt, but the game they stalk within their urban context is men. All the women shared a uniform of tight red dress and heels and moved through potent, powerfully sexy postures, armed with their spears of lipstick. They chat about the various attributes of shades such as "flaming fuchsia" and "fire-cracker," and all the while Laurie Carlos, in a white petticoat, sings "Dedicated to the one I love" a cappella. As she sang she moved through a heavily gestural phrase

that both embraced and struck out against the air around her.

Despite the ubiquitous red uniform, all the women remained highly individual—identifiably offering different commodities and perspectives on life. Theresa Cousar, Anita Gonzales, Christina Jones, Viola Sheely, Robin Wilson, Marlies Yearby and Zollar have rich, ready performance skills. They all act, sing, dance and mime. It is from this abundance of talent that they make the easy transformation from a narrative urban vignette into pure dance which again is an easy blend of classical modern and the Afro-Haitian traditions. The imagery builds further with Zollar emerging in trench coat, sun glasses and very painted lips. She sheds the trench coat and we watch a cross between some striptease routine and a seemingly voodoo anti-fertility ritual, which ends with Zollar on her knees in a deep back bend. We are discomfited by her smashing a raw egg on her bare chest and brandishing a bloody dagger across her loins, but we are also mesmerized. As the egg runs we see the wet glowing of her breasts and feel a chilling stillness as the lights fade.

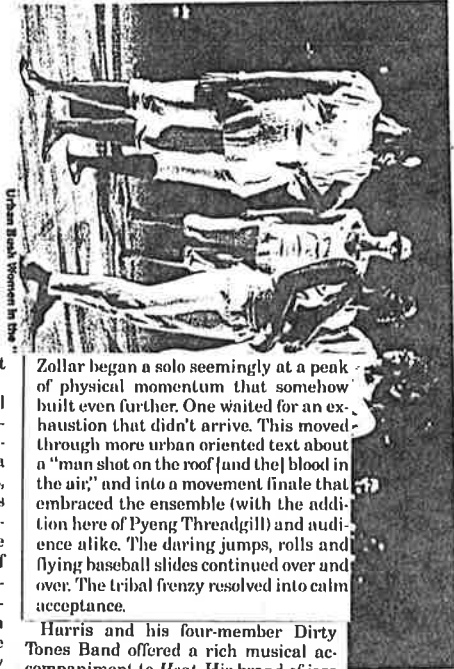
"Shelter," the second part of the evening's performance, started at an intense

DANCE

energy level and pretty consistently built throughout. Musician Craig Harris plays the djiridoo, an aboriginal folk flute that emits low, animal-type moans. In moonlight the tribe huddles in nighttime fear. They sleep in fetal positions but begin a shivering that, builds until their bodies rock and flail, as if possessed by mystical spirits. The poetry like the movement is powerfully to the point. The words express their needs directly: "Shelter searching for some shelter. . . a place to eat and sleep. Home—a place to call my own." Whether it be Abidjian or 42 Street and Broadway makes not much difference—the messages are universal.

If the dancers are to be commended for their fine acting skills, the poets of Thought Music (Carlos, Jessica Hagedorn, and Robbie McCauley) must surely be acknowledged for their dance and movement skills.

The evening's ending was amazing.



Urban Bush Women in the "Heat"

Zollar began a solo seemingly at a peak of physical momentum that somehow built even further. One waited for an exhaustion that didn't arrive. This moved through more urban oriented text about a "man shot on the roof [and the] blood in the air," and into a movement finale that embraced the ensemble (with the addition here of Pyeng Threadgill) and audience alike. The daring jumps, rolls and flying baseball slides continued over and over. The tribal frenzy resolved into calm acceptance.

Harris and his four-member Dirty Tones Band offered a rich musical accompaniment to *Heat*. His brand of jazz moves the audience to freely experience the mysticism of some ancient place and then propels us to hear the steam rising from inner-city pavement on a hot August night. Unfortunately long, lone musical interludes (like "Red Lights and Party Nights" placed in the middle of the first act) really broke the cohesiveness of the theatrical event. The musician's exuberance was lost on the audience

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whose interest waned as they waited, viewing only the band, dimly lit, for a time span that could have allowed costume changes five times over. We had become accustomed to the totality of music, dance, text and visual lighting concepts. (Lighting was by Leni Schwendinger).

All in all this is a small complaint. Zollar's ability to utilize black cultural and theatrical idioms, without a political or racial comment, reaches the bare-bones primitive nature in us all. Be it issues of birth and death or feelings of joy and sadness, love or anger, we are bound to be not only deeply touched but further educated to the truths of humanity. This is the Urban Bush Women experience. ■

Heat in the Bush

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NATIVE