Research in Movement: Running, Directing, and Funding a World-Class Dance Company, Featuring Jawole Willa Jo Zollar

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Evangeline Coker: I think it was at a keynote, you had said that you're in the profession of creating, and I thought that was a wonderful way to express what you do.

Jawole Zollar: Yeah, I mean that's what I do. I create, and when I tell people my job is to be inspired, I think that people misunderstand how artists work. So, for me to be inspired, I have to go to museums. I have to read. I have to go to music concerts. I have to go to dance concerts. I have to be in nature. I have to take long walks by myself. I have to sit on the beach whenever I can, and just stare out, into the vastness of the world. I have to contemplate our being-ness. So, what that looks like sometimes to people is that you're not working. "Oh, she's just having fun, she goes to concerts all the time." "Wow, I wish I could do that with my job." Well, it is my job. [Chuckles]

Evangeline Coker: So, going back to the beginning of when Urban Bush Women was founded in 1984, I was wondering how you navigated those early years as a founder and artistic director of a dance company. Possibly, were there some mentors or guides who helped you as you started that?

Jawole Zollar: Absolutely. When I first moved to New York in 1980, I moved to New York to study with a woman named Diane McIntyre, and she had a company called "Sounds in Motion," that was at that time located on 125th Street in Harlem. She was a creative spiritual mentor, *is* a creative, spiritual mentor for me. What I was so happy to see in her, in her work, was her use of jazz, her use of jazz music. I grew up in a jazz family, but I hadn't really understood how to integrate it to the depth that Diane's innovation and creativity existed. So, that was a huge treasure for me to have this relationship with Diane.

Evangeline Coker: I remember hearing that you had grown up in a jazz family and actually had been in the "kiddie act" in the comic reviews. Is that where your love of dance started?

Jawole Zollar: Yeah, I think I always loved moving. Any moving form, whether it's ice skating (I never did it), roller skating, track, you know, things where the body is in motion. As a young child, I wouldn't have been able to say that's where my interest is, but certainly now I can look back and say I've always been interested in anything moving. Growing up in this family where music in general and jazz in particular were so much a part of our life. It's that connection between music and dance, and it's just been very much embedded. And my brother is a jazz musician, James Zollar, and he's actually come to FSU to play a couple of times. He's played with the Bassie band and another time it was at Club B Sharp Street. So, we have a long family history of jazz.

Evangeline Coker: That's awesome. Did you think that you were going to involve jazz in your choreography when you started Urban Bush Women?

Jawole Zollar: Yes. Yes. It's not just the music itself, but it is how the music is organized. Jazz is music that is highly improvised and there is a high degree of skill, of improvisation. People think that you just get up and do whatever you feel. Actually, that's not the case. You have to be able to compose on the spot, structure and understand form and story – often your own internal story – rhythm, phrasing all at once. And that's the study of improvisation that I really began at Sounds in Motion with Diane, and I've continued in my own work.

Evangeline Coker: You talked about story and improvisation and then also jazz. I know when you were creating *Train* based on John Coltrane, that you were doing a lot of research. What does research look like in a dance company or in your dance ensemble specifically? How do you do that?

Jawole Zollar: It's interesting cause I talked to my students about what research is for us. So, for me, it was going to art exhibits that I could find on John Coltrane. It was listening to his music over and over again. It was reading any book I could find on John Coltrane about his life, his music, his legacy. It was interviewing musicians and talking to them about what is the legacy of Coltrane or what is the approach of Coltrane and trying to understand this thing of "modal music" that is often used to describe Coltrane's music. So, the research for me is on many, many levels. It was going to jam sessions and hearing music. We use this term "embodied" or "experiential research," where the company would have an experience together, and then we'd come back in the studio and work from that. So, when we were in Chicago, we were able to go to the Black Music Research Center at Columbia College and spend time researching the different approaches to Coltrane's music and then going back into the studio and seeing how that would live in our bodies.

Evangeline Coker: So, you're talking about ensemble-based approaches to creation, research, and exploration. How do you coordinate an ensemble as the leader and director? … You need the funding, right? You have some of the boring business stuff to do, but then you're also trying to create new work in a collaborative form. What's that dynamic?

Jawole Zollar: There's always a tension between the administration of having an ensemble or a company and the creative work. Sometimes that tension, I will say, has been out of balance – where my focus has been so administrative and I felt like I was losing myself as an artist, or the focus was so much as an artist that the administration was not properly supporting the art. So, it is an ongoing tension and balance. Where I think we are as an organization right now is looking at ensemble practices – which is collaboration and teamwork – and understanding roles and responsibilities and being able to respond to the needs of the moment in the situation within our roles and responsibility, and really starting to apply that more to our administrative practices, because I think that is where the future is.

Evangeline Coker: Could you explain a bit about how you apply that to the administrative practices?

Jawole Zollar: I think in arts administration, and often I will say specifically my experiences in dance, the administration tends to be task-based: it's getting the things done. Our ensemble is values-based. So, if we're values-based – we're taking time to talk through what that means, values connected to action – but the administration is only task-based, you can see the potential for the gulf to happen. So, we've been talking about what are the processes we need that are really applicable to the environment and the work that the administrative team has to do, that build that value space, as well as knowing that we both have our to-do lists of what we have to get done. Sometimes I think in administration, it is outside of understanding how you're part of the artistic circle.

Evangeline Coker: So, for those faculty or performing artists who are tasked with being in charge, being more on the administrative side of their own research and creativity, are there some tips or some encouragement you'd want to share with them?

Jawole Zollar: For me, my research and creativity are at the center of my life. They're at the center of my teaching; they're at the center of everything that I do. Each person has to figure out what that balance is for them, how they place their research in the center. [For] some people it's all consuming, and some people it will be a part. Everybody has to find that balance within their families, with the totality of their lives. I think what the situation in COVID is uncovering is that our lives actually are not going to be invisible to our work. So, in zooms you see the children, you see the pets, you see the partners coming; all of that is integrated. People are managing school, work, with being on calls or teaching. Where our family lives were invisible, and our research and creative practice were the thing that people could be, or teaching, it's now moving towards maybe a more holistic framework. I hope that's what we can grow from, from this crisis, is that we are whole people, and we are not just one thing. And when we're able to bring that whole-ism into our work, I think we're all the better for it.

I recently gave a talk, and there was a period of time when funders were asking, "Can you present your theory of change?" When they were first asking that I was like, "Theory of change? I don't know what you mean." And then somebody said, "No, it's the work you're doing. You already have it articulated. You just have to put it in that particular language." I think this theory of change is coming more to the front now to me.

This is my theory of change: The answer is always in the group, not the leader. That change is powerful, long lasting, and life-affirming when the answer is in the group, not the individual leader. That people who are most affected by decisions need to be at the forefront of the decision-making. And I think that is something. The hierarchical nature of how we have operated has really disempowered the voices of people who would have innovative solutions to some of the things that we are dealing with.

Leadership has a responsibility to guide and facilitate a process through which people gain a full sense of their own power. Now, you have to understand that you have to want people to have a full sense of their own power. I think some power structures, in fact, do not want that. For me, that is important.

When a container is created for people's full power to emerge, the genius of the group will always rise above individual capacities. It will rise and create powerful, innovative practices of art. These are the lessons I've learned from jazz, from jazz music, and the jazz ensemble. It is the genius of the group that is allowed to emerge [in] that ensemble practice … and how you play back and forth within the structure of the band. There is a band leader, and this ensemble creates such amazing things together that could never just be done, I think, by one person. And then the last part of that, in my theory of change: rather than seeing communities and people only as in crisis and in need, the genius will emerge when we shift the narrative to see where people are powerful. If we make where they are powerful a central part of our work, then the THEM becomes the WE. And that's the part I think our country is struggling with. We are a WE. We are getting stuck in US and THEM.

Evangeline Coker: Absolutely. I think that's very powerful when you're talking about the genius, shifting the narrative to not, "Where are your weaknesses?" or "Where are you lacking?" but "Where are you powerful?" Is that related to that Summer Leadership Institute? That's in the community, right? That's an outreach that you do. Could you explain a bit about that?

Jawole Zollar: Yes. I want to actually go back to that term "outreach." So, when we started developing this approach to community engagement, at first when we were touring, people would say, "go do outreach." What I started to realize in the outreach model is that often institutions that would hire a company like Urban Bush Woman, a predominantly black company, to go into areas that they called the inner city or the ghetto or rural (sometimes rural areas of poverty or mostly black audience so they could count off numbers of how many had been served), it had nothing to do with if the quality of the work was good. If we were creating lasting connections and relationships. It was counting. It was all about metrics.

We started to counter that with this idea at that time. When we started using the term "community engagement," it wasn't used so much in the art or the dance world, with the idea that there is mutual benefit. Which means, we have to have a different planning process. We have to have a different education and training process. The Summer Leadership Institute was born out of that. How do we create that training and education process for artists to work with communities? The way that somebody could have good intention. But just because they have good intention, doesn't mean I'm going to let them operate on me. [Laughs] **"**I feel that cyst on your arm. I have good intentions to operate on it." I believe in the power of us to do this together. You want that person trained, and you want them trained really well to understand what that is. That's what the summer leadership Institute was about. Not just having good intentions, but having deep, rigorous, academic, scholarly, embodied, artistic, creative, rigor and research to undergird the work.

Evangeline Coker: Then, how has this Summer Leadership Institute grown?

Jawole Zollar: It's morphed and evolved and changed shapes. We started the first one at FSU. We held it at FSU for three years. It was a four-week Summer Leadership Institute. We worked with community, we worked with the academic community at FSU, as well as people we brought in. What we realized is that because it was a four-week model, we mostly got young students who could take that kind of time out for the summer. So, we took some time off to rethink it, and we came up with a 10-day model that we did in New York and Brooklyn. What we started to look at were the key components. By having a 10-day model, we could get a wide range of participation. So, usually we don't allow below 18 [years old] unless somebody is coming with a guardian, but we've had as young as 16 and as old as 82, 83. We think that is what a community is. So that provides a stronger kind of learning together. Then we moved our Summer Leadership Institute to New Orleans after Katrina, in response to our longtime partners there, and to be a part of the rebuilding of the artistic leadership and community. And it morphed again, so it became a place-based model in 10 days. Then we had an alumni convening and we just recently had a three-day virtual convening. So, what I love is this idea of shape-shifting. I think what COVID has, again, taught us and asked us is that we have to shape-shift to respond to the situation with our safety and the integrity of our work in mind.

Evangeline Coker: How do you get a funding agency to buy into that? Because what you're talking about is something very powerful, very passionate and "make-a-better-world" based, but like you said, it's not metrics, and sometimes agencies work in the language of metrics. How does that work?

Jawole Zollar: Perseverance and practice. I remember this one funder that we were in conversation with for seven years before we were able to get funding, and that's the perseverance. A "no" is not a place to be angry about. Of course, you're angry, you know, but it's not a place to stay angry about. It's a place to figure out, "How do we build the relationship so that we eventually get a 'yes'?" It's perseverance and understanding; it's relationship building, which again, is our edX framework. It's not transactional, its relationship building.

Evangeline Coker: Have you ever been tempted to say, well, we'll just adapt what we're doing to fit the request for proposals?

Jawole Zollar: Yes, we are tempted. This is the value of having a group of people with shared values. Because when we do that, somebody says, "Um …accountability here. Accountability. We're chasing dollars." When we're chasing dollars, not in service of our vision and values, we're going to end up outside of who we are. It's not that you don't want to expand who you are, but you can really lose yourself in the chasing of dollars.

Evangeline Coker: Arts funding is so small and so competitive, and there isn't a lot of it. Then you funnel that down. Arts funding for women is smaller, and then for black women is even smaller. Any minorities or marginalized groups, it's even less and less. How would you

encourage those going after that funding, or that awareness from the community, to keep going or how to proceed?

Jawole Zollar: Fierceness, fortitude, and grace. You've got to be ready to challenge people and challenge systems and challenge institutions. You've got to be ready to challenge that. You can also get so caught up in that challenge work that you lose your artistic, and that's where you have to offer grace to yourself and a certain grace to the community. If it's important to you, put it in front. It's not going to be easy, but nothing in life really is. But if it's important to you, and it's worth fighting for, then get in the good fight.

Evangeline Coker: Is there a moment where that fierceness, fortitude, and grace really came to bear in your own life?

Jawole Zollar: Oh my God. How many times? Well, first of all, I never felt like I was entitled to get any grant. So, I was like, "Okay, I'll apply, apply." I'm always hurt and upset in this. "Okay, all right. What did I learn from that? What feedback?" And then move on. I tend to focus on the learning. When you get rejection after rejection, after rejection, after rejection, I think it's really hard. Again, what do you trust, and why are you doing it? So, for me in the early years, I decided, and through lots of different spiritual signs, signals, experiences, that it was not about success. If I was chasing success, I was chasing the wrong thing. It was about: do I need to do this? Do I *need* to do this for my spirit? And if I need to do it, then I do it. And it's as simple as that.

Evangeline Coker: Do you have advice for performers who also work in an academic setting?

Jawole Zollar: Yeah. I hope I can say this in the right way. What I see with young faculty coming into academia is chasing tenure. We want tenure. You have to get tenure, but I see people going outside of themselves. "Well, this would be good for my tenure, or this would be good." I don't know. If that's the system that we've created – then it's a flawed system. I'd like to see people be able to trust their work. What is your research work and the passion of your research work? You want to do it rigorously and vigorously, as opposed to doing things that are maybe a little bit outside your interest, or "oh, I need to do those kinds of things because that's going to look good on my tenure profile." I hear that a lot, and I have a lot of big questions about that. I think when you go from your genuine questions of your research and your work, that is where you become powerful.

Evangeline Coker: Absolutely. So, getting back to the ensemble-based approach, what's the dynamic there as opposed to something like a collective?

Jawole Zollar: We are not a collective, and it has to do with roles and responsibility. We are director-based; we are a collaborative ensemble structure. There is a director, whether that director is me or somebody else, and that director has to have the responsibility to understand how you get out of the way. It's like when the band leader steps back, and the band is playing, and the soloists are coming forward. The director isn't saying "No, you play these notes."

[Laughs] Exactly. You know, I get it. I'm using the jazz. I believe strongly in that. There's a power in directed ensembles. I will say my role is to take a lot of visions and make them feel like one vision. But I feel like I'm often over credited, you know, because that was that person, but my job is to make it feel like one cohesive vision coming forward. That's what I feel like the director's role is.

Evangeline Coker: That sounds like a tough process. Are there times when things feel very disjointed and like they're not going to fit? And then what do you do in response to that?

Jawole Zollar: There's always those times! Daily, hourly. [Laughs] You do the work; you just trust and do the work. What is the whole of what you're trying to do? W-H-O-L-E, whole of what you're trying to do. Sometimes I create a little sentence for me of what I'm trying to do. In one work, it was about a very powerful figure in dance, Pearl Primis. My personal statement about that was I wanted to connect my artistic heart to her artistic heart. When I would feel disjointed at times, I felt like, okay, I can't figure it out. I'd go back to that. I'd also bring people in and work with dramaturgs and I was like, "I'm lost here. What are you seeing?" I think that outside feedback of people who have an ability to listen to what your intention is, and then articulate what they're seeing. I really like people to express their opinions. I'm not afraid of strong opinions. If someone said, "Jawole, I think you're so off base, I think you're just off base here." I'm not afraid of that. I like that and welcome that, but it has to be from people that I know and have some trust and relationship with.

Evangeline Coker: You had talked in another interview about how that time as an artistic director and leader of the company really started to inform your creative work when you got back to it, and had talked about understanding better the methodology of what you were doing. Is there a way to put in words, what that methodology is, especially for us who may be outside of that dance world?

Jawole Zollar: To create a container for the genius in the room to arise. So as a director, as a choreographer, I want the genius that's in that room. I know it's always in the room. How can it rise to its highest level? If there's anything I would say as a central methodology, it's that. And that takes a lot of communication and trust and building, casting. You got to have the right people in the room and understand where everybody is in the process of making work. It's a very complex thing to really talk about, learn, and understand.

One of my research areas is organizational structures, and there's this great book, I love this book, by Otto Scharmer. It's called the *Theory U*, the letter U. When I read this book, I thought, *oh my God, has this man been in our rehearsals? Has he been in our artistic process?* Because the way he described it, this organizational structuring, was so much like the artistic process. What I loved about it was the way he described the complexity. I think at first it used to be called "Chaos Theory," then it was all "Complexity Theory." [It's] gotten a lot of evolutions. But this place of literally like a U-shape, where you start and how you go down to the sourcing, to the presencing, and then how you come back up the other side. I think that is so much the artistic

process. It's complex. It's many different systems, methodologies, and tools to accomplish it. It's not just one single thing.

Evangeline Coker: For someone who's thinking about starting their own ensemble company, or a performing arts group, would you suggest going for that kind of collaborative theory that you're talking about?

Jawole Zollar: Yeah. I think whenever anybody starts to bring forth a vision, it has to be true to them. I'm speaking about my work. There are people whose best work is going to be because they're autocratic, and that's true to who they are. I don't have a lot of interest in working with them, but that doesn't mean that there isn't something powerful there. I think it's often very patriarchal – I don't have a lot of interest in that– but that doesn't mean that there can't be a powerful vision that emerges from that. I think you have to be true to who you are and allow yourself to continue to evolve and grow. You know, there's people that have to, and need to, control every single element of the creative process and would never give people the kind of space that I give, and if that's their truth, I think they need to operate from that truth.

Evangeline Coker: So, is picking a collaborator, or casting a dancer or choosing your dramaturg, what are some things to look for to make sure you're getting as close as you can to that right dynamic in the room?

Jawole Zollar: It's like finding your soulmate. [Chuckles] I don't know. You trust what you feel. I would say develop the relationships. Sometimes jumping into bed before you know each other might pay off, but I would suggest that you get to know each other artistically a little better first. What I do now is – what I wouldn't generally do – is what we call "play dates." If it's somebody I'm considering working with, let's set up an artistic play date and lab together and figure out if there's something there. That's what I've learned to do, because I've jumped in before I knew somebody and discovered I'm in the middle of a nightmare. How do I get out? So, I've learned to do the artistic play dates. I look for a creative tension and synergy. You want the tension. That's a good thing. You want somebody who thinks differently, or sees the world differently, that's going to blow open some of your assumptions. You just got to experiment with it. What I do know, if there is someone in the room where I start to shut down. If I feel the room shutting down, or if I feel myself shutting down, I have to look at what is happening in the room, about who's in the room. Is it something solely about me, or is there someone who's energy is bullying, or allowing people not to take risks and be vulnerable? Because when that happens, people will shut down. So, I definitely pay attention to that, and I try to pay attention to if that's me, am I doing that, when I see the room shutting down.

Evangeline Coker: That's staying true to your vision in an ensemble, that even the director can't shut down that communication or that honesty. I feel like that takes a really mature, and secure-of-themselves person to say, "Yes, I am the director. I'm ultimately in charge, but I want to hear from you, and I'm going to step back and let that genius come through, even if that's not mine."

Jawole Zollar: Well, isn't that leadership? And I think we could use a lot more leadership like that.

Evangeline Coker: I love that. For those who were in your shoes before and who are wanting to follow in your footsteps, is there anything that you would like to charge your fellow creatives with?

Jawole Zollar: Yeah, don't follow in my footsteps. There's a great book by a man named Myles Horton. It was written by the Civil Rights and Labor Movement. The book is called, *We Make the Road by Walking*. You just have to do it. Then evaluate, be willing to evaluate what's working and what's not working. But you got to walk. Your footprints are going to be very different from my footprints. Obviously, you learn from as many people as you can learn from but trust the uniqueness of your footprint.

Evangeline Coker: Thank you so much.

Jawole Zollar: This has been a pleasure!

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