



DANCE TALKS NOTES

WRITINGS TO GIVE AUDIENCES A BROADER CONTEXT FOR EXPERIENCING WORKS ON THE JOYCE STAGE.



GET CLOSER TO DANCE

BILL T. JONES/ARNIE ZANE DANCE COMPANY: BEAUTY AND RAGE

By Deborah Jowitz

A generation or so of New Yorkers who've frequented the wilder shores of dance in our town have grown up alongside Bill T. Jones, artistically speaking. He made one of his first New York appearances in 1977, on a Choreographers Showcase at Dance Theater Workshop. He'd presented the solo three years earlier in Binghamton, where he got his B.A. at the State University and performed with the American Dance Asylum. He had long dreads and looked gorgeous. He swore at the spectators, eyed them, stroked his body, danced to beat the band. He was 25 and hadn't studied dance until he got to college.

What Jones established so unforgettably back in the 1970s, he has mined and developed over the years. Even as he matured as a choreographer, broadened his sphere of activity, and acquired new ideas, he remains a man unafraid of confrontation, of revealing aspects of his private life, or of tackling social and political issues. Three works that he constructed and performed with his partner, Arnie Zane—*Monkey Run Road* (1978), *Blauvelt Mountain* (1979), and *Valley Cottage* (1980)—conveyed their love and their differences in spare, immaculate structures influenced by what they'd read about Judson Dance Theater during the radical 1960s, as well as by the minimalist zeitgeist of the 1970s. Zane's *Hand Dance* of 1977, a gradually accumulating solo of precise gestures, blossomed into a group dance by Jones in 1991, which is featured, with a new score by Jerome Begin, on Program A of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company's 30th anniversary Joyce season (March 26–April 7, 2013).

Audiences came to expect text and improvised talking (and occasional nudity) in works by Jones and Zane, or by Jones alone. In *Monkey Run Road*, Jones recited the names of his eleven brothers and sisters, while Zane spoke in Dutch of the places he and Jones visited during a long sojourn in the Netherlands. The two performed as themselves, sometimes to great music. Dancing was from the start a voluptuous pleasure. Reviews that emphasized their disparateness—one man tall and black, the other short and white—annoyed them, but their differences made their togetherness all the richer.

Arnie Zane died of AIDS in 1988, but the group that he and Jones had founded in 1982 survived. One of the works that's to be performed at the Joyce during the company's Joyce season is *D-Man in the Waters* (1989, revised 1998). Jones made the work to celebrate company member Demian Acquavella, one of the many men who were struggling against AIDS during the 1980s. No talking here—just dancers rushing across the stage, leaping, diving, rolling, breasting the current of Felix Mendelssohn's *Octet for Strings in E-flat Major*, and caring for one another. Avqavella died in 1990.

Zane's death fueled both anger and questions, and Jones put many of them into his 1990 *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land*. If his life was to be short, he'd better press for answers—about himself, the religion he'd been raised in, racism in America, and injustice of all kinds. Harriet Beecher's Stowe's novel and its characters infused the narrative in ways both obvious and subtle (four Elizas danced—sometimes spoke—their thin-ice stories). Leonardo Da Vinci's mural was enacted, then disassembled. Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech was recited backward, making every word count. Jones's mother, Estella, prayed and sang, while her son danced beside her. He also performed Job's tribulations and interrogated a man of the cloth (different at each performance) about the benevolence of a God who could cause

scourges such as AIDS. By the end of the last part, "The Promised Land," the entire cast, joined by local volunteers, created a moving mass of hopeful humanity, stripped naked to reveal, without subterfuges, their body shapes, their ages, the color of their skins. In his book, *Last Night on Earth*, Jones wrote that the three-and-a-half-hour piece summed up everything that he believed. "It was impossible for it to succeed. It did not fail."

Jones created several small-scale works that honored or mourned Zane's death and raged against his own HIV status, including the defiant, libidinous lust-for-life solo, *Last Day on Earth* (1992). But his thoughts about his own mortality also engendered gentler, tender, more controlled work. In making *Still/Here* (1993), he was done with asking "why;" he wanted to discover the "how"—how to deal with grief and accept possibly imminent death. He conducted fourteen Survival Workshops in eleven cities for people who had been diagnosed with terminal illnesses. His creative sympathy and exercises were designed to help them identify and face their fears. Some of their gestures and images fed into his choreography for *Still/Here*; their words nested in the musical scores by Kenneth Fragile and Vernon Reid; a few of their faces appeared on shifting video screens. Some people thought Jones might be exploiting the workshop participants. The participants themselves did not feel that way. In creating this beautiful, hopeful dance and helping himself, Jones had helped them.

Bill T. Jones has won much in the way of honorary doctorates, fellowships, awards, and commissions. His choreography for *Spring Awakening* introduced him to Broadway and won a Tony in 2007. The Broadway hit *Fela*, which he co-conceived, co-wrote, directed, and choreographed, won another. That was in 2010, the same year he received a Kennedy Center Honor.

He wears fame well. In 2011 Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company merged with Dance Theater Workshop in New York Live Arts; the mission was to continue and broaden DTW's commitment to new, edgy choreography. Jones himself keeps digging fiercely into America's history and his own—linking the two in often startling ways that deconstruct, illumine, and strike sparks off the subject at hand. *Serenade/The Proposition* (2008) and *Fondly Do We Hope...Fervently Do We Pray* (2009) were created in connection with the centennial of Abraham Lincoln's birth. This year, his company collaborated with Anne Bogart's on *A Rite* in commemoration of another 100th birthday, that of the Stravinsky-Nijinsky *Rite of Spring* ballet. Jones, however, is no distanced historian, whatever the amount of quoted text in his works; he's always asking, "What does this mean to us today?"

Speaking animates his choreography in various ways He sits onstage almost throughout his 2011 *Story/Time*, channeling composer John Cage by telling stories relating to his own experiences, each of which must be delivered in one minute, while the superb dancers echo (or not) the urges and rhythms the lurk within the words.

Jones had a season at The Joyce Theater in October of 1992, while *Still/Here* was underway and *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin* had ended two years of touring. That summer, he had remarked in an interview that he wanted "to make works that I don't have to talk about." Beauty was on his mind, and love and generosity. Not an easy beauty, but the aliveness and the logic of the Louise Nevelson sculptures that he and Zane fell in love with long ago. At The Joyce, over nineteen years ago, no one spoke, and strength and beauty reigned.

In March 2013, at The Joyce, the Orion String Quartet will play for the dancers, and, in Jones's new and recent works, Mozart, Ravel, and Mendelssohn will do the talking.

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