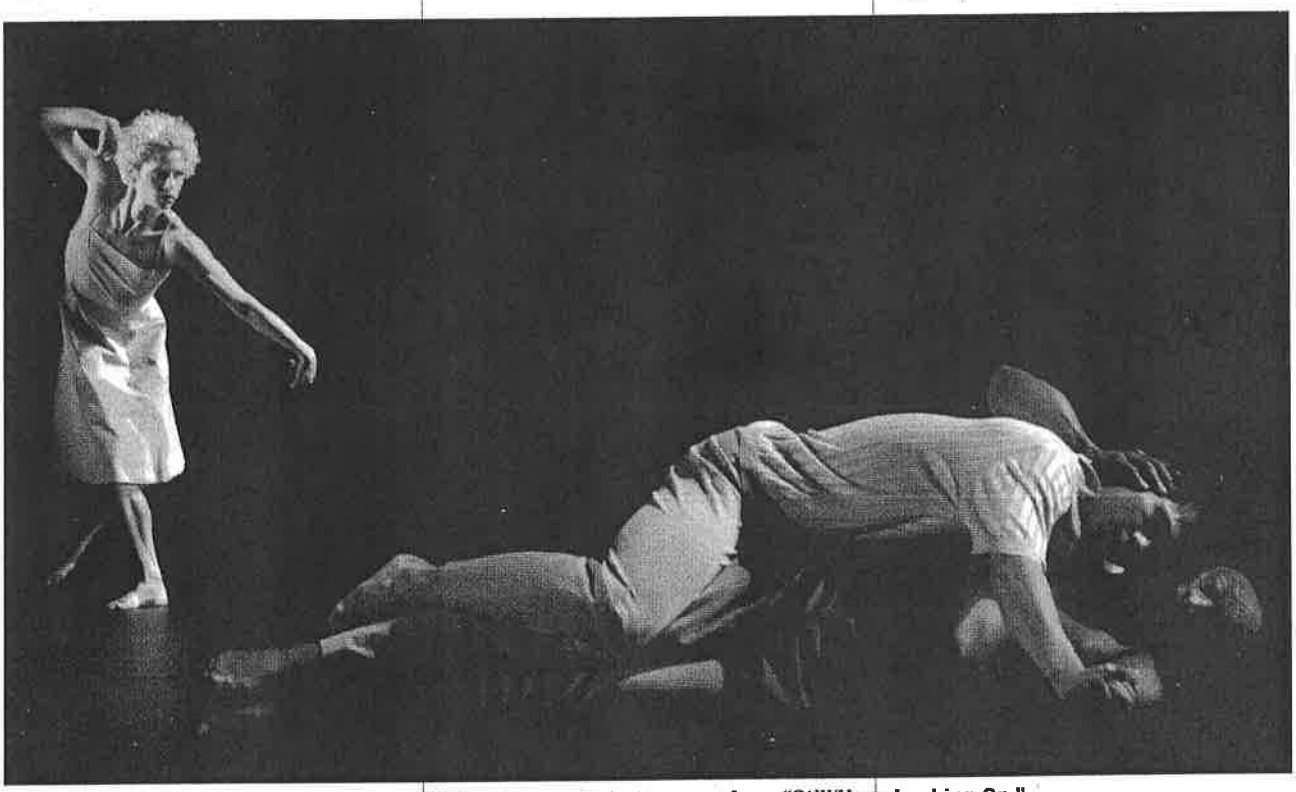


Leah Cox, Wen-Chung Lin and choreographer Bill T. Jones, bottom, perform "Still/Here Looking On."

JULIETA CERVANTES

dance

Bill T. Jones: Still Dancing Outside the Lines

by Angela Ards

After the lights go down at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, a lone, nude male dancer enters stage right with a determined amble, gesturing with his arms and hands. One by one, dancers emerge from backstage, joining him until there are dozens of gesticulating bodies — tall, short, Black, White, male, female, sinewy, fat, young, old — all nude, circling the stage.

"Continuous Replay," a riveting, playful performance by the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, has spilled onto the stage. The group is celebrating is 20th anniversary and it's the final night of its five-day run in February.

As the multicultural procession wends its way around the performance space, dancers leave the stage in waves and all gradually return wearing black bottoms or tops. A tall, bald man in black pants strolls with attitude, refusing to break his stride while the procession maneuvers around him. The dancers again depart in cycles, only to return moments later each clad in white. A curly-haired man in loose white linen excitedly bounds across the stage like a child at recess. A woman dances an energetic solo as if touched by the spirit of a Saturday night jam or Sunday morning praise. The diverse mass of idiosyncratic humanity, flowing across the stage like blood through veins, is a metaphor for life's changes, its sorrows and joys.

It is fitting that "Continuous Replay," one of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company's oldest repertory pieces, should conclude its appearance at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) in New York, where the dance company debuted more than 20 years ago. The piece recalls when Jones and Zane, partners in dance and life, burst onto New York's avant-garde dance scene, determined to mold human bodies into what Jones describes today as "moving sculpture." Originally choreographed as a solo, the production was staged as an ensemble piece as a testament to the dance company's longevity through loss and change over the last two decades. Zane died of AIDS complications in 1988, leaving Jones to, as he puts it, "prove that the two of us had in fact created something that could withstand the test of time."

Today, the company has performed its repertoire of more than 75 works, including award-winning performances like "D-Man in the Waters," "Last Supper at Uncle

Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land" and "The Table Project" for audiences all over the world. The landmark 2003-04 season includes a mix of new and old works entitled "The Phantom Project."

Over the years Jones has been recognized for his artistic vision. He received a MacArthur "genius" award in 1994 and the Dance Heritage Coalition named him "An Irreplaceable Dance Treasure" in 2000. At the same time, a critic once dubbed Jones the "Muhammad Ali of the dance world" for his provocative stances on and off the stage.

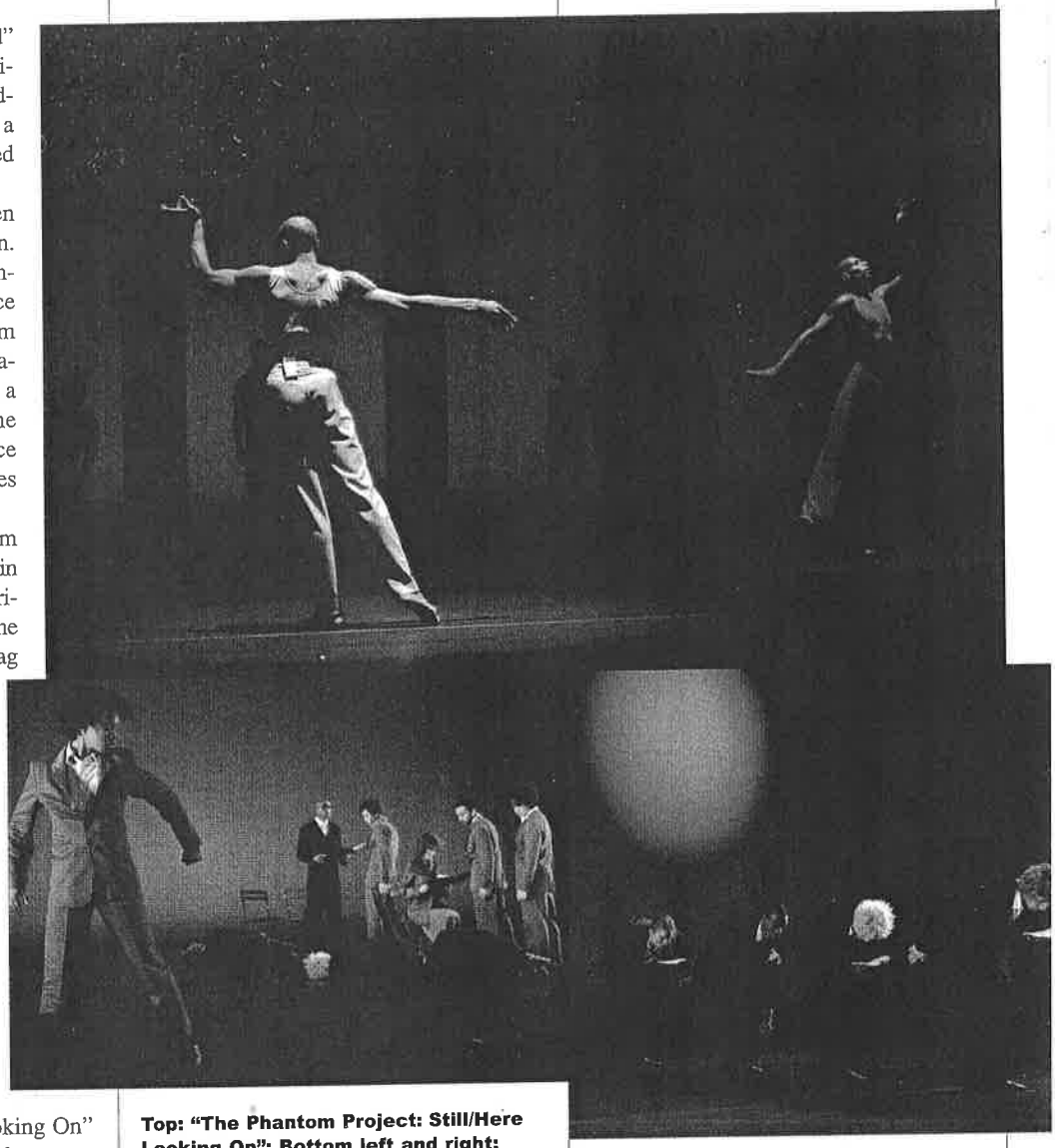
In 2000, he refused to perform at the annual Spoleto Festival in Charleston, S.C., an act of solidarity with the NAACP boycott of the state for flying the Confederate flag over its statehouse. And in the early 1990s he ignited a cultural war about the place of social issues in "fine art" when he staged "Still/Here," which included photographs and interviews with people suffering from terminal illnesses like AIDS and cancer. Without even seeing it, *New Yorker* critic Arlene Croce accused Jones, who is HIV positive, of working out his personal issues on stage and dismissed the piece as "victim art."

This season, "Still/Here Looking On" updates the work. During its performance at BAM, Jones stoked the flames with a passing reference to the feud, causing knowing, muffled laughter among those in the audience who relished the flash of the familiar provocateur.

After more than two decades, a mellower Jones is re-directing the quarrelsome questions into the formal aspects of dance, an art form he believes is inherently provocative. "Dance is one of the last places where people truly believe that the human body in and of itself is full of signifiers and deep, profound meaning," he says in a telephone interview.

Jones, 51, hopes to do with his art what he believes religion once did: organize a chaotic universe. "The people on the stage, at least on my stage — the fierceness in their bodies, their training, their generosity — have to speak about some sort of belief they have, some faith they have in the beauty in them and in this experience that they are sharing with an audience."

It's a concept he learned from his mother.



JULIETA CERVANTES (3)

Top: "The Phantom Project: Still/Here Looking On"; Bottom left and right: "Reading, Mercy and The Artificial Nigger," with Bill T. Jones and Susan Sarandon (holding books at rear).

Born in Bunnell, Fla., in 1952, Jones grew up in upstate New York in Steuben County, where he was a high school track star with a love of song and storytelling.

"My first truly theatrical, transformative experience was watching my mother pray when I was very small on Christmas morning," he says. "She was able to start with a simple repeated set of words and make those words speak on the most personal, inter-family level, and then to the community, and to the whole world, and ultimately she would address her Lord, her God, in public. She was at once performing, but she was also doing something that was extremely profound and interior. That set up a wonderful paradigm that I have indirectly, and sometimes directly, been trying to approximate ever since."

Jones had set his sights on an acting career on Broadway until a fateful encounter with postmodernism at the State University of New York at Binghamton steered him toward dance. He studied contact improvisation, a technique based on leaning and falling with a partner, with teachers — "mostly women, mostly White," he says — who "acknowledged the clean slate I wanted to be and helped me write on it." Later, from Trinidadian dancer Percival Borde he learned "how a man, how a Black man could move." Merce Cunningham, who Jones claims as his favorite choreographer, "set an amazing standard for artistic investigation, free of market place concerns, free of critical concerns."

And of course there was Arnie Zane — a visual artist, a gay man of Jewish-Italian ancestry, "a challenging personality in the world," says Jones. Their interracial personal and professional union inspired an ecstatic, avant-garde style that defied definition and relentlessly re-examined the relationship of modern dance to ballet, the-

ater, technique and training. Their innovative style, so different from the formal elegance of Alvin Ailey's dancers or the New York City Ballet, fused beguiling physicality with a fierce, lyrical message.

"Arnie Zane and I were interested in art with a capital 'A,'" Jones says. "We were very interested in the world of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas and Paris between the [world] wars. That was the classic era of modernism." Looking back, he describes their collaboration as an artistic and social experiment to see if "people who were so physically different, and so different in temperament and background, could make a cogent and coherent vision."

In 1982, the two sensibilities merged into the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company. "Arnie pulled Bill into postmodernism and Bill pulled Arnie into dance," says Elizabeth Zimmer, *Village Voice* dance editor and author of *Body Against Body: The Dance and Other Collaborations of Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane*. "Jones followed the compositional instincts of his gut and his boyfriend Arnie Zane into an aesthetic practiced at the time, by and large, by White people. Bill was pretty much alone in that universe."

Indeed, Jones is one of the few African American choreographers to embrace a postmodern aesthetic, and this singular vision has not only isolated him within mainstream dance circles, but also created an ambivalent relationship with Black audiences. "A lot of people over the years have accused Bill of not doing Black dance," Zimmer adds, "because his work is not informed by the traditional music and subject matter of Black dance."

In the past Jones has identified as a world artist — rather than a Black one — for fear of being pigeonholed.

"There are those who say Black dance is dance made by a Black choreographer that deals with the historical circumstances of Blacks in this country," Jones says. "What do I think Black dance is? Black dance is any dance that a person who considers himself African American or Black chooses to deem worthy of the stage."

He cites a list of factors — from financial constraints to the coarsening of American cultural tastes in general and the conservative bent of the Black middle class in particular — to explain his small Black following. But he's also acknowledged that he's not always been generous enough to cultivate the audience he's long craved.

"My performances were like being in the Black church," he told *The New York Times* in 2002. "I was calling out and expecting to hear the response back, 'Amen.' But it was the wrong audience. I wanted that audience, but I didn't know if the audience wanted me."

The sophisticated engagement with race in recent productions like "Reading, Mercy and The Artificial Nigger" suggests to critics like Zimmer that Jones "has begun to acknowledge his roots more."

The provocative title, adapted from a short story by Flannery O'Connor, pushes the buttons and boundaries that have defined Jones' career, but it also probes truths about life and human nature. The story is that of Mr. Head, a White racist determined to pass on his bigotry to his grandson, Nelson. On a trip to the city, Mr. Head betrays his grandson out of great cowardice. The weight of this sin creates a rift between them until they stumble across a plastic Black lawn jockey with a smile as wide as the slice of watermelon he's holding. In a moment Mr. Head understands as God's grace, he and Nelson have the chance to reconcile while musing over this "artificial nigger."

Choreographer Bill T. Jones

As Jones and activist-actress Susan Sarandon read the short story aloud at BAM, alternating pairings of the multiculti cast of dancers (who hail from Russia, China, Mexico and throughout the United States) portray the two White protagonists in turn, exposing the lie of race and the dogma that sustains the illusion. And though Mr. Head doesn't lose his bigotry, he does change: He realizes his shortcomings and need for mercy, and that, Jones says, is where the spiritual lessons lie for all of us.

Determined to reject all ghettoes, racial and otherwise, Jones started his dance company in the midst of New York's eclectic downtown scene. For the past few years, however, Jones has sought a permanent home for his company in Harlem.

When asked about the irony, he first makes clear that, independent of cultural concerns, Harlem's charms have a pragmatic sway: its cosmopolitan air, beautiful real estate, proximity to his home just 20 minutes up the Hudson River in Valley Cottage.

But with that point made, he grants that there's also an emergent vitality "to this place which is full of the good fight, a place which has a spiritual heart, a place which helps me feel not so alone. In the avant-garde, I have been one of few Blacks. Can I be the artist I am going to be in the next 20 or 30 years with Black colleagues nearby? Can I do it with children coming in from the community that I would be training? Can I be interacting with other artists in the community? I don't intend to lose anything I have now. But I want to bring what I have."

Like the poet Walt Whitman, Bill T. Jones contains multitudes. In "Chaconne," his moving new solo, video projections cast his image on the stage, allowing him to dance duets and trios with phantom figures. Set to Bach's "Partita in D-Minor," a multi-part composition with a back story of sudden loss, Jones' solo evokes his duets with Zane from the company's early years, his mother's layered prayers on Christmas morning, all the men he has been and will be.

"I have made silent enemies sometimes by the things I have done and not done," Jones says.

"But I have always assumed that was the way one lived in the light. It was something I got from my mother, something about the world as a place where you have to fight...I think that was the first rule: This world does not want you, as a Black person, as a Black man in particular. I was a part of the 1960s when everyone was dropping out and tuning in and turning on. I did that as well. But I also could feel the tradition that had created me."

"What do I think Black dance is? Black dance is any dance that a person who considers himself African American or Black deems worthy of the stage."

Angela Ards is a freelance writer in Brooklyn, N.Y.

COURTESY BILL T. JONES/ARNIE ZANE DANCE COMPANY