



Goode, Joe (b. 1951)

by Greg Varner

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The most original contribution of the work of choreographer Joe Goode is its challenge to traditional assumptions involving gender. Like the dance theater pieces of Bill T. Jones and other openly gay choreographers, Goode's work incorporates spoken word, music, and visual imagery in varying combinations. His dances often tell stories about being gay in the age of AIDS.

Goode was born into a working-class family in Presque Isle, Maine on March 13, 1951. Depressed and suicidal as a high school student in the 1960s, Goode found solace in the poetry of Allen Ginsberg, which he read as a message from an alternative world where it was possible to be Jewish, intellectual, politically radical, and gay.

"I didn't see how I was going to fit in and have a whole, meaningful life. My sexuality and my sensitivity and my whole being seemed wrong," Goode later told a reporter for *The Washington Blade*.

Goode earned a B.F.A. in drama from Virginia Commonwealth University in 1973 and then studied dance in New York City with Merce Cunningham and Viola Farber.

However, he was unhappy during his years as a young artist in New York City. "All the great choreographers were big old fags," he told the *Blade*, but "their work was dogmatically heterosexual, even in abstraction." The sight of so many male/female, implicitly heterosexual couples, with men lifting and leading the women, impressed Goode as a dishonest spectacle.

Like other maverick spirits before him, Goode went west in search of freedom. In 1979, he left New York for California, where he felt it would be easier to break out of such restrictive roles. The Joe Goode Performance Group, headquartered in San Francisco, was incorporated as a not-for-profit organization in 1986. The company has performed internationally and has been honored with numerous grants and prizes.

One of Goode's most noted pieces, *Deeply There (Stories of a Neighborhood)*, which premiered in 1998, explores the impact of AIDS on San Francisco's Castro district. Another, *The Maverick Strain* (1996), is an examination of the stubbornly individualist streak in American culture; it puts pioneer women and androgynous cowboys on yesterday's range and in today's AIDS wards to make a complex statement about the strengths and weaknesses of the American character.

Other works with significant gay content include *Remembering the Pool at the Best Western* (1990), which meditates on AIDS and life after death, and *Convenience Boy* (1993), which examines the plight of gay and lesbian workers in the sex industry.

The women in Goode's company often lift their male colleagues. In this way and in others, Goode presents images of the softness of men and the strength of women. "I'm just interested in those images because they're so fearful to our culture," Goode told the *Blade*.

But Goode's creative impulse is not entirely confrontational. The comic performer in him loves to make people laugh. Indeed, humor helps to defuse his risky subject matter, rendering it less threatening to viewers who might otherwise be put off.

Goode's work explores the importance of "inappropriate" behavior. In a mission statement, Goode wrote that he aims to "pierce the veil of toughness that we all have in our lives and to uncover the vulnerable center, the confused, flailing human part of us that we conceal and avoid." Among his goals, he wrote, is "to make the world a more compassionate place."

With his troupe, Goode has done outreach work with various population groups, including gay youth. He has taught at several academic institutions and he has received numerous awards, including multiple Isadora Duncan awards and National Endowment for the Arts and Irvine Dance fellowships.

Bibliography

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About the Author

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