



Jones, Bill T. (b. 1951)

by Bud Coleman

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On St. Patrick's Day, 1971, State University of New York-Binghamton freshman Bill T. Jones met 22-year-old photography major Arnie Zane. The latter soon convinced Jones to leave school and travel with him to Amsterdam to explore Europe and pursue their romance. They shared their personal and creative lives together for the next seventeen years, forging a relationship and a dance company that made them the most visible gay couple in American dance in the 1980s.

Born February 15, 1951 in Bunnell, Florida, William Tass Jones was the tenth of twelve children born to Estella and Augustus Jones, African-American migrant farm workers. In 1959, the family settled in Wayland, New York, where Jones graduated from high school. He entered SUNY-Binghamton in fall 1970 and soon discovered dance, an experience that transformed his life.

After forming a relationship with Zane, a short Jewish-Italian young man to whom he was immediately attracted, Jones began to envision their partnership in dance. Working first in solos and duets based on contact improvisation, the pair made an unlikely but striking couple.

After their return from two years in Amsterdam, they moved to Brockport, New York, where Jones enrolled as a dance major at SUNY-Brockport. They soon followed improvisationist Lois Welk to San Francisco, where she established the American Dance Asylum, a collective of choreographers.

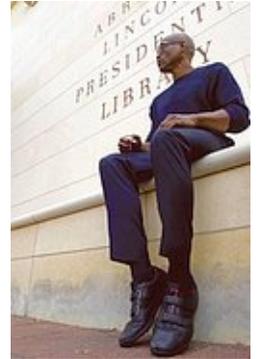
After a year, Welk and Jones and Zane moved back east to Binghamton, relocating the American Dance Asylum in an old Elks Club building. Jones and Zane's performances in such works as *Monkey Run Road*, *Blauvelt Mountain*, and *Valley Cottage* (1979-1980) received positive press attention, which helped generate a financial base to form a company of dancers that they named Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane & Company.

From its beginning in 1982, the look and choreography of the company set it apart from other modern dance groups: the dancers were a rainbow of races and a polyglot of sizes; the music was everything from Mendelssohn to gospel to Dada poetry to silence; nudity was as common as clothing; and anger freely mixed with joy. In the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane & Company, difference was celebrated, including sexual difference.

The company unabashedly presented the sensual and the erotic, sometimes with an edge. As Jones explained to Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in *The New Yorker* in 1994, "My eroticism, my sensuality onstage is always coupled with a wild anger and belligerence."

One of the earliest successes of the company was *Secret Pastures*, which premiered at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival in 1984, featuring costumes by Willi Smith, sets by Keith Haring, and music by Peter Gordon.

Other evening-length works include *Last Summer at Uncle Tom's Cabin / The Promised Land* (1990)--a four-



Bill T. Jones at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield, Illinois in 2009.

part three-hour fantasia inspired by the Harriet Beecher Stowe novel--and *We Set Out Early . . . Visibility Was Poor* (1997).

Both Jones and Zane were diagnosed with HIV infection in 1984. In response, Jones went on a two-year trek to eleven cities, interviewing people with life-threatening conditions to create what became his best-known work, *Still / Here* (1994), a piece not about illness or death but about living.

It is among the first full-length works to treat seriously the subject of living with a terminal illness. Attacked as "victim art" by *New Yorker* dance critic Arlene Croce, who refused to see it, the work has been both damned and (more often) celebrated.

When Zane died of AIDS-related lymphoma in 1988 at the age of 39, Jones made the decision to keep Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company alive as a memorial to his partner of seventeen years.

Jones's works are often more theater than concert dance. Hence, it is not surprising that during the 1990s Jones was hired to direct and choreograph several opera and theater productions. Perhaps the most notable of these is *The Mother of Three Sons* (1991) at New York City Opera, which was conceived and directed by Jones, with music composed by Leroy Jenkins and lyrics by Ann T. Greene.

In 1994, Jones signed a three-year contract as resident choreographer of the Lyons Opera Ballet in France. Yet, as he explained to critic Joseph Mazo, "I don't want--I can't--look to Europe for a place to create. France could not have invented Bill T. Jones."

Like all American modern dance company directors who compete for meager arts funding, Jones depends on international commissions and bookings to keep his company solvent.

In 1994, Jones received a MacArthur "genius" Fellowship. In 1995 he collaborated with author Toni Morrison and drummer Max Roach on *Dega*, and with opera singer Jessye Norman on *How! Do! You! Do!* (1999).

Famously extroverted, Jones is a charismatic performer and gifted choreographer whose autobiographical work often merges the private and the public. Comfortable within the freedom of post-modernism, Jones's choreography often includes spoken text, projections, and videos. His eclectic works range in character from outbursts of emotional agitation to political controversy to formalist abstraction.

Following Zane's death Jones entered into a five-year relationship with company dancer Arthur Aviles, then in 1993 with a new companion, Bjorn Amelan.

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About the Author

Bud Coleman, Associate Professor in the Department of Theater and Dance at the University of Colorado at Boulder, is a former dancer with Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo (as Natasha Notgoudenuff), Fort Worth Ballet, Kinesis, and Ballet Austin. He has directed and choreographed numerous productions and published in several journals and encyclopedias.