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Middle Passage

A Radical Artist Evolves

BY H.B. KRONEN

Bill T. Jones has moved through life making people mad. He fully understands the artist's role as provocateur. So it's ironic that *We Set Out Early . . . Visibility Was Poor*, opening at BAM on Tuesday, may anger people simply because it isn't provocative. "I'm sighing rather than screaming," he says. "This is about transformation."

Jones has aged; to those expecting the taut, angry man whose rage illuminated our most pressing contemporary issues, his presence at BAM may be a surprise. At 46, he's still one of the most beautiful human beings ever made, but an evocative shift has occurred, in his body and in his work. Where once he worked from fury, he is now moving from considered choice. He calls it experience. "The piece is trying to talk about what it means to live for long enough that you can actually have some distance from thi[illegible]" he says.

[illegible] doesn't disavow the passion from which his work has flowed but says, "I don't want to do it in that way anymore. It's got to be passion seen through formality. A person with an extremely emotional temperament like mine—I have to find another way to live so I won't wear myself out." He has had to find a new way to work as well, less dependent on what he terms the emotional spigot, more willing to trust a process of construction. He is aided by rehearsal director Janet Wong, the company, and his partner and production director, Bjorn Amelan.

Jones says Wong has revolutionized his choreographic practice by acting as memory, analyst, and codifier. She can deconstruct his every improvisational impulse, mark each component, and then return it to him and teach it to the ensemble—a painstaking process that can distill four hours of material into two minutes of movement. In this way, Jones says, "it's a thing away from me, and can become a shared vocabulary."

The current ensemble is strong, no longer the odd collection of characters for [illegible]h this company is known, more a varied sample of virtuosic dancers. "I don't want to rely on their personalities," Jones asserts. "I want to craft material so that personalities come through."

The most profound change has come through his relationship with Amelan. "From the very beginning of

A jones for transformation

Early . . . is a serene foil for the sensuous, muscular curves of the dance. A glowing ovoid lantern, 12 feet high, crosses the stage with the mysterious majesty of a moon; a constructivist composition of gleaming aluminum becomes a cart and then a c[illegible]

The dance, too, is geon[illegible] structured to three formidable [illegible] scores. Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du* [illegible] opens the first section, punctuated w[illegible] bird sounds and the dancers' vocal[illegible] meows, squawks, and bits of so[illegible] The second section is a deliberate [illegible]terlude set to John Cage's *Em[illegible] Words*, *Sonata for Prepared Piano*, a[illegible] *Music for Marcel Duchamp*, ending [illegible] a procession interrupted by *Sti[illegible]men*, a cinematically colored score [illegible] Peteris Vasks.

"There was something abou[illegible] young Stravinsky and a middle-ag[illegible] Vasks that was very important for [illegible] to think about," says Jones. "T[illegible] choices Stravinsky was making a[illegible] young, brash, intelligent man w[illegible] was in some ways showing off a[illegible] rebelling in his score. Vasks was n[illegible] rebelling; he is crying out of co[illegible]science and experience. I thoug[illegible] that was a universal kind of arc."

Jones made *We Set Out Early* . [illegible] in recognition of his path al[illegible] arc. It's an exploration of for[illegible] [illegible]cerns: a mature artist's pleasure [illegible] shape, light, and choreographic pl[illegible] He has taken movement from ever[illegible]where—jive, jazz, hip hop, the at[illegible]letic field, and ballet—though [illegible] torques the balletic line.

Maybe it's sheer confidence th[illegible] makes this piece less confrontation[illegible] than so much of his earlier work—like his first duets with Arnie Zane [illegible] the massive *Last Supper at Unc[illegible] Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land* a[illegible] *Still/Here*—in which he thru[illegible] against received notions about se[illegible] race, and death. Nor has this pie[illegible] the in-your-face stance that climaxe[illegible] in his incendiary *Last Night on Eart[illegible]*

"I stand by those works an[illegible] I'm proud of where they stood i[illegible] the social discourse," Jones sa[illegible] quietly, "but now what, Bill? An[illegible] now what?"

DISCUSSING BEAUTY WITH BILL T. OVER TEA

by Kevin Giordano

NEW YORK CITY—It's a very hot July afternoon in Manhattan, and choreographer Bill T. Jones and I are in a small café in midtown sharing a pot of iced herbal tea. "Beauty is what I'm doing right now," says Jones, "something that is elemental and elegant."

Calm and cogent, Jones is referring to his new piece, *We Set Out Early . . . Visibility Was Poor,* which has its New York premiere this month at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, October 6 to 11, then tours to Berkeley, California, October 14 to 18; Lawrence, Kansas, October 19 and 20; and Ann Arbor, Michigan, October 21 to 25; then heads to Europe. In the work, the forty-six-year-old choreographer, whose awards have included a 1994 MacArthur "genius" fellowship, two New York Dance and Performance (Bessie) Awards, an honorary doctorate from Bard College in 1996, and a 1993 Dance Magazine Award, is departing, at least for a while, from his customary politics and is putting his "faith in art. I must admit I'm making a philosophical shift to a very old principal about dance." Jones, paraphrasing Martha Graham, explains—"Dance doesn't lie."

Jones's recent subject, if beauty or art can be called simply subjects, is something of a change. In the past ten years, his company, Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, has built a reputation for being controversial, beginning with 1990's *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land,* which magnifies the issues of race and discrimination in America within a setting of mixed-media theater and dance. His creative perception of the terminally ill in the 1993 *Still/Here* garnered a plethora of press backlash, begun by writer Arlene Croce's *New Yorker* article that questioned whether the work was "victim art," and therefore impossible to review. But the success of his past works is a testament to the power of collective consciousness; they speak of today's issues, from one person's point of view.

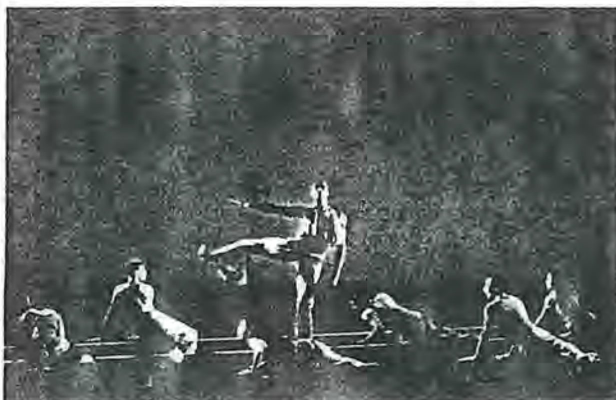
"Some of those pieces were about the issue of saying, 'Can you see me?' They were about identity and feelings," explains Jones. "Now I feel I'm alive; I can be seen; I'm a real player. Now I invite you to come and look at what I find beautiful."

So what *is* beautiful to Jones? On the table between us is a teapot; to explain, he puts his hand on it. "What does it mean when you sit and look at a beautiful teapot? I know it's a very effete attitude from a person who is supposed to be so politically minded, but I want to understand what gives a teapot its ability to make you stop dead and look at it. What did that craftsman imbue it with?"

With a cast of ten, *We Set Out Early* opens on a bare setting, yet the movement suggests a pastoral, folkish sensibility—it feels like Sunday morning. It has the effect generated by an Andrew Wyeth painting. A woman wearing a long dress prances onto the stage while a trio and soloist perform; soon the dancers join hands and playfully interact, performing as a group or a family. Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale,* a jaunty, impish score comprised of many short folk and tango pieces, accompanies movements and gestures that pass like photographs slowly held before one's eyes. As the first movement nears its end, the dancers take a moment to rejoice, yelling and talking among themselves.

In the second movement there is a severe change: suddenly the audience is looking through peepholes at the characters in their secret world, a world of solitude and introspection, of self-examination and self-absorption. Lighting designer Robert Wierzel offers only scant illumination of this world by way of single thin beams of light which the dancers step into or out of. The music consists of John Cage's *Empty Words, Sonata,* and *Music for Marcel Duchamp,* a somber, avant-garde score filled with seemingly unfinished melody lines.

After the second section, the last movement is a shock—it's Jones at his cinematic best. The curtain rises, revealing a bright blue backdrop, and the lights come up blazing. Overhead hangs a steel cart, minus a horse. Dancers run onto the stage, their movements bold and powerful but melancholic. A wrenching score by Lithuanian composer Peteris Vasks called *Stimmen,* which Jones refers to as "frightening, painful," gives weight to the evening's denouement. There is a celebration happening, but it is different from that of the first movement. Another change has overcome the dancers, and the choreography seems to suggest that they ask "Who are we now? We've changed, but what has changed?"


Simon R. Fulford/Courtesy Brooklyn Academy of Music

Bill T. Jones's We Set Out Early . . . Visibility Was Poor

Clocking in at seventy minutes, *We Set Out Early* is succinct and poignant. "I was thinking of a theater evening," says Jones. "If I were to watch a piece with no intermission, what would I need from that piece? I'd need something that really brought me into it, then let me rest, quietly meditative, and then suddenly something very emotional. That's why I say it's about a journey."

At moments, Jones's musings seem more like those of a preoccupied writer or a tormented composer than a choreographer. He uses words like *character* and *plot,* and mentions first and second movements, sonata form. Yet it all makes sense in the context of the piece. *We Set Out Early* has no spoken word, no video, no multimedia element, and while constructed like a story, it is different than something like *Last Supper* or *Still/Here.* "I was always using a similar process in those pieces, like, what if I took this character from a novel and did it as four different characters?" Jones declares. "Some people say *We Set Out Early* is more about the how of the subject than the what."

Jones explains that his creative process involved a combination of improvising, following his body's natural movement, giving himself over to the music, and having faith in his instincts as a dancer. He relied on his own body's encyclopedia of movement language to speak up and tell the story and to evoke joy and sadness. In it Jones finds a narrative that he continues throughout the piece, carrying the audience along from emotion to emotion. "The idea is to capture myself thinking and feeling," he says. "I look at my own contribution in today's dance world, and I think my own body has information in it, so I try to capture that within the music's universe."

Jones admits he's a romantic. His use of formal structure, themes, variations, and movements is evident and enables him to communicate abstract ideas clearly, giving voice to issues that might otherwise be evanescent. "I'm trying to use them at the service of a wild and woolly sensibility," he says.

Before leaving, Jones relates one last thought: he tells of seeing ballerinas leaving the American Ballet Theatre rehearsal studios that day. He explains that he was thinking of how the dancer is an instrument, and that the dancer is trained to be the muse of some genius. "But doesn't that make them anonymous?" he asks. Jones raises the subject of identity, asking, "Who is this person that is making this piece? What is his background, his vocabulary, his race, his sexual preference, and what do we need to know about him to understand his work? And, what do we need to know about an artist who is trying to express beauty?" Most definitely, Jones is asking audiences—and himself—these questions. ■

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DANCE

Interview

Overdue Bill

Visibility is anything but poor in Bill T. Jones's awaited evening-length work

By **Gia Kourlas**

There's no message—political, social or otherwise—in *We Set Out Early... Visibility Was Poor.* With any other choreographer, that remark might not even elicit a shrug of the shoulders, but when the controversial dancemaker in question is Bill T. Jones—and the piece is his first full-length work since *Still/Here*—well, it's a momentous occasion.

Now 46, Jones has successfully risen above attacks from critics (notably that of Arlene Croce in her famous *New Yorker* piece about victim art, "Discussing the Undiscussible") and from AIDS. Jones may be HIV-positive, but he feels "better than ever." He's even written a children's book with photographer Susan Kuklin, titled simply *Dance* (Hyperion).

In *We Set Out Early*, Jones has taken music from three different composers of this century: Igor Stravinsky, John Cage and Peteris Vasks. The dance, which premiered at the Kennedy Center last year, is divided into three sections and deftly blends dance styles from contemporary movement to hip-hop. It's beautiful and dreamlike, a journey through Jones's subconscious. And because it's oblique, the dream could just as easily be your own.

***Time Out New York:* What led to the decision not to focus on a particular issue in *We Set Out Early*?**

Bill T. Jones: It raises a lot of philosophical issues, I know. Is it possible to make work that's completely neutral? Martha Graham said movement does not lie. What did she mean by that? There's always some information coming across when a group of people dance. I think it matters who is dancing with whom, how they touch, when they touch and when they don't. That said, feel free to move in any way that you like that's realized, well conceived—and there *will* be meaning.

***TONY:* In the new piece, I felt as though I could see your body moving within your dancers' bodies.**

BTJ: Is that good? I guess that's good.

***TONY:* It's clear that you're moving in a different direction. Are you going for a more uniform company?**

BTJ: Not uniform in the way they *look*, but stylistic uniformity. I always want people to be different, but this is the hallmark of contemporary dance. Martha Graham, José Limón—they all had an intensely personal way of moving, but they codified it and taught it to others. Now, I don't claim to be making a technique, but there is a style of movement that I have that I'm trying to share with this group to give it more cohesion. I'm thinking less about the individual personalities, like when Lawrence [Goldhuber] or Seán [Curran] were in the company, and more about the movement—because when people leave, I don't want them to take so much with them. Does that make it more anonymous, more the same? Maybe to some degree, but *what* we do becomes more important than *who* we are.

***TONY:* Do you have a vivid dream life?**

BTJ: I do. And I remember them. I'm not a bad analyzer of dreams—my own and others. I sort of have to pull back, because sometimes I'm overwhelmed by what I think the dreams are telling me. I often dream about my company, persons who are sometimes closer to me than family. [I experience] shocking feelings of dependency or attraction to them in ways that are erotic. Those dreams are very real. When a person comes into the company, I have to fall in love with them, and I have to dream about them.

***TONY:* Who do you think Arlene Croce hates more: you or Peter Martins?**

BTJ: [*Shocked*] Oh, God, that's a terrible question! *Well.* [*Laughs*] I've never been asked such a question. I don't know—I think about her a lot, and I must admit on one level my respect for her is undiminished. She's a really important writer; she just shows extreme vulnerability, that she's human, you know? I think she would probably say that she doesn't hate me.

***TONY:* Why did you decide to write a children's book?**

BTJ: Susan Kuklin and I met in 1983, and she always said she wanted to work on a project. She finally approached me and said she had a publisher. But I had trepidation. I'm a big-muscled man. Will little boys and girls be intimidated by it? No, because it's ultimately saying that all those boundaries have nothing to do with what it means to fly high and dance on the ground.

***TONY:* Why did you feel anxious?**

BTJ: Oh, it can be foolish: a children's book. It's time for me, though. I feel an urge to nurture—maybe it's being in your forties. I feel the urge to be in touch with little things that grow. The book is dedicated to my niece, who is a young dancer and performer herself. She's seven. I'm *afraid* of her critique. [*Laughs nervously*] We were over at her house a couple Christmases ago, and she wanted me to dance with her, but of course, she wanted to do all the latest social hip-hop dances—some of which are in the end of *We Set Out Early.* I would be dancing, and she'd say, "Well, it's *okay*—could use a little more work." She was, like, *five* at the time.

***TONY:* Can you tell me about your company's curtain call—when the dancers "circulate" by clapping their hands and stomping their feet as they move off the stage?**

BTJ: There was a concerted effort in the Vasks section [of *We Set Out Early*] that it was not going to be a grieving, mourning piece. We were looking for a way to inhabit the stage with that incredibly emotional music. I told the dancers, I want you to dance as if you were having tea, making love, going to work—in a house that's on fire. And you're completely oblivious to the house burning. We want to ride this music, and not have it ride us. I think that we found that clapping, that tribal movement, to fit. It's the way many of the dancers dance socially.

Bringing that movement into the piece and into the curtain call is a way of us talking about what it means to be alive *now*. It's a very naked moment, in a way. High art, low art, pop dance, concert dance—they're irrelevant [labels] ultimately. Does it have a poetic cast to it? Does it urge the spectator to come closer? That's what I want it to be. Those curtain calls invite you to clap along! If there's any message, my work is always saying, Come on. It's all right. Don't be afraid. I do it with my company, because I want them to know that these are hard times. There are a lot of things that we do have to be afraid of, but what we do have—which is what I think dance is—is a body that we turn into a sacred instrument. We dance with and for a community. How we dance is a choice a choreographer makes, but it happens in a social context. Excuse me if I get on my soapbox, but good art is always about the profound act of encouragement. It might not always be Hallmark cards, daisies and sunshine, but it invites people to live more rigorously, more big-heartedly. *That* is the message.

***We Set Out Early... Visibility Was Poor* will be performed at the BAM Opera House Tuesday 6 through October 11.**

Beverly Blossom says she favors "the wrecked look."

Beatriz Schiller

When a Dancer's Shape Surprises the Audience

By JENNIFER DUNNING

Critic's Notebook

Dance is an accommodating art, shepherding all comers under its umbrella. This season, for instance, there are dancing horses, in the form of Zingaro, and puppet shows. The long list has also included performance art, ice and roller skating and wheelchair choreography. Still, dancegoers tend to be surprised — even exhilarated or dismayed — by performers who are larger, smaller, heavier or older than the norm.

Physical perfection and energy play an important part in the appeal of dance, from the stereotypical fast-moving, thermometer-shaped "Balanchine ballerina" to the sleek ballet-trained bodies now coursing through modern dance.

Uniformity has also been important. Choreographic styles or messages are often clearer when the performers look alike. A high degree of physical homogeneity has been a goal for most dance companies, particularly in ballet. In modern dance, Paul Taylor and Bill T. Jones are the chief exceptions.

"I always look for talent first," Mr. Taylor said in an interview. "But I'm also a person who doesn't like Chiclets. I like all the dancers to be recognizable, different."

The Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company was founded by a long, lithe black man, Mr. Jones, and a short, compact white man, Mr. Zane, who died in 1988. For many years the troupe has been a "bouquet," as Mr. Jones put it recently, of wildly diverse bodies with a rich variety of individual movement styles, ranging from hyper-energetic rubber balls to lyrical gazelles.

"Arnie and I started off being two different bodies," Mr. Jones said. "And we always had a taste for that eclecticism in what we pursued in art and in the people we wanted to be surrounded by. To this day, I look first for skill when I do an audition, but then I'm interested in who the dancers are and what that looks like in their bodies, though I'm not trying to make an interesting melange."

Extensive training is now more important to Mr. Jones, who faces a new challenge in his "We Set Out Early ... Visibility Was Poor," to be presented next week in the Next Wave Festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

"People have been talking about its being abstract," Mr. Jones said of the new work. "The question that poses, an old one for 20th-century artists, is what 'seduces' or invites an audience into the

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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Continued From First Arts Page

universe of that work when the piece is not about an issue or a theme. First, for me, is that they've got to look at a stage that is interesting. They've got to see individuals there who make them curious."

One of the most interesting oddball dancers is Lawrence Goldhuber, a former Jones-Zane performer, who is six feet tall and averages 350 pounds. Mr. Goldhuber is not likely to be snapped up by Merce Cunningham, the José Limón troupe or even Mr. Taylor. But he has an active independent dance career.

In April, as half of Goldhuber and Latsky, he will dance at Performance Space 122. His partner, Heidi Latsky, another former Jones dancer, is five feet tall and weighs 100 pounds. "Four hundred pounds of laughs and deep art," their advertising slogan reads. Though largely untrained in dance, Mr. Goldhuber, 37, moves fast and lightly, bringing a sense of amused aplomb to the stage.

Another standout is Beverly Blossom, who has had a long and well-received career in dance, from her days in the 1950's with the Alwin Nikolais company to solo performing today. Ms. Blossom, who is 72, goes even further against the grain than Mr. Goldhuber by allowing herself to look magnificently, comfortably ruined on stage, recalling Martha Graham's suggestion that it is the sudden, often shocking imperfection that makes art of craft.

Dressed most often in what she describes as "shabby black," Ms. Blossom favors the "wrecked look" in off-the-rack costumes that are often strangely stylish. "I just bought something the other day that looks like a catastrophe," she said happily. "A green shawl, like moss. I don't like 'pretty' very much."

Onstage, she is less an eccentric than a statuesque, slightly quizzical human being not afraid to look offbeat. "I've tried to be 'onbeat,' but it never works," Ms. Blossom said. "This seems to be my karma."

What can such dancers bring to performing? Clearly neither Mr. Goldhuber nor Ms. Blossom could meet today's high technical standards. Ms. Blossom points out, however, that dance was not always a matter of perfectly proportioned bodies. "Russian ballerinas were short with big legs and sometimes a lot of bulk under those tutus," she said of a golden age of ballet in turn-of-the-century Russia. "Isadora Duncan was not exactly a sylph, even young."

Nikolais began to favor tall, thin, more glamorous types in the early 1960's, Ms. Blossom said, as he found his own choreographic voice and became internationally known. "They could wear those scantily designed costumes he had," Ms. Blossom recalled. But Nikolais had encouraged his early dancers to choreograph. Ms. Blossom went on to a career in avant-garde dance, followed by university teaching, before returning to the stage almost accidentally in solos she began to perform in New York in 1978.

Mr. Goldhuber, who had never danced professionally, found himself drawn to Mr. Jones's work after watching a friend in a Jones-Zane workshop. "If you ever need a big man, give me a call," Mr. Goldhuber told them. Do you speak? they asked.

Nan Melville

Lawrence Goldhuber and his partner, Heidi Latsky, in a dance program in Union Square Park.

He told them he was an actor. The following week, he was recruited to dance with Mr. Jones in a piece with text.

"I wanted to make a duet in which I could feel small and be lifted," Mr. Jones recalled. In 1987, Mr. Goldhuber was invited to join the troupe as "just another dancer."

"The decision to join was a little more difficult," he said. "I had always been fat. I loathed my body. I guess I knew I was gay, but I was in the closet. The company was very political then. I would be surrounded by the perfection of dancers' bodies." He left in 1996 after knee surgery.

Mr. Goldhuber and Ms. Latsky fit into the anything-goes downtown dance esthetic, although they have branched out into modern-dance choreography that does not focus on their disparate sizes. Ms. Blossom has had a harder time recently finding a place in New York to perform, and is planning a spring season at a SoHo loft.

Ms. Blossom sounded like a cat at a dish of cream as she talked of a performance by Kazuo Ohno, an aged male Japanese Butoh artist, who delights in portraying crumbling old crones. "He had this wonderful patina. One of the things you dare not touch in an antique is the patina. You can't artificially produce that."

She also admires Mr. Goldhuber. "I like to see the effort of motion at times," she said. "And he has character, like an actor. Though if Bill T. Jones had a company where everyone looked like him, I probably wouldn't like it. Contrast is a *great* thing in theater. Sameness is probably the worst thing. And there don't seem to be enough 'real' things on the stage."

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WEDNESDAY, MAY 6, 1998

Q&A
BILL T. JONES

Moved to Seek a Connection

By JENNIFER FISHER
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Dancer-choreographer Bill T. Jones has been interrogating the Big Themes in provocative ways for more than 25 years, most visibly with the Bill T. Jones / Arnie Zane Dance Company since 1982. Religion, love, sex, racism, death—no issue has been too hot or too complex to dance about. Influenced most by classical form, modern dance and idiosyncratic improvisation, Jones has often used autobiography and storytelling in his work, especially his two ambitious evening-length pieces: "Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin / The Promised Land" in 1990 and "Still / Here" in 1994.

Jones' newest work, "We Set Out Early . . . Visibility Was Poor," premiered at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., last October, with critics noting its lack of explicitly stated themes and its suggestion of a transformational journey. Called "startling in its purity of vision and movement" by one critic, it will be performed at Royce Hall on Friday and Saturday.

Question: I read that Janet Reno stayed for the post-performance talk after "We Set Out Early" at the Kennedy Center. Did you find out what she thought?

Answer: She came backstage afterward, and she was very taken with the piece and particularly with the performers. She wanted to make sure she spoke to each one individually. I think a great many people wanted to stay behind for the talk because they had questions, but they also wanted to hear what other people were thinking, not just what I had to say.

When I talk about a work, I won't tell you what I was meaning, per se, but I'll tell you what I was doing and maybe what I was feeling. And then I think you do the other part.

There's a sort of communion—which is a touchy word that implies something metaphysical and religious, but that's the way I feel about art. All of those people sat there . . . and watched these other people onstage, and afterward, I think they wanted to extend their communion with the event.

Q: The title—"We Set Out Early . . . Visibility Was Poor"—sounds like it's from a 19th century traveler's diary.

A: Yes, intentionally so. I thought it read like Melville, or a travel book, very open-ended. It has a kind of epic sweep. It speaks of a "we," not specifying who the "we" is, and it speaks of something that begins somewhere, we don't know where. It seemed an honest way to describe how I was feeling—something in my nature is always pondering the notion of the "we."

Q: How do you do that with dance? After using spoken narration and multimedia effects in "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and "Still / Here," you seem to rely more on the moving body in this work.

A: Well, I came into dance when minimalism was raging, and as much as I loved it formally, it could not express my dislocation, my conflicted relationship to the status quo. So I brought into it what I knew—storytelling, songs, references to what I thought was the real world. I wanted to say, "Look, this is who I am."

Then once I had done that, I knew what could and could not be achieved in terms of that kind of communication. Some things will never be healed between people.

And I learned from people in survival workshops [in preparation for "Still / Here"] who said, "Well, if you're confused about your life, you don't know how you're going to live—isolate what you love. What is your passion? Give yourself to it." I looked around and, lo and behold, I was so glad to find out that I really loved dancing, as a primary art form. OK, I would give myself to that. Don't *talk* about things, because we can dance, we can see

> **"Before, with all those public confessional pieces that were painful and emotional, I was trying to say, 'Can you see me?' Now, I truly believe I can be seen."**

Please see JONES, F9

Los Angeles Times

WEDNESDAY, MAY 6, 1998

Q&A
BILL T. JONES

CALENDAR

JONES: Moved to Seek a Connection Through Dance

Continued from F1

who you are, your race, your sexuality, what you're afraid of. We can almost see what you're thinking.

Before, with all those public confessional pieces that were painful and emotional, I was trying to say, "Can you see me?" Now, I truly believe I can be seen.

Q: What was your process like this time?

A: Well, I started with the music, Igor Stravinsky's "Soldier's Tale," John Cage piano pieces and Peteris Vasks' "Stimmen"—but how to enter into it in terms of movement? I decided to get back into the studio and into my own body, and I've been doing a lot of experimentation with skeletal movement, with rhythmical and textural isolations. I tried to apply some of those ideas and just plain old-fashioned, feel-good dancing to the Stravinsky score. On a hot summer afternoon, I danced to it several times and videotaped it and looked at what I had. I saw that man dancing and I said, "This dancer is speaking about everything I could possibly say with text or narrative." So I said, "Let's just trust in movement."

Q: And how did you do that?

A: Well, for one thing, I've been working with my brilliant rehearsal director Janet Wong, who has helped codify my movement. She can learn every idiosyncratic isolation that I do, and set all of my improvisations. We sit with tapes and decide which sections work, and she goes off and learns them, then teaches them to me and to the company. It creates quite a rich, eclectic vocabulary. She has revolutionized the way I make movement and the way that it comes into the company.

I'm very proud of the way it works. It used to dismay me not to have a codified vocabulary, like Balanchine had and Martha Graham had. There's power and expediency in that. When you start out as I did, literally making it up, suddenly you're trying to find a shared language.

What is our common language? I'm trying to discover that with this process.

I start out alone, approaching the music purely as rhythm and texture. I work with Janet, then the company comes into it, and I respond to their personalities and shapes. . . . I choose and edit, but I also listen and see what people naturally give back. All of this feeds into a stew—it becomes what "we" are—there's the "we" word again. I always strive to believe in the "we," not the "they," "us," "I" or "you." And that's a hard one in the 20th century, I think, because so much has been balkanized and atomized and deconstructed.

Q: Are explanations important to you? Is there something you want the audience to know before seeing the work?

A: That's difficult to say, be[illegible] I don't know who they ar[illegible] inviting them to come and [illegible] with me something I fir[illegible] a[illegible] And that act of witnessing, lo[illegible] contemplation is an act of [illegible]munion that closes a gap bet[illegible] us. I know it does it for me w[illegible] look at art, art that's centurie[illegible] I suddenly forget the differ[illegible] time is irrelevant. Then I'[illegible] touch with an impulse—spir[illegible] intellectual, what have you. W[illegible] is really all we have. I think [illegible] there to keep us agile—not th[illegible] agree with it, not that it's al[illegible] understood, but we have to [illegible] moving to deal with it.

■ Bill T. Jones / Arnie Zane [illegible] Company, "We Set Out Early [illegible] Visibility Was Poor," 8 p.m., F[illegible] and Saturday, Royce Hall, U[illegible] $16-$40, (310) 825-2101.

The Washington Post

October 31, 1997

On Stage

THEATER • DANCE

Jones's Continuing Journey of Discovery

By Sarah Kaufman

THOUGH HE may be considered unconventional in the extreme, choreographer Bill T. Jones has been on a path shared by great artists since time immemorial: the endless quest to discover what is beauty, what is poetry, what is truth. His works, first created with partner Arnie Zane, and then alone since Zane's death nine years ago, display an unmistakable urgency, a drive to discovery—witness the emotional intensity and inventive movement vocabulary of "D-Man on the Waters"; the scope, by turns raging and humble, of "Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin," with its finale of non-dancer recruits stripping themselves bare; and the frank honesty of "Still/Here," accompanied by recorded interviews with the terminally ill.

This weekend, the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company performs the results of Jones's most recent artistic search, with a world premiere presented by the Kennedy Center and the Washington Performing Arts Society. The work figures in the center's "America Dancing" series, which focuses on the spreading influence of this nation's dance makers.

Jones has given the new piece the alluring title "We Set Out Early . . . Visibility Was Poor," but says it has little of the narrative shape the name suggests.

He chose the title, he says, because "it reads like the first line of a short story or a novel, so the audience gets into that mode, but it's an abstract, nonlinear work. There is, however, the sense that this community has started somewhere."

To mark the close of the century, Jones selected accompaniment with "strong 20th-century credentials." He uses three composers: Stravinsky, specifically his "L'Histoire du Soldat (The Soldier's Tale)," which Jones says intrigued him with its blend of "whimsy and brilliance"; John Cage; and Latvian composer Peteris Vask.

Jones is reluctant to pin down the inspiration or meaning of the 75-minute work, saying only that it suggests a journey. It is also the continuation of "a formal investigation I've been interested in: What is beauty? What is architecture in space? . . . How can I move the company and give them an activity that will be a rich experience for the audience?" They are age-old questions, to which Jones has been finding timeless answers.

BILL T. JONES/ARNIE ZANE DANCE COMPANY — Friday and Saturday at 7:30, Saturday and Sunday at 2:30 at the Kennedy Center Eisenhower Theater. Call 202/467-4600 or 202/833-9800.

The Washington Post

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 28, 1997

SUNDAY

Arts

BEST OF THE YEAR

It has been a rich year, laden with many performances that have uplifted, tickled or provoked feisty discussions, the last of which is the best sign of success. Yet my favorites—works as nearly fault-free as you can find, and ones I would fall over myself to get to again—boil down to these three:

1. Bill T. Jones's "We Set Out Early . . . Visibility Was Poor." This evening-length work, performed without intermission, was given its world premiere at the Kennedy Center on Halloween. This work burned with many ideas—of community, of journeys, of the ferment of the times. All were given eloquent expression in Jones's angular, often galvanic movement vocabulary, but nothing was decisively etched. Therein lay the work's strength. Jones sketched his themes but left plenty for the viewer to fill in, aided by his

Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company

Bill T. Jones, a 1994 recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship, began his dance training at the State University of New York at Binghamton (SUNY), where he studied classical ballet and modern dance. After living in Amsterdam, Mr. Jones returned to SUNY, where he became co-founder of the American Dance Asylum in 1973. Before forming Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company (then called Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane & Company) in 1982, Mr. Jones choreographed and performed nationally and internationally as a soloist and duet company with his late partner, Arnie Zane.

In addition to creating over 40 works for his own company, Mr. Jones has received many commissions to create dances for modern and ballet companies including Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Boston Ballet, Lyon Opera Ballet, Berkshire Ballet, Berlin Opera Ballet and Diversions Dance Company, among others. He has also received numerous commissions to create new works for his own company, including premieres for the Next Wave Festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and for St. Luke's Chamber Orchestra. In July 1995, Mr. Jones directed and performed in a collaborative work with Toni Morrison and Max Roach, *Degga* , at Alice Tully Hall, commissioned by Lincoln Center's Serious Fun Festival.

During the past few years, Mr. Jones has also begun to work with several opera companies around the world. In 1990, he choreographed Sir Michael Tippet's *New Year* under the direction of Sir Peter Hall for the Houston Grand Opera and the Glyndebourne Festival Opera. He conceived, co-directed and choreographed *Mother of Three Sons*, which was performed at the Munich Biennale, New York City Opera, and the Houston Grand Opera. He also directed *Lost in the Stars* for the Boston Lyric Opera. Mr. Jones' theater involvement includes co-directing *Perfect Courage* with Rhodessa Jones for Festival 2000, in 1990. In 1994, he directed Derek Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain* for The Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, MN.

Television credits for Mr. Jones include *Fever Swamp* , which was filmed for PBS's "Great Performances" series, and *Untitled* for "Alive from Off Center," which aired nationally on PBS in July 1989. In early 1992, a documentary on Bill T. Jones' *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land* was aired on Dance in America as part of PBS's "Great Performances" series. CBS Sunday Morning broadcasted two features on Mr. Jones' work, once in 1993 and again in 1994. *Still/Here* , Mr. Jones' latest evening-length work, was co-directed for television by Bill T. Jones and Gretchen Bender and aired nationally and internationally. The making of *Still/Here* was also the subject of a documentary by Bill Moyers and David Grubin entitled "Bill T. Jones: *Still/Here* with Bill Moyers."

In addition to the MacArthur Fellowship, Mr. Jones has received several other prestigious awards. In 1979, Mr. Jones was granted the Creative Artists Public Service Award in Choreography, and in 1980, 1981 and 1982, he was the recipient of Choreographic Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts. In 1986, Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane were awarded a New York Dance and Performance ("Bessie") Award for their Joyce Theater

season, and in 1989, Mr. Jones was awarded another "Bessie" for his work, *D-Man in the Waters*. Mr. Jones, along with his collaborators Rhodessa Jones and Idris Ackamoor received an "Izzy" Award for *Perfect Courage* in 1990. Mr. Jones was honored with the Dorothy B. Chandler Performing Arts Award for his innovative contributions to performing arts in 1991. In 1993, Mr. Jones was presented with the Dance Magazine Award. Mr. Jones received an honorary doctorate from Bard College in 1996.

Mr. Jones' memoirs, Last Night on Earth, were published by Pantheon Books in September 1995. An in-depth look at the work of Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane can be found in Body Against Body: The Dance and Other Collaborations of Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane, published by Station Hill Press. Mr. Jones is also proud to have contributed to the foreword of Philip Trager's book of photographs entitled, Dancers.

Arnie Zane (1948-1988) was a native New Yorker born in the Bronx and educated at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Binghamton. In 1971, Arnie Zane and Bill T. Jones began their long collaboration in choreography and in 1973 formed the American Dance Asylum in Binghamton with Lois Welk. Mr. Zane's first recognition in the arts came as a photographer when he received a Creative Artists Public Service (CAPS) Fellowship in 1973. Mr. Zane was the recipient of a second CAPS Fellowship in 1981 for choreography, as well as two Choreographic Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts (1983 and 1984). In 1980, Mr. Zane was co-recipient, with Bill T. Jones, of the German Critics Award for his work, *Blauvelt Mountain*. *Rotary Action*, a duet with Mr. Jones, was filmed for television, co-produced by WGBH-TV Boston and Channel 4 in London. The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater commissioned a new work from Mr. Zane and Bill T. Jones, *How to Walk an Elephant*, which premiered at Wolftrap in August 1985. Mr. Zane (along with Mr. Jones) received a 1985-86 New York Dance and Performance (Bessie) Award for Choreographer/ Creator.

An in-depth look at the work of Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane can be found in Body Against Body: The Dance and Other Collaborations of Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane, published by Station Hill Press.

The Word From Bill T. Jones: He's Moving Beyond Words

By ELIZABETH ZIMMER

BILL T. JONES, famously a choreographer who uses spoken language on the stage, is tired of talking. In his 1997 piece, "We Set Out Early ... Visibility Was Poor," which has its New York premiere at the Brooklyn Academy of Music on Tuesday, music and movement do all the work. Composed of three parts with no intermissions, the 70-minute piece "started with the music, not from an idea I wanted to express," Mr. Jones said in a telephone interview from Cardiff, Wales, where he was finishing "Nowhere But Here" for Diversions Dance Company. The piece has a score by the same Latvian composer, Peteris Vasks, whose music closes "We Set Out Early."

Elizabeth Zimmer, dance editor at The Village Voice, is the author of "Body Against Body: The Dance and Other Collaborations of Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane."

"I've been talked about so much. It's difficult for many journalists to talk about the work because they're so busy talking about me," the 46-year-old artist complained. "I made a work I really did not want to have to talk about; I truly wanted it to be a theatrical, visual experience."

Moving from the statement art of 'Still/Here' to a more abstract kind of expression.

Given the turmoil that surrounded his last full-evening piece, "Still/Here," Mr. Jones may be forgiven his testiness. Labeled "victim art" by the critic Arlene Croce, who declined to check it out for herself, the 1994 work continued the choreographer's engagement with pressing contemporary issues: questions of race, class, sexual orientation and, in "Still/Here," ways of confronting illness and impending death.

In 1998, though, he has arrived at another, more abstract place; "We Set Out Early" is in many ways a chronicle of his journey. He doesn't dance in it himself, but, he says, "I do a short solo beforehand. I'm feeling so good now; I've not given up dancing. I squeeze myself on as a sort of warm-up act."

The new dance, which had its premiere a year ago at the Kennedy Center in Washington and is in the midst of an international tour, may appear less "engaged" than some of Mr. Jones's earlier work, but he feels "that all of my issues are in the movement."

"When I look at a group of people dancing, I'm seeing their origins, histories, power plays, their genders, sexual preferences; I no longer feel that I need to use words," he said. "I make interesting movement and give it to a diverse, committed community of dancers; the viewer will do the rest. I tried to make something that's repeatable, an event for contemplation, to be looked at as I would look at my favorite art form, which is sculpture. It's not as funky as things I made in the past; it doesn't feel as extemporaneous, it's more considered, built for the long term."

Mr. Jones sees "We Set Out Early," which has visual design by his companion and production director Bjorn Amelan, as "a journey, an examination of the 20th century." The work uses music by Igor Stravinsky (the 1917 dance drama "A Soldier's Tale"), John Cage ("Empty Words," "Sonata for Prepared Piano" and "Music for Marcel Duchamp") and Mr. Vasks's "Stimmen," a symphony for strings, with

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DANCE

12 Bill T. Jones at BAM: evolving from verbal issues into dance abstraction. *By Elizabeth Zimmer*

Photographs by Simon R. Fulford

From Bill T. Jones's "We Set Out Early... Visibility Was Poor," which will be at Brooklyn Academy.

which he began.

"I wanted something that would be a counterpoint to the Vasks," he said. "You can't beat Stravinsky for danc[illegible]ty, clarity of structure, theat[illegible]lity, all those qualities the Vasks doesn't have. The Vasks, composed in 1991, has an emotional intensity. Both composers are from the former Soviet Union. I saw an arc going from the buoyant, brash optimism of the Stravinsky to the sober, seasoned melancholy of the Vasks; I thought this was, in a way, the trajectory of the whole century, beginning with revolutionary ideals, the notion that art can change the world, and ending with this voice of experience that I hear in the Vasks. These two pieces began to inform how I could find meaning in the work. Then I thought, why not find something that's mid-20th-century modernism?

"For many years the work I was making asked the question 'Can you see me?' —asked it of me and of the audience. I was a person who felt misunderstood and invisible. I was often confrontational. I feel now that I am seen; I feel a part, rather than apart; I even trust the eyes of the audience a bit more, and invite them to look at what I think is beautiful and meaningful. The work is designed to go in the eyes, find its way to the mind and ultimately to the heart."

Among the dozens of dances he has [illegible]de since 1973, alone and with [illegible]e Zane, his partner who died 10 years ago, are works like "The Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land," which incorporate texts and styles from American literature and vernacular music.

"For a long time," Mr. Jones said,

"I didn't believe that one could invent anything new. Now I'm looking for ways to invent. For years Arnie and I said we were assemblage artists, taking a bit of this, a bit of that; the secret of what we were doing was in syntax, not so much in vocabulary. Now I'm interested in the words I'm creating, before I even make a sentence. I still feel open to different ways of moving, to images taken from high and low culture, but they're secondary to my concern to find a personal vocabulary.

"I spend a lot of time in the studio trying out different ways of solving problems in the movement. How can one use the hips and the legs? How do the back and the shoulders affect what the arms do? Can I have different textures of movement in the upper body and the lower body? A lot of this thinking is actually done 'on my feet.' I improvise, and then videotape the results. I work with my rehearsal director, Janet Wong, to look at what is there and codify it so it can be taught to the company."

Before he formed his association with Ms. Wong, Mr. Jones said, "more work was made in the studio, on the dancers' bodies; now it starts with me working intensely in my body, inside, and Janet transcribing it so it can be taught."

"The dancers are all very individualistic," he continued. "Their experiences are different than mine. My wiggles, lunges, swings have to be adjusted for them. I'm trying to have more control over the style of the movement, which every choreographer from Ruth St. Denis on has been trying to do."

Mr. Jones's esthetic and political concerns were shaped by the 1960's, the decade he entered college and began studying modern dance. In that period, he said, personal choreographic style "was considered oppressive and dictatorial, so through improvisation and other means dance was democratized."

"I'm a product of that democratization," he continued. "Now I long for a stronger sense of style. What I do have in common with those early modern dancers is I trust very much my own body dancing, and what it knows, so I set about allowing it to do what it does best, and I capture it through the medium of video. Communicating that personal style to such a diverse community of dancers is where the action is now in my own creative world."