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Choreographer dances between artistic truth, audience acceptance

By Chris Evans
Special to freedomforum.org
05.10.01

NEW YORK —
Choreographer Bill T. Jones says he knows his audience is out there. He hears them applaud, and criticize, and tell him what his dance should — or should not — be.

When critics say his work should not be as erotic as it is, or as emotionally wrenching on the topics that matter to him as a black, homosexual, HIV-positive man, Jones battles against becoming his own worst censor.

After all, he has his vision, but he also has a dance company to run — the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Co., which he started with Zane, who died of AIDS in 1988.

"I want to be authentic," Jones said May 8 in an interview at the First Amendment Center. But "the dance company doesn't work if nobody buys the tickets."

The problem with being an artist today, Jones said, is that society doesn't always want authenticity from the artist; it wants acceptability. The challenge for the artist, he added, is to be true to his art and to survive in the real world at the same time.

Jones was interviewed by Ken Paulson, executive director of the First Amendment Center, and Maxwell L. Anderson, director of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, who together co-host the program "Whitney Dialogues at the First Amendment Center." The interview was taped for "[Speaking Freely](#)," a weekly First Amendment Center television show that explores issues of free expression in the arts. It airs in New York City on Metroarts 13.

Jones has long used his dance to champion marginalized minorities, he said, and he has learned to deal with a backlash from mainstream critics for doing so.

Born in Florida, Jones grew up in New York and began his dance training at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Binghamton. It was there he met Zane, while he was studying classical ballet and modern dance.

Jones later combined what he learned in his formal education "with the way we used to shimmy and shake to the jukebox."

In 1982, he and Zane formed their dance company as a multicultural ensemble. The 10-member company, which fuses dance and theater, has performed more than 50 works in America and abroad, Anderson said in introducing Jones.

Jones has described his work as dealing with the fear



Maxwell L. Anderson, Ken Paulson and Bill T. Jones on May 8 in an interview at the First Amendment Center.



of difference, as well as the issues of survival and triumph. But the way he deals with these issues has not always been well-received.

Photo by Larry Link

Bill T. Jones

Perhaps his most famous criticism came in 1995, when, Jones said, dance critic Arlene Croce wrote in *The New Yorker* that she refused to review his work "Still/Here" because it unabashedly tugged at the heartstrings by showing video clips of non-actors and non-dancers suffering from terminal illnesses.

In the article, Croce accused Jones of manipulating the people in the video clips, Jones recalled, adding that he had only been trying to show how terminally ill people lived.

Jones said he must be careful not to internalize such criticism. For him, living and dying is not the issue. Instead, he often seeks to explore what a person can do with the time that remains in his or her life.

Staying true to his vision can have incredible rewards, he added.

He recalled an experience that took place in the 1990s when middle America was introduced to his controversial show, "Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land." The show brings together themes of Christianity and slavery, and ends with a cast of nude dancers on stage.

The controversy surrounding the show drew people out, and then the emotion of the performance drew them in, he said.

"The (local) paper said: 'New York-based choreographer Bill T. Jones comes to Iowa inviting people to strut their stuff — all of it.' That was on the front page, not buried back there in the art section. That's called hard news. Yeah, yeah, I like that."

Drawn by the news, people who had never heard of the dance company came in large numbers, he recalled. "They could taste the transgression" that he sought to portray on stage.

Perhaps most rewarding for him, he added, was the knowledge that people usually continue the conversation that he begins in the theater. It's important for artists to initiate that kind of conversation, he said. They must "put it out there, and let people have a go at it."

At the same time, he hopes that audiences will "walk in with respect" when they go to see any artist's work.

Either way, Jones said he would continue to express what he knows must be expressed, and he will continue to ask of himself: "What is in this heart that can be communicated?"

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Last updated: Sunday, October 5, 2003 | 18:19:30