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Improvisation

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Using Dance as a Political Pathway

Bill T. Jones has been a highly influential figure throughout generations of dance and theater, from the early 1970's to present day. He had a strong interest for movement, which later became his life's work. By combining dance and language, he creates a movement style that is uncommon to the dance world. Jones blurs the line between the dance world and the public, which had not been done much before. Drawing from culture and placing it in the modern dance world was rare throughout this period (Harss). He also strives to leave the audience questioning what they watched and how it applies to daily life. Known as somebody who provokes questions in his rather comfortable audience, Jones uses the stage as a place to tell his story as well as the story of many others like him. In an interview with Marc Bamuthi Joseph talking about one of his pieces, Jones said:

I took it as a directive to tell “my stories,” stories that deal with Jim Crow racism and our ongoing struggle with inequality and bias today, the influence of sexuality, of personal and public tragedy, of spirituality of reporting on the world as I have grown up to understand it, coupled with what I have learned about ideas, about time, about art (Joseph).

It is evident that he wished to make a connection between what was happening in the dance world along with what was happening society. Bill T. Jones uses a political approach, along

with personal experiences, to create work that captures the attention of his viewers and makes them question their perception of social injustices.

Understanding the history of Bill T. Jones is a crucial step in learning about his work. Jones grew up with eleven siblings outside of Rochester, New York, where he gained a curiosity for movement while attending college at the State University of New York, Binghamton. Jones was a black and openly queer man, living in a world working against him. Early on in his life, he met Arnie Zane and they went on to form the American Dance Asylum. Zane and Jones were long term partners who were both diagnosed as HIV-positive within a year of each other. They were known for creating work that was viewed as controversial for displaying the idea of what it meant to be black, gay men with living with AIDS. Eventually, they formed the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company where they continued to choreograph and perform. Not long after forming the company, Zane, along with another member of the company, died of AIDS. This tragedy had a great impact on the work of Bill T. Jones. He used this personal experience as a way to create work that appealed to emotions and was informative. By drawing from the emotions of this loss and from a disease he was also fighting, he is able to create very meaningful art (Britannica.com).

For as long as time there has been a strong connection between politics and art, and this was very present in the work of Jones. From learning about his history, you can clearly see how the politics around sexuality, race, and AIDS are important to him. He uses these injustices to create his works. “Blind Date,” is a prime example of the use of politics in his work. *The New York Times* described it as “his most urgently topical piece in years, and perhaps his most unambiguously political.” The piece stemmed from a speech Jones had heard in Germany, stating that the words honor, and valor no longer held the same meaning that they once did. He

connected this to the presidential election in which Bush had won. “And he has done so with a series of segments that question the expediency of war, reflect on limited opportunities for the urban poor and remark on the certainty of sexual moralism to the Republican agenda.” (Bellafante). Jones’ reaction to topics of which he either agreed or disagreed with was to use them as fuel for dance. The piece includes ten of his company members, using both voice and music. It demonstrates a fight of power and difference of opinion, along with personal stories from the performers. Anytime politics are involved, it leaves room for disagreement. Jones was not always performing to audiences that agreed with him or understood his perspective. Many viewers disagreed with his lifestyle, therefore disagreeing with his work. Especially when he performed in a time where it was not socially acceptable to be gay, there was misinformation and a negative stigma around AIDS, and racial inequality was very prominent. He explained that dance can be a teaching tool in the same way as reading a book. Information can be relayed and with modern technology, last for years to come. He creates a way for people to learn and discuss over a decade later. Jones took advantage of every chance he could to use his voice in the dance world. Particularly he worked hard to become a voice for those who did not have one.

“D-Man in the Waters” was created in response to the death of Arnie Zane, as discussed previously. This has been described as Jones’ most famous work. He was experiencing many emotions during this time, but mainly grief. The grief was his driving force while creating the piece. “One of the company members described not just the dance but the process of creating the dance as a ‘healing cathartic ritual’” (O’Malley). AIDS was a very prominent disease at that time. Due to this, many dancers knew people who had died from this disease, making this work relatable to the dance world. The dancers watched those they love, suffer and be denied of proper care due to the negative stigma and false information surrounding the epidemic. They

were able to translate these emotions into movement by connecting with what was going on in their lives. “D-Man in the Waters” has such a strong impact that dance companies still perform it today. The piece earned Jones a New York Dance and Performance Award (“D-Man in the Waters (Part I)). The original piece premiered in 1989 and in 2021 “Can You Bring It” was released. This is a film that includes interviews from Jones describing what the dancers went through at this time (O’Malley). This shows how the piece is still relevant over thirty years later, as it still connects current worldly events with the dance world.

One of Jones’ most controversial pieces premiered in 1994. Many varying opinions flooded the media and criticized his approach. “Jones has crossed the line between theatre and reality—he thinks that victimhood in and of itself is sufficient to the creation of an art spectacle” said critic, Arlene Croce. A writer for *The New Yorker*, Croce harshly disagreed with Jones’ work. Her article was called “Discussing the Undiscussable” where she expressed her opposing opinions to “Still/Here.” In the creation of this piece, Jones spent time with terminally ill people and used his experience as an inspiration. He replicated some of the movements he saw from them and what he learned by spending time with them. The piece uses a mix of theater and dance elements which are very common to Jones’ work. In “Still/Here,” the dancers use language and movement to tell the story of those who were ill. Clearly, not everyone agreed with the ethics of creating and performing this piece. It could be argued as exploiting the subjects or taking advantage of their vulnerability. Jones says, “My job is to evoke the spirit of survival” (“Bill T. Jones: Still / Here with Bill Moyers”). His goal was to learn from these people and their suffering to see what they potentially had in common. His research led him to realize that throughout it all, they were surviving. As somebody also living with a terminal illness, he wanted to show the audience what it meant to survive (“Bill T. Jones: Still / Here with

Bill Moyers)." Looking back now, it is clear that he never had negative intentions against anybody involved. He only wished to share their story and use his voice for good. The New York Times described it as "For two generations now, his work has attempted to provoke, in the manner of a person intent on steering a conversation toward the uncomfortable, in order to yield understanding" (Mason). Whenever authors write about anything it creates publicity, whether that is negative or positive does not always matter. Sometimes controversy can be used as a tool to draw people in. It creates a debate that is useful for progression of an agenda. This is prominent throughout his career.

Overall, Bill T. Jones uses his hardships to persevere and construct successful art. By involving political issues, he creates discussion around sensitive topics. Drawing from personal hardships, allowed a rarely seen relationship with the audience. In doing this, he is able to have unique connections with the performers and the topic being discussed. Jones is an example of how important it is to speak up and start conversation using art. His risky choices proved to be worth it with his success that still lasts to this day.

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