

Bill T. Jones: The ‘Story/Time’ Memoir Interview

Williams Tass Jones is an accomplished artist, choreographer, dancer, theater director and writer. The world-renowned Renaissance man was born in Bunnell, Florida on February 15, 1952, but raised in upstate New York from an early age.

Bill began his dance training at the State University at Binghamton, where he studied classical ballet and modern dance. In 1982, he formed the Bill T. Jones / Arnie Zane Dance Company with his late partner, Arnie Zane.

Today, he continues to serve as the company’s choreographer and artistic director. He is also the executive director of New York Live Arts, a multi-disciplinary performance venue.

Bill is the recipient of many accolades, including the National Medal of Arts, the Kennedy Center Honors, the Jacob’s Pillow Dance Award, Tony Awards in the Best Choreography category (for Fela! And Spring Awakening), a MacArthur Genius Grant, the prestigious Order of Arts and Letters from the government of France, and induction into the National Museum of Dance Hall of Fame.

Here, he talks about his career and his surrealistic new memoir, “Story/Time.”

Kam Williams: Hi Bill, thanks for the interview. I loved the book.

Bill T. Jones: Fantastic!

KW: What a unique idea, turning a series of surrealistic lectures you delivered at Princeton into a memoir?



CELEBRITY INTERVIEW

by Kam Williams

BTJ: I don’t know why I still have this illusion that I could do something quietly which would just be for a very small group of people. Now that the book is being promoted, there are wider ramifications, and it’s part of a whole other form of expression beyond my just doing pure inquiry for myself. And you’re one of those personalities that comes along with that tsunami of discourse. So, no complaints, I’m just adjusting to that. So, what would you like to do, Kam?

KW: I’d like to mix in questions from fans with some of my own. Professor/Filmmaker/Author Hisani Dubose says: How has the trend towards people relying on technology for entertainment affected the appreciation of creativity in terms of live dance performances?

BTJ: [Laughs] Well, that’s quite a question, Hisani. I appreciate the question. We’re all wondering about that. There are a couple things we see. Dancers were the last romantics. The Romantic Movement of the 18th and 19th Century had this idea that everything in the world was an expression



‘Dancers were the last romantics. The Romantic Movement of the 18th and 19th Century had this idea that everything in the world was an expression of Nature. We in the dance world held onto this idea for a long time that we were Nature itself. There were no tricks involved. ‘

of Nature. We in the dance world held onto this idea for a long time that we were Nature itself. There were no tricks involved. When the curtain went up, you saw real people onstage. And we took that as setting us apart from other cultural pursuits. It’s not scored and we don’t need a conductor to bring it to life. No, dance is about a group of people coming together and using their bodies. But now we’re in an electronic, on-demand age where everything can be reproduced, and where life is an ever more turned inwards experience. One thing about dance that I’m proud of is the fact that you have to show up in a place and create an instant community for an event that occurs onstage which, depending on the skill of the creators, has great resonance with that community of

stein kept saying that they couldn’t find black professors who wanted to teach there, which was nonsense. Secondly, it’s nice to see how much Mr. Botstein has grown since then. An example of his progress is reflected in how many times Mr. Jones’ dance troupe has graced the stage at Bard. It’s clear that Botstein now respects Mr. Jones as an artist with much to teach about dance. Third, let him know that I admire his warrior spirit teaching the world about AIDS. Fourth, let Mr. Jones know that the mother’s words of wisdom his mother gave him after he lost his partner really spoke to me. Finally, let him know that he is one of my heroes and that this sister is major proud of his gift and grace and of how he conducts his business of dance.

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people. And this may sound suspiciously Christian, but you also all share a communion. Do we have the same experience with electronics? I think watching live performers onstage is different from standing around the water cooler discussing last night’s episode of Breaking Bad. I notice that there is now this feeling among many young people that the most important things are those that are validated by media. Do they go out of their way to attend an event with a smaller group of people who share a specialized interest? I tend to doubt it. And I suspect that might be a consequence of the rise of electronic media.

KW: Do you think electronic media should somehow be restricted or perhaps even eliminated?

BTJ: No, I’m not a reactionary in that regard. I believe that human life is a spiritual activity, and that anything that human beings give themselves to with great enthusiasm can rise to the level of being transcendent. I’m on the side of humanity and its penchant for finding innovative ways to express our dilemma through whatever medium we’re faced with.

KW: Marcia Evans says: First, let Bill T. Jones know that ironically while on Bard College Alumni site I discovered that he received an honorary degree. Let him know as a past Bard student it made me proud to see him at that podium. It brought back my fond memories and my disappointing ones regarding lack of professors of color teaching at that esteemed college. The years I attended in the early 1980 black professors were not teaching at Bard at that time. This was before Toni Morrison who was the first professor of color to teach there. Leon Bot-

BTJ: Well, Marcia, I am overwhelmed by your response, because I am very much African-American, even though I’m not a Christian like my mother was. Still, I appreciate the African tradition in the Black Church where you stand up and speak out to the community and the community answers back, effectively saying, “I hear you!” And this is what this communication with you has just done for me, Marcia. One of the struggles of a contemporary modern artist is to bridge this question: Is my work coming from a continent of one, an inner voice, a unique personal experience? Or is it that you have the privilege of standing on the shoulders of a community of people who have afforded you that platform, and that your work is always going to be negotiating that inner personal location and the ongoing discussion that your people are happy? I am really proud when I receive national honors, but I’m equally pleased when I hear a sister, a black woman, actually embrace me like a brother. I no longer feel alienated at this moment.

KW: Was writing this book a cathartic experience for you?

BTJ: On one level it was. The book initially was three lectures in which I attempted to work out some ideas in public. Since I’m a performer, that’s how I’m most comfortable. But, it’s a whole other thing when you’re confronted with just your words on the page unaccompanied by your personality. So, yes, it was cathartic, but it was also nerve-racking because I’m a professional performer, not a professional writer.

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