

The New York Times

Arts & Leisure

Sunday, January 27, 2002

DANCE

Bill T. Jones Searches for Beauty, and a New Home

By WENDY PERRON

DURING an open rehearsal at Aaron Davis Hall in Harlem last month, Bill T. Jones spoke glowingly of the Beethoven quartet he had chosen to accompany a new work — its range, its expansiveness, its spiritual transcendence. But, after the run-through, while answering a question from the audience, he swiveled his pelvis (subtly) and said, "There are things this body knows from dancing in front of the juke box."

Mr. Jones relishes rubbing the loftiest of ideals against the down and dirty. He is devoted to both religious and physical ecstasy and can juxtapose them, or equate them, in his performances. He has been known for the beguiling physicality of his solos, the complexity of his group works and his confrontational gestures and words. The Muhammad Ali of the dance world, he possesses an audacity, eloquence and insolence that have elicited both awe and irritation.

He might, in an improvised monologue, say something startling about a critic in the audience. Or he might, as he did in the summer of 2000, refuse to perform at the Spoleto Festival because South Carolina flew the Confederate flag over its statehouse.

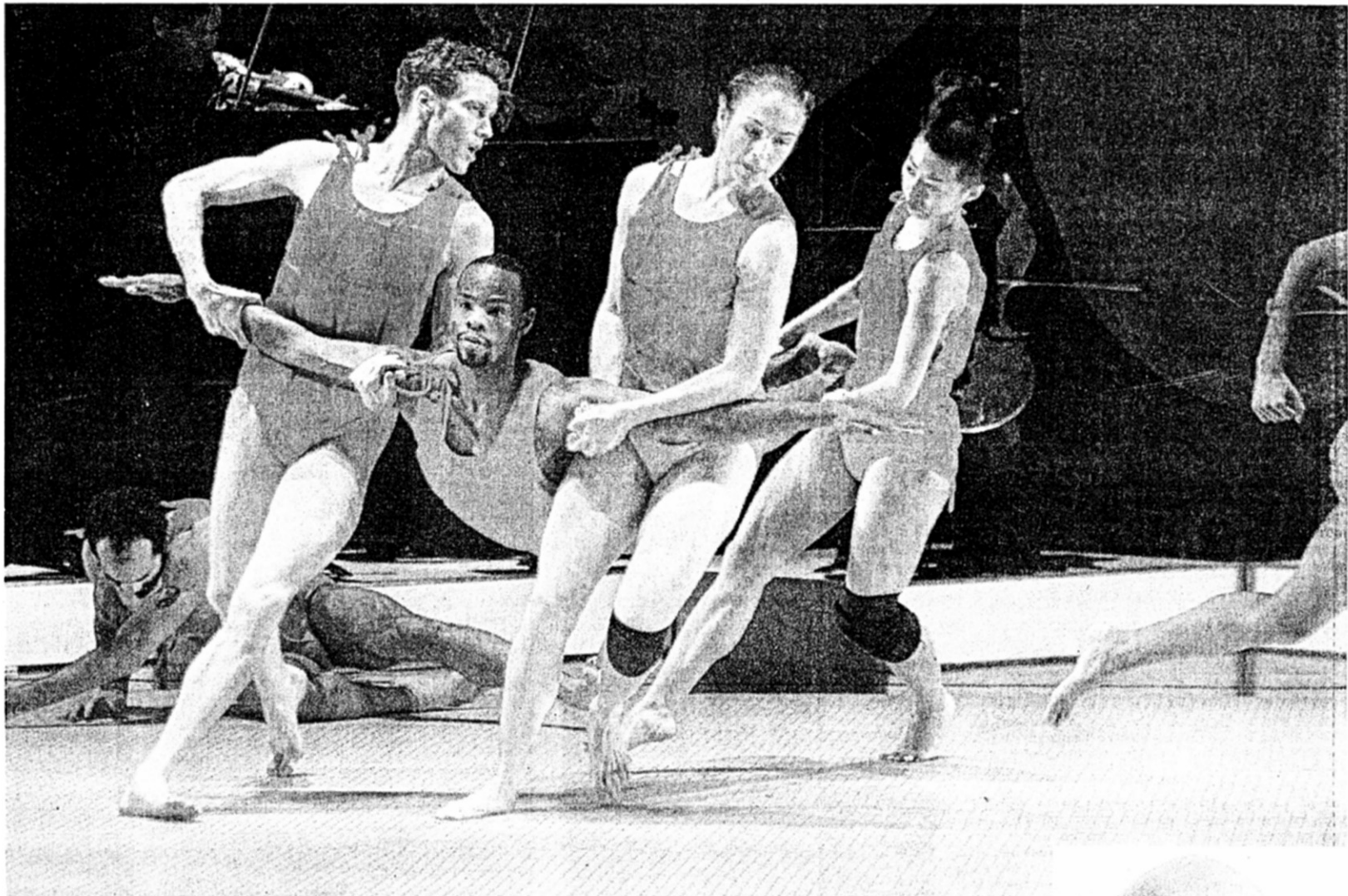
Now, as he nears 50, Mr. Jones has shed a degree of his political vehemence and is searching, quite simply, for beauty — and for a new home for the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company. The quest for beauty has produced three new works in collaboration with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center to be performed at Alice Tully Hall beginning on Thursday and running through next Sunday.

The first, "Worldwithout In," to music by the contemporary Hungarian composer György Kurtág, creates a fantasy land with animal masks, long blue veils and fake money. The second, "Verbum," set to Beethoven's String Quartet in F (Op. 135), has a range of movement from delicate to forceful, with dancers passing through large metal structures that look like wiggly frames or portals. The third, "Black Suzanne," features daredevil tumbling and an ominous Japanese-inspired stage set in red and black and is performed to the accompaniment of Shostakovich's Octet (Op. 11).

While the pitch of experimentation remains high ("How crazy can the picture be and still be legible?" he asks), Mr. Jones takes care to incorporate the visual element, designed by his partner, Bjorn Amelan, into the choreography from the outset to form a fully integrated whole. A recent example of this kind of artistic endeavor is "The Table Project," which was performed last year at Aaron Davis Hall. For this work, originally commissioned by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Mr. Amelan built a huge table topped with hurdles. The performers — six middle-aged men and then six young girls, all nondancers from Harlem — clambered over it, under it and around it to the strains of Schubert's Notturmo Trio for Piano in E flat. The effect was charming, breathtaking in its simplicity and deeply moving.

The Chamber Music Society will serve as host for the current season of Mr. Jones's company. David Shifrin, the society's artistic director, became intrigued with Mr. Jones three years ago at a benefit at which Mr. Jones danced while the Orion String Quartet, the society's quartet in residence, played. "He got the musicians to think about how they exist on the stage," Mr. Shifrin recalled. "They were so inspired that they were eager to do more."

Mr. Shifrin is impressed with the range of textures and moods in the music selected by Mr. Jones. "When you're talking about music with him, you feel like you're talking to a musician because he listens to so much



Photographs by Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

Eric Bradley, Daniel Russell Kubert, Catherine Cabeen and Toshiko Oiwa of Bill T. Jones's dance troupe, above, performing "Black Suzanne." It is one of three works Mr. Jones, right, produced in collaboration with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center.

A confrontational choreographer begins new quests: to know what is beautiful, and to find a base in Harlem.

music and understands the historical perspective and style," Mr. Shifrin said.

Mr. Jones's career as a searcher started early on. His first experience of being moved by beauty was seeing his mother in church, tears streaming down her face: "My mother said, 'Child, you've got to get out of self to know the Lord!' She was talking about ecstasy. Then I went in search of it. The 60's was when I was coming to consciousness, so I had to find social rebellion. Drugs could help me have an ecstatic feeling. Sex could. Then there was this thing called art that could."

His path took him from being a track star at the State University of New York at Binghamton to discovering the literary and film avant-garde and then to dance. Through contact improvisation, a technique based on leaning and falling with a partner, taught by Lois Welk, and African dance lessons with Percival Borde, he entered an arena where he — along with his former partner, Arnie Zane — could experiment freely. Their early work, with an electric energy and fearlessness, blended physical and intellectual exhilaration. (Zane died of complications of AIDS in 1988.)

When they started performing as an interracial couple in the 1970's, they were immediately embraced by the predominantly white downtown scene. "We didn't want to be in any ghetto — gay ghetto, art ghetto, and definitely not a racial ghetto," Mr. Jones said. He considered himself to be "a world artist, an artist before I was a black person."

Being influenced by white postmodern choreographers like Trisha Brown and David Gordon, Mr. Jones had an ambivalent relationship to the black dance community. "I was saying to black folks: 'Don't make assumptions about who I am, but love me,'"

he said. "My performances were like being in the black church: I was calling out and expecting to hear the response back, 'Amen.' But it was the wrong audience. I wanted that audience, but I didn't know if the audience wanted me, and I didn't know how to be generous enough to go in search of it."

Since that period, he has choreographed "Fever Swamp" for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and recently completed a four-year residency at Aaron Davis Hall on the campus of City College. In fact, he has begun a capital campaign to find a new home for his company in Harlem. For Mr. Jones, Harlem is "a place where I can find a spiritual platform."

"Being in that community reminds me of what it means to be an American, and how complicated that's been in my life," he said. "Harlem is an environment which is asking deep questions about what color it is, what class it is. It's one of the most promising areas of the city, and I want to be part of it."

Mr. Jones's current group of 10 dancers forms a picture of diversity. One dancer is austere while another is playful; one may be versed in the technique of Merce Cunningham while another has classical Russian training. But they all have bounding energy and versatility.

"Bill's style ranges from release to athleticism to contact improvisation to formal classical lines to the street dance he knew as a kid to African movement," said Janet Wong, the company's rehearsal director. "He goes from wiggling on the floor to a suspended attitude turn. He switches all the time, and he'll sometimes break into song to illustrate."

In creating movement sequences, Mr. Jones uses mathematical concepts. He may borrow Trisha Brown's "accumulation structure" (adding movements one at a time while also returning to the beginning after each addition) or he may say to his dancers, "Make a phrase in which you move for five counts and hold still for three." The miracle of his work is that, despite the cool postmodern approach, an emotional heat emanates from the dancing. The new works are so rich, so interactive and so playful in their relation to the music that one does not miss the charismatic Bill T. Jones presence.

Mr. Jones's role as a lightning rod in the culture wars of the 1990's is well known. In 1994 the critic Arlene Croce attacked him in The New Yorker for producing dance outside the borders of fine art. Without attending a performance of his work "Still/Here," she called it "victim art" because of its inclusion of video footage of participants in his "survival workshops." At that time Mr. Jones, who had been HIV positive since 1985, was leading workshops for people with terminal diseases to fulfill his own psychological and artistic needs. The article prompted a debate within critical circles. Ultimately, it clarified a question about the nature of art: Is art a haven, an escape from everyday life, or is it part of the messy social reality we live in?

When asked about the controversy during a recent interview, Mr. Jones bristled, saying, "The perpetrators of that attack owe me an apology, and I will go to my grave feeling that way." After a moment, he added, "I don't want to put more gasoline on that fire anyway. But that fire never went out. I just put it in an asbestos-lined room."

Two weeks short of turning 50, Mr. Jones says he did not think he would live this long. "The unprotected have to die young," he wrote in his 1995 memoir, "Last Night on Earth" (Pantheon Books). But he said recently, "I'm in pretty fantastic shape." Aside from lower back problems and a bruised toe, he has never been hospitalized or had a serious injury, an amazing record for a dancer of his age.

Today, he says, he feels a greater sense of responsibility, largely out of respect for his dancers. "I have more at stake now," he said. "I have this company, this possibility for a home in Harlem."

"What does it mean to institutionalize?" he asked and then went on to answer his own question. "The dancers look to me for their paycheck; they look to me to know what we're dancing to next. It's my job to make my vision clear."

His search is for more than a new building; it is to ensure the future of his choreography and his company. Last year, the dancers started receiving health and retirement benefits, a rarity for a small modern dance company.



Where has his former rebelliousness gone? Perhaps it has gone into his creative fervor. "As an irate person who is a descendant of slaves and who has marching freedom rhythms in his blood, I say: 'Make something beautiful, Bill, really beautiful. Make something that comes honestly from you. Dare to fail.'"

Mr. Jones's striving and determination have set a standard of postmodern edginess for younger artists. Sean Curran, one of the many alumni of the company who have gone on to choreograph, said that "Bill and Arnie were the best composition teachers you could have."

"Bill was never precious about anything," he added. "He made so much great material that he didn't care about letting go. He was really all about getting to the essence."

The essence that preoccupies Mr. Jones these days is beauty. "I want to know what is beauty that is not conditioned by one's perception of gender or race," he said. The search itself is part of his art. □