

# artshouston

## A Dance to be Witnessed

Bill T. Jones Brings His Chapel /Chapter to Houston

### Last Acts

HGO's World Premiere Stars Opera Legend Frederica von Stade

### Watercolor Arts Society

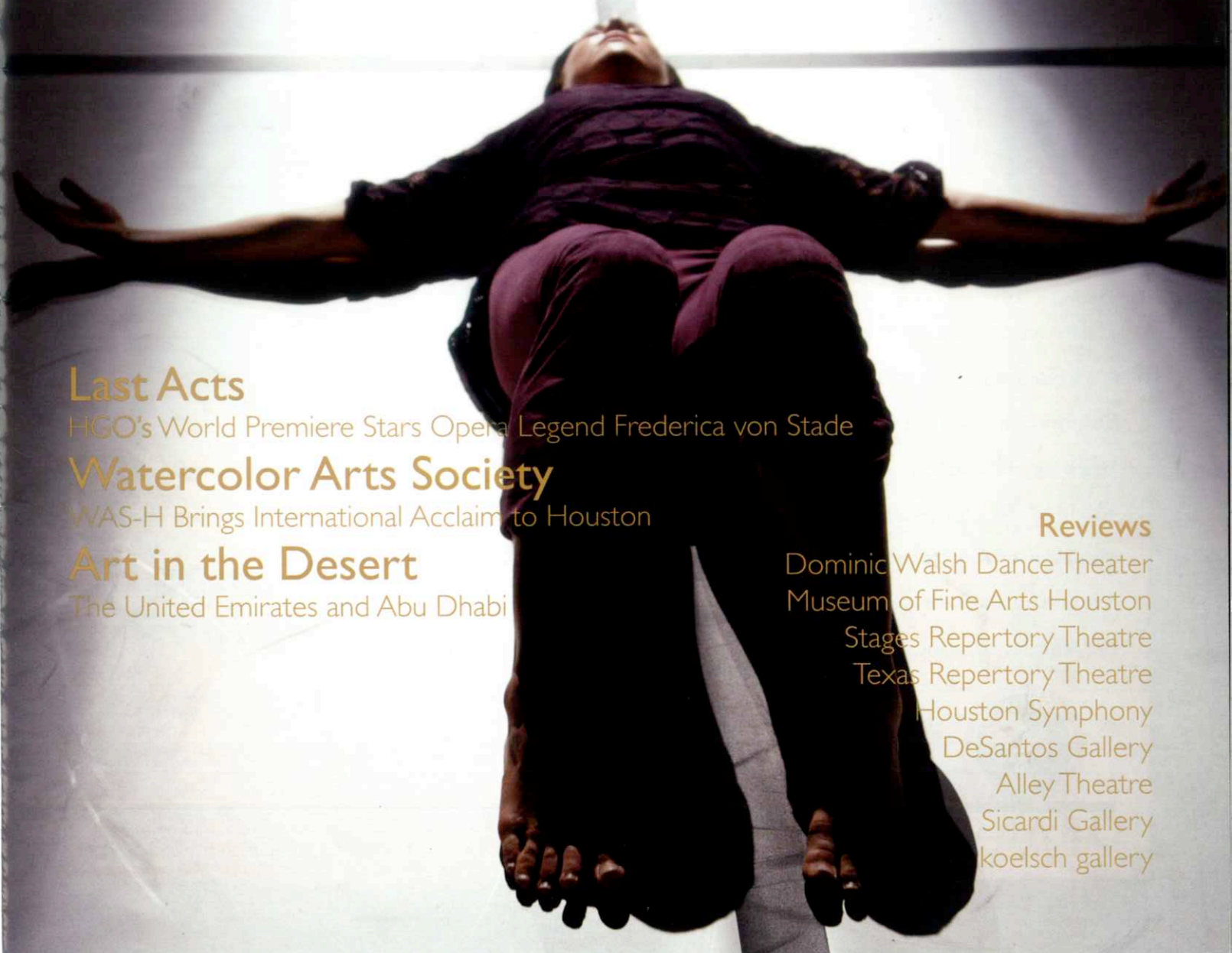
WAS-H Brings International Acclaim to Houston

### Art in the Desert

The United Emirates and Abu Dhabi

### Reviews

Dominic Walsh Dance Theater  
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“As citizens, we live in a world saturated with crime, violence, and human rights abuse. The media literally assault us on a daily basis with the cold hard facts of all that is wrong with the world. What’s the role of the private citizen here? Are we judges, witnesses, or simply passive observers?”

-Nancy Wozny

# march 2008

## Features

### 16 Watercolor Art Society

Nearly five hundred members strong and having moved to a spacious new studio and gallery space on West Alabama, the organization is the city’s only group fully dedicated to furthering the appreciation of watercolor art—and internationally speaking, is the only society who owns their own building to that end.

### 20 A Dance to be Witnessed: Bill T. Jones Brings His *Chapel/Chapter* to Houston

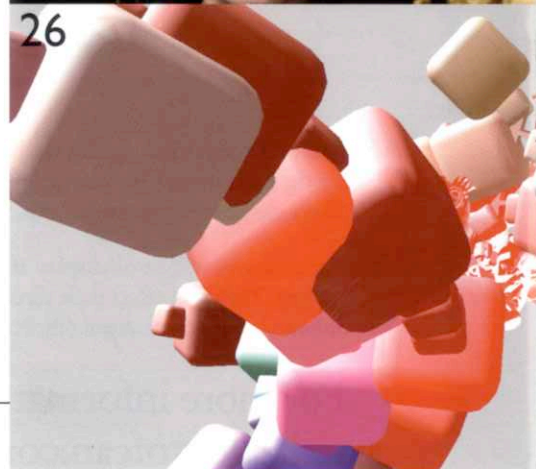
Houston, you have been summoned—to watch, listen, and witness choreographer Bill T. Jones’s masterwork, *Chapel/Chapter*, a work that straddles a sharp edge between art and spirituality.

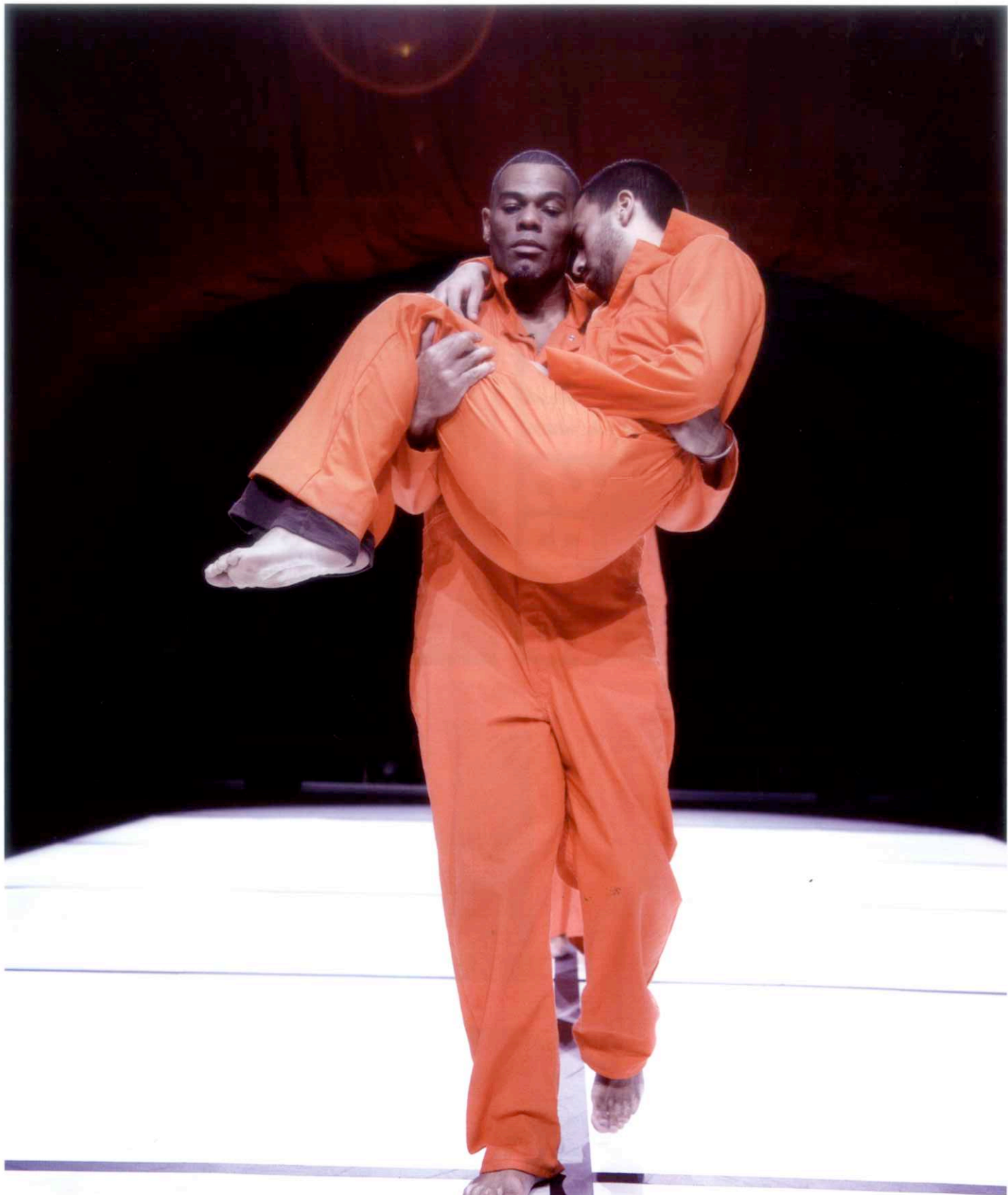
### 24 Last Acts: HGO’s World Premiere Stars Opera Legend

For his new work, Jake Heggie expands upon the briefest of plays by Terrence McNally, about three decades in the lives of a woman and her two children.

### 26 Art in the Desert: The United Emirates and Abu Dhabi

The United Arab Emirates consists of seven states including Sharjah, Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Is this Middle Eastern federation becoming a new world class destination for the arts?





A Dance to Be Witnessed  
Bill T. Jones Brings His *Chapel/Chapter* to Houston

by Nancy Wozny



Houston, you have been summoned—to watch, listen, and witness choreographer Bill T. Jones’s masterwork, *Chapel/Chapter*, a work that straddles a sharp edge between art and spirituality.

Bells toll at the start, galvanizing our attention and creating a mood that something significant is about to happen. Originally set up with the audience close in church pews, Jones meant for the piece to have a communal viewing element.

“I wanted people to be able to watch each other watching,” says Jones. “It’s an act of witnessing.”

Pushing the boundaries of what subjects are fit for post-modern dance has always been a high priority for Jones. He’s tackled subjects as difficult as death and dying in *Still/Here*, the resilience of the human spirit in the face of disaster in *Another Evening: I Bow Down*, sexual and intellectual coming-of-age in *Spring Awakening*, and now, in *Chapel/Chapter*, the personal experience of living in a violent world.

Jones skyrocketed to prominence during the 1980s when post-modernism emerged as the next big shift in modern dance. Since then, his steady presence on the dance field has continued to defy easy categorization. Along the way he has amassed a multitude of impressive honors, including a 2007 Tony Award for *Spring Awakening*, the 2005 Wexner Prize, the 2005 Samuel H. Scripps American Dance Festival Award for Lifetime Achievement, a 2005 Harlem Renaissance Award, the 2003 Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize, MacArthur “Genius” Artists Public Service Award in Choreography, and several Choreographic Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Jones prefers the hard problems when it comes to dance-making. He refers to *Chapel/Chapter* as an ongoing investigation.

“What are the limits of modern dance for

me?” asks Jones. “How do you as a private citizen come to grips with what is done in your name. That’s the spiritual aspect.” These questions drive *Chapel/Chapter*, a work that is considered Jones’s most provocative piece thus far.

Two true-life crimes and one long-forgotten memory are re-enacted during the course of the dance. The brutal murder of the Soto family, a father’s fatal beating of his “troublesome” daughter, and a tale of two young boys watching someone drown make up the chapters. Some of the text comes directly from court transcripts of the criminals’ confessions, and is relayed in the most matter-of-fact manner.

In the re-enactment of the Soto family killings, the family dog emerges as a potent symbol. The dog was put outside so as not to get in the way. “What about the lowliness among us, and those that are left behind,” says Jones. “In a way, we are like that helpless dog.” The character of the dog comes and goes throughout the piece, continuing the act of summoning. Childhood games such as hopscotch and hand chants appear and disappear, making room for the lost innocence of the murdered daughter.

In the last story, company member Charles Scott shares a memory of two 11-year-old boys who sneak out of camp one morning to watch the sun rise. They see a man drowning in a waterfall and decide not to do anything about the man’s impending death. Movement and narration merge to reveal a long-held secret as the theme of confession is re-enforced.

Like any dance by Jones, the actual movement vocabulary plays a vital role in the telling. Athletic and powerful dancing propels the narra-

Opposite: Andrea Smith and Erick Montes; Above: (l-r) Leah Cox, Donald Shorter, Jr., Asli Bulbul, Charles Scott and Erick Montes; photos by Paul B. Goode

Below: Andrea  
Smith (seated)  
and Maija Garcia;  
photo by Paul B.  
Goode

tive along. Using a formal post-modern strategy, the dancers imagined their movements on an invisible keyboard that allowed them to spell out familiar sayings as “the road to hell is paved with good intentions,” and other variations on that theme. It’s some of his most raw and physical movement.

*Chapel/Chapter* premiered in December, 2006 at New York’s Stone Gatehouse, which dates from the 1890s. It’s the locale where water from the Croton Aqueduct made its way to the city. The rectangular space brought audience members close up and in full view of one another. Scenic Designer Bjorn Amelan draped the space in red cloth, reminiscent of liturgical dressing or choir robes. Much thought has gone into adapting the piece to Jones Hall to re-create the sense of sacred space and intimacy. Some audience members will be seated on stage across from one another as in the original performance set-up. Red cloth will still frame the space in an attempt to maintain the character of the original location. “Each space will be different,” says Jones, “but the essence of the piece will remain the same.”

As usual, Jones has gathered a highly capable team of collaborators. The musical score was composed by Daniel Bernard Roumain (DBR),

who has worked on several of Jones’s pieces. Alicia Hall Moran, Christopher Lancaster, and Lipbone Redding also contributed to the sonic landscape. Janet Wong’s video sends butterflies scampering through the airspace in the piece’s most delicate moments. Robert Wierzel’s lighting isolates the action into grid-like sections. Costumes by Liz Prince consist of vibrant orange prison jumpsuits, and pedestrian clothing.

Towards the end of the piece, the bells toll again, the dog howls, and our summoning comes to a close. Prepare to leave the fragile boundary between the sacred and the secular, be it chapel or courtroom, with a set of deep and profound questions.

Society for the Performing Arts presents The Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company in *Chapel/Chapter* on Friday, March 28th at 8 pm in Jones Hall. Call 713-227-4SPA or visit [spahouston.org](http://spahouston.org)

Bill T. Jones will moderate a panel of representatives from Houston’s religious, arts, political and journalistic communities on March 27th at 8pm at The Menil Collection. Topics to be explored include the relationship between spiritual and public places and our own communal experience of the tragedies that we witness every day.

