Bill T. Jones On Top

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“You know, there must be so many people in the dance world who are HIV positive, yet so few of them have come forward and talked about it publicly, openly. Why? Why is my story so special?”

Bill T. Jones isn’t scared to say what he feels or believes.

"I’m trying not to use the word angry, but I really don’t want to be made into some charismatic decoy so that people can sit back and use my struggle as a way of not having to ’own’ their own issues. Oftentimes I am uncomfortable being so alone. It gives me a strange, isolated feeling that I don’t embrace.

“I think maybe people feel they don’t have to go through the pain of disclosure if someone is doing it for them. But I feel encumbered by always being labeled as a person who is HIV positive. It bothers me to be called, as I sometimes have been, a person with AIDS when I don’t have AIDS.”

He stops and thinks for a moment. “I don’t know why I have that bias. Maybe, because like everyone else, I don’t want to be different really. I don’t want to be a sick person.”

Looking at this gifted and unique dancer/choreographer, with his large, thoughtful, fiery eyes, you watch a dazzling smile form on his face and ponder his description of himself. Decoy? Maybe. Charismatic? Definitely. This man is one of Mother Nature’s more astonishing creations.

Tall, lithe, agile and sexy, with the classically proportioned body of a dancer/athlete, Jones’ physical gifts are as shocking as his talents are undeniable. *Dance Magazine*, in bestowing its coveted annual award on him, describes Jones as the innovator of a new form of highly theatrical, intensely personal, issue-oriented dance. For more than a decade, he’s been one of the postmodern dance world’s brightest stars, an authentic artist who, according to *The New York Times*’ Anna Kisselgoff, “is anything but your conventional social protest choreographer, and a hot ticket on the international dance scene.”

There’s more to the Jones mystique than modern dance, however. Since the death from AIDS in 1988 of Arnie Zane, Jones’ longtime lover and colleague with whom he formed the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, and because of a vocal commitment to political issues, Jones has emerged over the last decade as a powerfully symbolic figure who embodies the struggles and aspirations of the various embattled minorities to which he belongs. There’s an image of him today in the minds of many people as a five-headed culture hero -- black, gay, militant, HIV positive,

artist -- and this public persona, Bill as Icon, often weighs him down. It's a lot of baggage to lug around.

"Hey, it's right there in the first paragraph of the *Times'* story," he says, referring to a recent *New York Times Magazine* article on him. "'Black. Gay. Son of migrant workers. HIV positive.'" He punctuates the air with an upraised thumb after each word. "You don't even have to get past the first paragraph." Yet if he's less than happy about it, who can he blame but himself? The frankly autobiographical elements he folds into his ballets and his absolute fearlessness about confronting his private pain onstage, make him someone people talk about. From the start, he and Zane were open and honest about their sexual orientation, honest about their passion and lust for one another. When they partnered each other, slamming body against body, flipping each other around in their dances, you could almost imagine you were getting a glimpse of what they did in bed and many in the audience wouldn't have minded -- let's be frank here -- would have loved to have joined in.

Audiences always feel the force of Jones' personality. In various ballets, he harangues them from the stage with questions calculated to make them squirm, and going home from a Jones/Zane Company performance you can feel more like you're coming from an encounter session than a dance recital. Speaking out, asking questions is a tactic he still uses. People expect it; invariably it's the confrontational side of Bill that makes news the most.

For example, tales about how he allegedly strong-armed some of his company members and local performers, recruited for the occasion, to strip naked onstage for the finale of his ballet/theater piece *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land* made national news a few years ago. That he lowered his pants on stage and showed his penis in front of some kids at an East Hampton fund-raiser last summer also made steamy headlines. Less shocking but just as titillating was another incident at the same bash. There, he approached a straight white couple, first French kissed the wife and then planted his lips on the mouth of a hunky young man sitting next to the woman's husband.

So it's not that unusual that Jones is widely regarded as an artist/provocateur who's not afraid to talk about anything.

"But, you know, I sometimes feel I should put the brakes on this HIV thing," he says. "Not long ago, the photographer Annie Leibovitz came to me and said she heard on the grapevine that I was HIV positive. Heard through the grapevine, I thought? *Mmmm*. It's been known for six years at least, since Arnie died.

"'Is it true?' she wanted to know, and I told her, 'Yes.' She was asking, she said, because she was going to do a photo spread for *Vanity Fair* of 10 people living with AIDS and wanted me to be a part of it.

"I said, 'Well, I have a dance company, a pretty notable one, and I think that *Vanity Fair*, which has never done *one* thing on my dance company, should do more than just talk about me as a person

with AIDS. They should talk about me as a choreographer.'

"'Yeah well, if you did do this, you'd be so brave,' she said. I told her, 'I have been brave.'

"It was all a little insulting," he now says, "but, you know, when Arnie died I made a commitment to our company. It was the child he and I had. I could have given it up, cut back, worked as an independent choreographer. But no, I wanted the responsibility of maintaining it, and that demands constant fund-raising, constant vigilance, an orientation to the future. You just can't have an organization like a dance company and not be planning for, not be investing in the future. And so, because I need the media to promote the company, I didn't say no to Annie Liebovits right away. But, finally, I decided not to do it.

"So when *POZ* asked if they could do this article, a new magazine devoted floor to ceiling to the HIV issue, I said to myself, Bill, you're never going to be free of this issue, and I was wary. But then I thought, what makes you think you are *ever gonna* be free of it? Maybe if the world changed you'd feel differently. But the world is not changing. You will always be this isolated person. And you need the HIV community. You need to look at the other people who are like yourself, and they need to look at you."

Of course, he's stating the truth. Like it or not, Jones' HIV status is an overriding factor for him; in all probability, it'll always be as much a part of who he is as his art and his epic affair with Arnie Zane.

"You know, I always assumed when we found out Arnie was HIV positive that I was too. By 1982, Arnie was already panicking. At that time there was no test, but he was worried about night sweats, and in '85 when the test came out we both took it. It was clear that Arnie was in what they called the ARC stage then and that I had he antibodies for the virus. The doctors were very hush-hush about it, the "Protecting Bill Club" sort of thing. But I didn't even know what being positive meant. I also didn't know what T-cells were.

"Eventually I found out mine were OK. Today, they're still OK and I don't take any drug or treatment at all. I see my doctor three or four times a year, the same woman who treated Arnie, and I have a good relationship with her. Of course I've been through every possible psychological frame of mind about it, and when Arnie died, ny T-cells dropped about 150 points. But as Arnie's acupuncturist used to say, 'Don't play the T-cells numbers game. I know people with great T-cell counts who are dead and some with no T-cells at all who are doing great.' So medically I can't say I'm in denial because I have nothing to deny. I've never had an opportunistic infection."

Yet even if he had been in denial it would have been understandable. For the longest time, because of Arnie's deteriorating state, Jones' condition was on the back burner.

"You know when Arnie was dying in the hospital, we had a really active sex life. We fought, but we had a real affinity for each other sexually. It's no accident we were together 17 years. The last time I had sex with him was six weeks before he died. We're talking real sex. And then about two

weeks before it was all over, he was so weak, and I was so in need, worn out and tired, I just took his hand and put it to my face and held it there, and I remember feeling real satisfaction. It was sexy, it was there for him, and it was there for me. It was very complete."

Now he stops for breath. "So I say to people if you feel you can't have human contact, pleasure, because of this thing, you're doing it to yourself. Don't blame it on AIDS. There are areas of subtlety to be explored that are rich. Any barrier you feel, be aware. You are doing it. Nobody else is doing it. Take responsibility for your mental and physical health. Don't blame it on HIV. Don't blame it on the government. I say, have sex. Sex is a healthy human expression, and if HIV wins over that, that's bad.

"Sex is not on trial in the struggle against AIDS," Jones emphasizes. "You know the attitude: Woe is me, did we do something wrong? I say to all my friends, I don't regret the baths. Gay men in the 70s and 80s had more freedom than ever before in the world. It was a brave time, and it's probably still going on today. If it is, I hope it's a wiser one, an extension of the experiment that mankind has been conducting since Day One about the sexual frontier. What is allowed? Hey, what was wrong with it? What was wrong with having casual sex? What's wrong with having sex with someone and asking his name afterwards?"

If Jones' sex life today is not what it was in the heady days he describes, he's not sure it has anything to do with HIV.

"Part of it is aging," he smiles. "I'm 42, and I'm discovering for the first time what it's really like to be taken. Like most men, I've spent most of my life struggling with my sexual role. I've got a big sensuous body, it's strong, sure, but it's got sexual fears, and now I understand that it's OK for someone to pleasure me. Now, has that come with HIV? I don't know. It comes from being able to realize that you are beautiful, that he or she is with you because they like you. And that you're all right if you don't get an erection.

"And you're OK when the sex is over; you're a person. For a long time I thought there was only going to be one significant man in my life. Sure, I had lots of affairs, but there was no other place at the end of the day that I wanted to be than with Arnie. Later, when he was gone, I would travel halfway around the world to be able to lie down with Arthur, Arthur Aviles, a dancer in my company who was my lover for five years.

"The man I'm with now, Bjorn Amelan, a Jewish Frenchman, is very smart, highly principled, brave and gentle. This is a person you can have a conversation with, a person you can build with. So I've calmed down. I'm in a good place sexually. I no longer feel I have to bargain for affection with my attractiveness. I've learned some good things about sex, love, the orgasm, the joy of being with one person and levels of pleasure I never knew before.

"I have a pornographic imagination. Wild imagination about sex and outrageous situations. If I like somebody, I make eye contact and have intercourse with them on the most subtle level. But when my boyfriend's in town, there's a peacefulness and happiness. Sometimes with gay men,

dominance and ugliness has to come out for people to get off. I'm beyond that now. I can laugh when I have sex now. I'm not a victim of it anymore."

"This is the gay part," Jones says, "but they don't get it." We're in France sitting in the Lyons Opera Ballet rehearsal studio looking at a group of company dancers go through one of Jones' ballets, *Love, Defined*, which he created for the troupe two years before in 1992. Jones is watching carefully, taking notes and in one section in which a group of boys begin rough-housing, pushing each other around in gestures that are both aggressive and erotic, he feels the dancing is smoothing out the edges of choreography.

"They make it more innocent, like boys in a playground," he says.

The rehearsal studio, all mirrors and windows, is spacious and airy and sits 12 stories high atop the Lyons Opera House, commanding a breathtaking view of the city spread out beyond it on a hill. Outside, the sky is leaden, but daylight plays off the terracotta-colored tiled rooftops of the buildings of Lyons and creates a glow. A Tricolor, visible out the window flapping in the breeze on the roof of the Hotel de Ville, City Hall, adds another bright touch.

Inside the studio there's a glow, a warmth that's a blend of dancers pushing hard and sweating and the atmosphere Jones creates when he works. Here he's the kinder, gentler Bill immersed in his art, unconcerned with his rap about sex, power and HIV. That he loves being in this place is clear from the way he sits, like a benign Buddha in a hard-back chair, eyes taking in everything from the configuration of the 20 or so people spread out before him on the studio floor to the tilt and curve of one dancer's middle finger, a crucial detail that must be right.

Jones has just been named resident company choreographer here, but of course his own troupe, the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company, takes up most of his time. Yet it's the Lyons Opera Ballet that has premiered his latest work, *I Want To Cross Over*, danced to gospel songs sung live by Liz McComb and based on movements Jones has developed in Survival Workshops.

Survival Workshops are his latest innovation. He's been conducting them all over the States with cancer patients, PWAs, women suffering from multiple sclerosis and persons afflicted with other life-threatening diseases. The material that comes ouf of them he's used, not only in *I Want To Cross Over*, but as part of a large-scale ambitious new ballet called *Still/Here*, which he has been working on for several years. His company will open it in Lyons in September, then dance it in Iowa City, Milwaukee and Washington, D.C., before bringing it to the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) in Brooklyn, New York in December.

Love, Defined, however, is the ballet Jones is rehearsing now in Lyons, trying to make sure the cast is adept at the style and comfortable with the tempo. As he works, he gives each dancer individual attention, but there's one, a sandy-haired boy who's dancing with his shirt off, he finds particularly attractive.

"It's good, David," he tells him, "but it's got to be more precise. I'm looking for quality of

movement.” When David tries the steps again, you can see a difference. He’s pleased -- and so is Jones.

“These dancers aren’t used to having a feeling initiate movement,” he says. “They’re used to doing steps and movements correctly, hitting positions as in classical ballet.”

Love, Defined is choreographed to a set of mysterious folk-rock songs by Daniel Johnson, a Texas-based composer, who created his music for toy instruments. For the section called King Kong, Johnson sings in a haunted, whiny, spaced-out voice the plot of the movie King Kong, and the dancers have pretty much mastered the choreography for it.

But the other part of the ballet where the boys push each other around presents a slight problem. The dance ends in a freeze-frame pose, two boys in a rough embrace, the lips of one crushed up against the cheek of the other, and it isn’t right yet.

“It’s supposed to be a kiss on the mouth,” Jones says. “But, you know, not one of the boys in this company is gay.” He smiles, getting off on the fact that one of the straight world’s dearest-held stereotypes about gay men, the one that says most male dancers are queer, is being set on its ear. So even if they don’t have the movement exactly right, it doesn’t really trouble him.

“They don’t know about the ambiguity of touch,” he says, and you feel he means they won’t any time soon. Then he sighs, “I haven’t exactly decided how to tell them how I want the kiss yet.”

There’s something about the Gallic point of view that comforts Jones. He was “discovered,” as it were, by the French for the first time in 1990 and is now wildly popular, but he’s wary. The public can be fickle. He doesn’t want to be undiscovered. But he feels at home in France, and having a French lover is part of it.

Acquaintances for 18 months and lovers for nearly a year now, Bjorn Amelan calls himself Jones’ helpmate. In fact, they’ve mastered a partnership. The lover for seven years of Patrick Kelly (the black American fashion designer who made a name in France and died of AIDS), Amelan -- articulate, intelligent, cosmopolitan -- helps organize Jones’ schedule and activities while keeping up on his own, which include a book about his dead lover.

"I don’t want people to have the feeling that *Still/Here* is just another piece about AIDS,“ Bill says, settling in to talk about it. ”Well, yes, it is informed by the simple fact of AIDS in my life, but it’s also about another very big human issue. It’s about *living*, and in fact, in the last five Survival Worshops most of the people were HIV positive heterosexuals."

"The mthods I use derive in a way from a recent solo I did called *Last Night on Earth*. In that piece I ask the audience questions like What tiem is it? Can you at this moment look into the mirror and be all right with it? Who are you sleeping with? Are you happy? The job? Are you happy with that? Are you doing what you want to do *right*? Have you located your passion as if this was your last night on earth?"

As he recites the questions, Jones' manner becomes truly powerful, downright dangerous. It's as if he's actually giving a performance. But suddenly he snaps out of it, as if the force of his persona alarms him slightly too.

"It's a big checklist, I know. Believe me, I can't answer it every day," he says. "And some people can't stand it, but for some people, it goes right to the heart of their soul sickness, opens them up. In the workshop, I've recruited people who know agony, and they respond. They know what it means to get up everyday, face the abyss and then have a go at it. They have not slit their wrists. They have not jumped off a bridge. Why? These people, when you look at them in the face, there's a determination. When I start asking questions. Are you a member of an elite? Do you know something most people don't?, most say yes. One woman said, 'I only wish people don't have to go through this to know what I know.' So, these people understand struggle. I describe *Still/Here* as being concerned with the subtle hum and concern around mortality. And the HIV community has become a symbol of that. We have been touched by the bony finger. But what the hell; the fact is, nobody gets out of here alive."

If *Still/Here* is about living, just how does Bill T. (the T is for Tass) Jones survive coping with HIV?

"I do spend a lot of time preparing for the shock of something to happen, and I use the terminology of the black church to describe it. Getting ready, it's called. I want to be ready. It's something my mother used to sing about. What they mean of course is that on that fateful day when you got to lay down all of your worries and concerns and let go of everybody, are you going to be ready to make the journey to wherever you have to make it to? I promise myself now that I will be ready, and that's what my work is about, holding my head up, loving the man I love, facing the things that scare me, acknowledging my fears of being unappreciated or penniless and not being crippled by them, operating as a 42-year-old creative person at the peak of my powers absolutely unsure if tomorrow I'll still be able to do it."

Appropriating the language and signs of the black church is natural for Jones because he says, "My survival instinct and my racial history are inseparable. I inherited from my people a sense of the world being a place of adversity, a valley of sorrow, but that redemption is possible. My mother's still at it. She's still trying to finish a basic education. She's still trying to learn long division. I point to that with pride."

Of course, there are aspects of the black community that fill Jones with deep distress, the issue of homophobia, for example.

"The black community is the most virulently homophobic, and it bothers me deeply," he says. "I want to be loved by my folks, but I've spent a good part of my adult life being disappointed. In the Faith section of *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin*, at every performance I engage in a dialogue with a man of faith and ask the question, 'Is AIDS a punishment from God?' The only one who answered 'Yes' was a young black minister. 'Homosexuality is against nature,' he said. 'AIDS is God's way of saying you stepped over something.'

"I appreciated his candor. He said it without malice. I don't know if he knew what he was saying. But let's face it, AIDS is something the black community is going to have to come to grips with. It's only a matter of time before they'll be forced to do so. Most black leaders are failing with their gay children.

"My friend Maya Angelou, talk about a down sister -- you can't be more down than Maya. She's a great healer. There's a rift between the individual and the world, and she helps heal that rift. She says we've all been paid for. Someone has paid for us. In America, that has a lot of resonance. So, I think, young black intellectuals are going to have to find a way to sit around those Sunday tables in those church groups and have the courage to say, 'You can't condone ignorance because it is killing us.' No one can do it but black people. The clergy must take a leadership role in doing this, or they will have sinned, and I'll go on record as saying that if they don't, then they'll have to atone. They will have to atone."

Does art heal?

"I'm not sure if art can feed anybody. Art is not going to find a cure for AIDS. I've seen works of art such as Guernica that have changed my notion of how the world can be seen. But Mother Teresa, Harvey Milk, Larry Kramer, the people who are up everyday dealing with city hall, the politicians, the educators, teachers, these people make a real difference.

"And black drag queens, drag queens in general, who insist on redefining who they are, there's something aesthetic about them I just dig; queens who got out of their sissy bag, locked the police in Stonewall and set fire to the place, I like what that says to me.

"I have to be very clear about what I do with the time I have left -- build my art," Jones says. "We're at a very important time in human history. Our attitudes about death and sex are being brought to a head right now, the area of human culpability around the issues of body, guilt. These things are being tested by AIDS right now. Artists are taking on things they were only talking about before and are trying to change the fabric. So I'd like to be recognized as being a major voice in the things Arnie and I stood for. The way we lived our lives as if it were natural. We were not waiting for the Ronald Reagans of the world to acknowledge that homosexuality was a possible, viable alternative.

"In 20 or 30 years, we'll be out from the Middle Ages, the Inquisition. This is a benign universe that exists on a level so far beyond the screams and cries of the Holocaust, my mother's tears, beyond lesions and sores and gasping for air in the last moments of life. I think that if we look back, it'll be understood that we know what it feels for me to right now be saying, I am HIV positive, and I am all right. I am a homosexual man, and I have been promiscuous, and that too is all right."

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