# Positive Rewards

Bill T. Jones and Jerry Herman Receive Kennedy Center Honors.

November 12, 2010 By Bob Ickes

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On December 28, CBS is scheduled to broadcast *The Kennedy Center Honors*, a program that "redefines America's perception of its artistic legacy" by "reinventing the way this nation rewards its artists."

This year's program will add five names to the historic roster of 166 big-deal dancers, singers, actors, composers, playwrights and TV celebs anointed inside the illustrious Washington, DC, structure. The telecast, always an Emmy darling, will be especially distinguished this year—and not just because it is one of the few remaining awards programs to escape the clutches of actor turned award-show host extraordinaire Neil Patrick Harris.

For the first time in the event's 33-year history, it will induct two artists openly living with HIV: choreographer Bill T. Jones and Broadway composer and lyricist Jerry Herman. Both men have appeared on *POZ* covers; Jones in July/August 1994 and Herman in February 1997.

The pair will sit beside President Barack Obama as a parade of colleagues pays tribute to their careers. (Other inductees this year include Merle Haggard, Paul McCartney and Oprah Winfrey.) The show's organizers would not reveal if the celebration will mention Jones's and Herman's triumphs in the face of HIV.

But this much we know: Too often, HIV has rewarded this nation's finest artists not with laurels but with death. Jones, 58, and Herman, 79, have both borne witness to AIDS devastating leagues of their colleagues, including choreographer Alvin Ailey (honored by the Kennedy Center in 1998).

AIDS has also touched Jones personally when, in 1988, he lost his longtime partner, Arnie Zane, to the disease. He and Zane had formed the genre-bending Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company. Jones then confronted not only grief, but also the phobias of America's most celebrated critics.

In 1994, *The New Yorker's* Arlene Croce wrote that she would not attend Jones's *Still/Here*, dismissing it as "victim art." The work is now considered monumental. Jones has been named a MacArthur Fellow, has won two Tonys (for *Spring Awakening* and *Fela!*) and crafted more than 100 dances.

Jerry Herman, meanwhile, has been nominated for five Tonys (he's won two) during his 50-year Broadway career. He wrote and composed *Mack and Mabel*, *La Cage Aux Folles*, *Mame* and *Hello, Dolly!* It is no accident that his works teem with never-say-die characters—from the life-loving Mame Dennis to the irrepressible Dolly Levi to the enduring drag contingent of *La Cage*.

As Jones and Herman shake the president's hand and join the Kennedy Center's legendary greats like Mikhail Baryshnikov, Andrew Lloyd Webber, Fred Astaire and Jerome Robbins, they show the world that far from being victim artists—they are still very much alive and kicking.

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