The Arts

An argument for AIDS in the arts

April 1, 1994 By Stephen Greco

A couple of seasons ago, during a performance of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, Jones mad a splash by carrying onstage a company member who was obviously too sick to dance. The piece was *D-Man in the Waters*, a new work that season, a richly imagined statement about swimming and sinking and being saved set to an ebullient score by Felix Mendelssohn. The dancer was Demian Acquavella. I remember being shocked by the entrance -- not because of the degree to which Acquavella had deteriorated since the last time I'd seen him (which was not very long ago), or because the sight of anyone onstage looking so out of it was totally unexpected, but because of the reaction of the friend whom I'd brought to the show. He was incensed. I may have mentioned to him before that *D-Man* had been choreographed by Jones in honor of friends who had struggled with AIDS and that the title incorporated the company nickname for Acquavella, who was the latest of Jones' intimates to be immersed in the waters of medical uncertainty. But my friend had not been expecting to look at the face of AIDS itself that evening. He said that he thought that by choosing to partner Acquavella this way, Jones had crossed over the line from art to something else -- "maybe a telethon," he suggested.

It was a wrenching sight: a dancer who can do nothing more than wave weakly and blow a kiss at the audience. But I didn't think it threw off our perception of the piece, as my friend argued. It was sort of what the piece was about. Actually I had always found the stage presence of Acquavella when he was healthy to be fairly distracting so nothing he did now could make me watch him more. I always got the pieces he danced in, for all his sizzle. In fact, being turned on by Acquavella was simply one valid way into them. I think that Jones and Acquavella jointly decided to use this appeal in a new way in *D-Man*. At the same time that my friend was getting all appalled by what he termed a "cheap bid for sympathy," I was being moved by Jones' heroism -- his confidence as a choreographer, first of all, that his work was resilient enough to accommodate such a large emotional perforation and his certainty as a performer that the gentleness and respect he showed for Acquavella could counteract any interpretation of exploitation. Acquavella, I learned later, though he'd already withdrawn from performing with the company, had asked to go onstage that night by any means possible. It was clear that it would be one of the last times he would get to do what he loved most in his life, and Jones agreed to help him do it.

Now there is AIDS in the world for a choreographer to consider, along with meter, geometry, long-necked waterfowl, colored light and everything else that has ever inspired a dance. I am

particularly grateful that we have people like Jones at work. In art, too, silence equals death. His talent aside, Bill T. Jones is brave enough to handle images of the disease, and he has enough faith in his audience to think we want to see them.

The friend I speak of would have hated Bernd's last work -- as he hated Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, Bill Sherwood's *Parting Glances*, Robert Ferro's *Second Son*, the last self-portraits of Robert Mapplethorpe, and almost everything David Wojnarowicz ever wrote, for reasons I feel are a little weak to me. But his view of art has not been unaffected by AIDS. The same season I saw *D-Man* with him, we went together to a performance of *La Traviata*, and I saw him weep in the last act as I had never seen him do before at the opera. It was the loss of so many of our friends, I assumed, that was suddenly permitting Violetta's death to resonate with such power in his heart. That's great, but Violetta's death was the result of consumption -- last century's horror, amply processed by decades of criticism, teachings and lore. What I want for my friend -- and for all of us, really -- is the strength to deal on his own with the reality of right now, to be available to works of art that are being made about our time by Jones, Kushner, Bernd, Mapplethorpe and Wojnarowicz. Even the least of these works constitutes a kind of fabulous gift -- in some cases a bequest. It would be a shame to ignore it until some critic in the 21st century finally puts AIDS "in perspective."

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