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### Dance

**By Bill T. Jones**  
**Hyperion Books, 1998**

*Dance is action and shape  
 designed in space and time  
 to express feelings and ideas.*

~ Bill T. Jones

You open *Dance*, by Bill T. Jones and Susan Kuklin. You watch Bill T. Jones stretching, warming up, feeling the tension and release of his muscles. He fine-tunes each section of his body--hands, feet, fingers, toes--as if they were highly sensitive instruments in a visceral orchestra.

The 46-year-old dancer has the sinewy musculature and confident air of the athlete he once was. His body is almost as smooth and hairless as his head. The masklike, terra cotta features of his face (nose flaring gently down to its pyramidal base, lips well-defined but not--he hastens to add--too "thick"), together with his striking poses, suggest his second-favorite art form: sculpture.

*Dance* is Jones' poetic introduction to basic concepts through images and text. But what is Bill T. Jones, exactly? Group therapist? Pyrrhic victor of the culture wars? Phallic totem acting out, in bouts of elegant rage, his audience's lurid preconceptions of black masculinity? Or is he simply what Arthur Mitchell calls "one of the finest dance artists I've ever seen"? And, if so, why all the controversy?

Born William Tass Jones in Bunnell, Florida, between the end of the Korean and the beginning of Viet Nam wars, Jones was just in time for Woodstock, where he was electrified by Jimi Hendrix. Late 1960s and early 1970s cinema--visually and narratively hypnotic--exerted so powerful an influence that he nearly chose film over dance as his expressive medium. ... until college at the State University of New York at Binghamton, that is, where he met a boy from Queens. His first love, Arnie Zane seduced Jones away from track and field, where he had excelled since high school, and into the dance studio. ("I never thought," gasped Jones' father, "I'd have one of those in the family.") Bill T. Jones had discovered modern dance, an art form that

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his body deeply understood.

Outspoken and articulate, Jones is noted for his use of the spoken word in dance. He is best described as a multimedia performance artist whose dance is conceived in terms of image, music and text. But back in 1973, when everyone was doing his or her own thing and the downtown New York City loft scene was alive with controversy over the new "postmodernism," Jones was only just beginning, between odd jobs in Amsterdam and San Francisco, to make his own dances, struggling to find his form in the long shadows cast by Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor and Alvin Ailey.

During the heyday of the Dance Theatre Workshop in the late 1970s, the performing arts establishment finally recognized Jones as a dancer-choreographer of unique promise--just as the dance boom was ending. In 1982 Jones and Zane formed the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, which toured the Far East, and in rapid succession Jones began creating the major full-length works through which he would emerge as perhaps the leading black choreographer of his generation.

He would also become a lightning rod for the politically charged storms of the 1970s and '80s: Should art engage issues of identity politics? Should "elitist" art forms receive governmental support? Is art itself a societal luxury or a spiritual necessity?

While militantly incorporating gender and ethnicity into his aesthetic, Jones remained suspicious of what he called the Black Arts Movement's nationalist orthodoxy. "I'm an artist first," he insisted, "and a black man second." And rightly so, you feel, knowing full well that Jones could never count on the Dance Theatre of Harlem's conservative core audience for the kind of ovations and financial support that he received from the Guthrie, the Brooklyn Academy and the MacArthur Foundation, not to mention the Berlin and Lyons opera ballets.

Jones' career, at any rate, was conspicuously successful. But his life was falling apart. In 1988 his loving collaborator of 17 years lay dying from AIDS in their suburban home in Nyack, New York. Undaunted, Jones staged a domestic "deathwatch": His sisters sang gospel hymns while a troupe of dancers performed a kind of 21-person salute to "dance him over," as Zane's Italian-

Jewish mother looked on in horror and disgust.

Jones' latest production, however, is a prudently wholesome affair--a matinee performance innocent of nudity and political overtones. Like all good children's literature, *Dance* is a book that anyone can dream to, and you close it having collaborated in a kind of imaginative duet. HIV-positive, looking at least a decade younger than his age, and having spent his entire career making a spectacle of himself, this most-written-about contemporary dance artist is still producing. And *Dance*--a divertissement of a few dozen photos by Susan Kuklin and less than 150 words--is a book as brief as a dancer's career, a portrait of the artist at the height of his form. "I will never grow old," Jones says, with a note of false bravado. Or is it sadness?