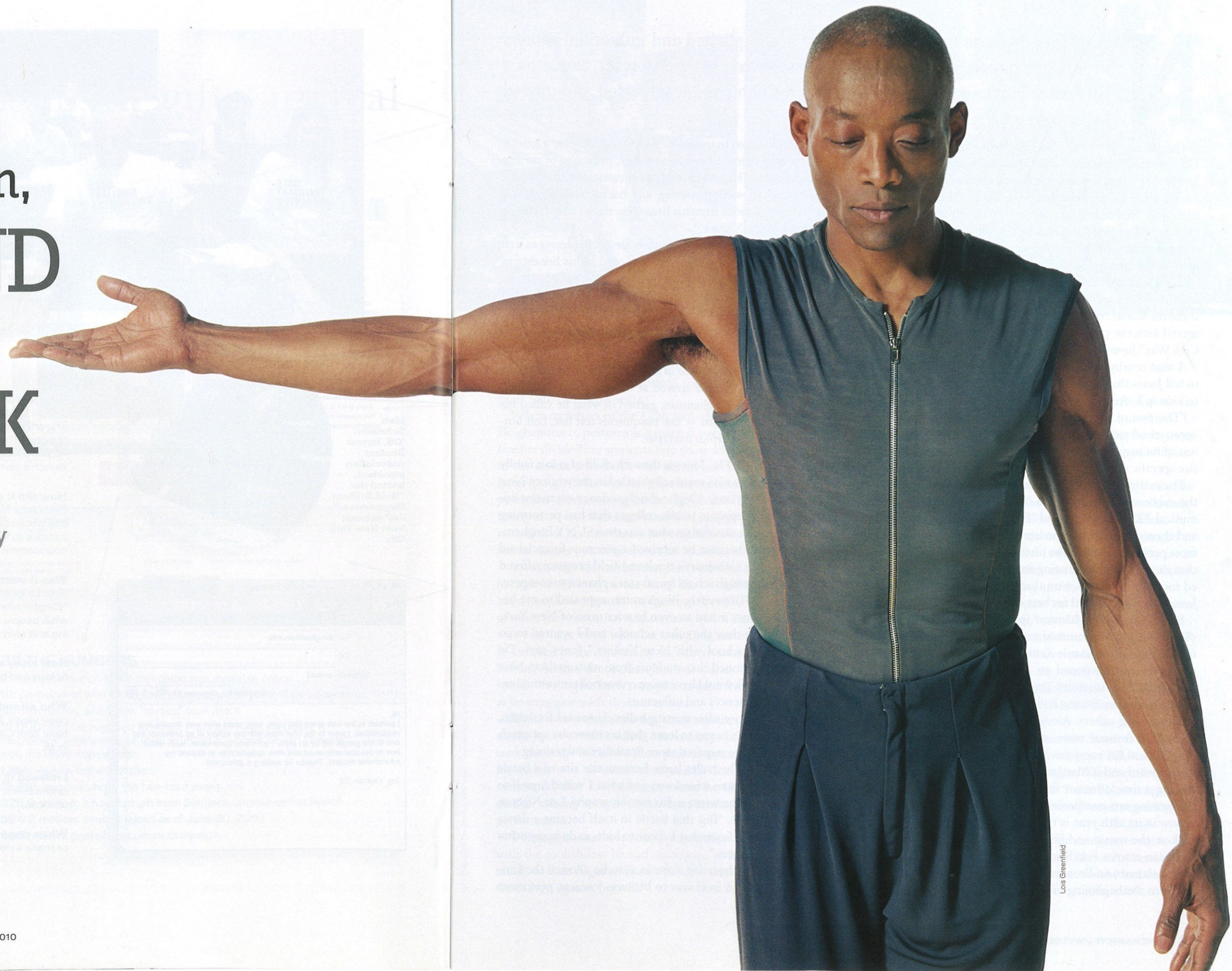


A body in motion, A MIND AT WORK

Bill T. Jones
weaves artistry
and intellect.

BY GARY E. FRANK



Lois Greenfield

Nearly four decades into one of the most accomplished and influential careers in modern dance, Bill T. Jones, who discovered his passion for dance as a student at Binghamton University, finds he can still be surprised and moved by how people react to his art.

The dancer-choreographer was artist-in-residence at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Va., for two weeks in November 2008, working on *Fondly Do We Hope ... Fervently Do We Pray*, a dance/theater piece about Abraham Lincoln that premiered at the Ravinia Festival in Chicago the following September. Jones also was holding workshops that offered community members the opportunity to perform another piece connected to Lincoln, called *100 Migrations*.

"After a short rehearsal, a black woman who was probably in her 70s walked up to me weeping, saying she hoped that I or someone would create a piece about her grandfather, who had served with the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry in the Civil War," Jones recalls.

A man nearby overheard the conversation and walked over to tell Jones that one of his ancestors had been part of a plot to kidnap Lincoln.

"The two of them were there by chance and, on a whim, approached me and revealed something about their past that was quite surprising, so I incorporated those stories into that site-specific work," Jones says.

The critical and popular success of *Fondly Do We Hope* and the successful Broadway run of the Tony Award-nominated musical *FELA!* (pronounced "fay-lah"), which Jones directed and choreographed, are the latest achievements in one of the most prolific careers in the history of modern dance, a career that shows no sign of abating anytime soon. *FELA!*, nominated for 11 Tony Awards, won three this year, with Jones earning an award for best choreography.

Since leaving Binghamton in the 1970s, the 58-year-old Jones has created more than 140 works for the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company and been commissioned to create dances for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, AXIS Dance Company, Boston Ballet and Berlin Opera Ballet, among others. Along the way, Jones has garnered a treasure trove of honors, including a Tony Award (in 2007 for *Spring Awakening*), an Obie Award and a MacArthur "Genius Award." During a time of major financial difficulties for performing arts companies, the company, which is now in its 28th year, is thriving. And *FELA!* (a look at the music and life of the late Nigerian musician-activist Fela Kuti) is one of the few notable successes on Broadway this year.

"From the beginning of his career, [Jones] has

shown a willingness to improvise pieces that develop a kinetic spark between people," says Fred Weiss, professor of theatre at Binghamton. "He's got a sense of theatricality that people can respond to without having any background in dance. That's pretty obvious from his Broadway shows and strikingly obvious in his early work."

Weiss, who has seen the company's *Spring Awakening* as well as *FELA!*, believes Jones' artistry is rooted in his honesty as well as his "formidable intellect."

"He has an unflinching quality about him; he's not afraid of stepping outside the pale," Weiss says.

Raising the bar

Binghamton University's role in nurturing Jones' career began one day in 1970, when he arrived at the Greyhound bus station in downtown Binghamton, garbed in what he called his "counterculture uniform — the ubiquitous felt hat, bell bottoms and an Army surplus overcoat."

Born in Bunnell, Fla., Jones is the 10th child of 12 in a family of migrant farmers who eventually settled in the western New York town of Wayland. A high school guidance counselor encouraged him to apply to public colleges that had performing arts programs. He decided on what was then SUNY Binghamton in large part because he received a generous financial aid package and the University's track-and-field program offered the high school sprint star a chance to compete.

"Ultimately, Binghamton appealed to me because it had an even heavier mass of New Yorkers than the other schools, and I wanted to go to school with New Yorkers," Jones says. He reasoned that students from metropolitan New York would have more cosmopolitan cultural experiences and influences.

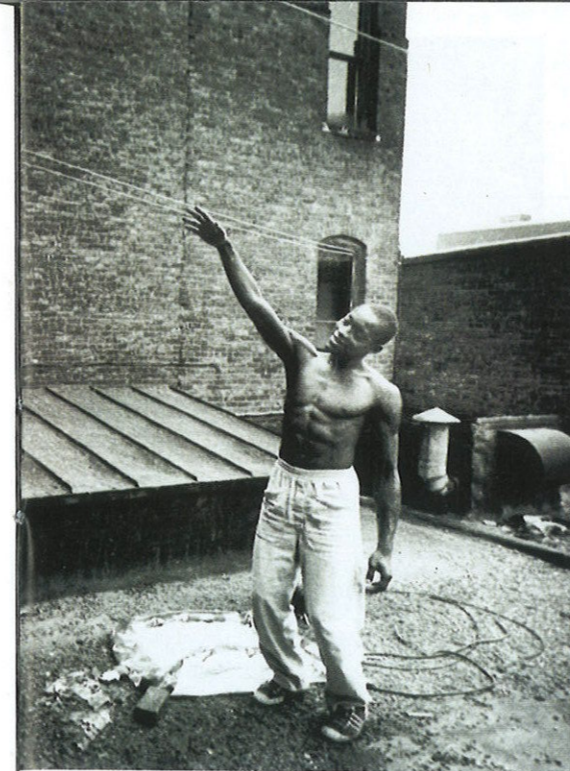
Soon after starting ballet classes as a freshman, Jones began to learn that his muscular sprinter's frame required more flexibility and training.

"The ballet barre became the site of a battle between what I was and what I willed myself to be," he wrote in his autobiography, *Last Night on Earth*. "But that battle in itself became a dance — a dance that I chose to hide, as do many other dancers."

Rehearsing alone in a studio allowed the frustrated freshman to become "creator, performer



FELA! won Tony Awards for choreography, costume design and sound design of a musical.



Bill T. Jones in 1972, left, and last year, right, as guest lecturer at Skidmore College in Saratoga, N.Y.

and audience." In those solitary sessions, Jones experienced "the deep truth of movement," something he struggled to share with others for years.

When members of the Utah Repertory Company came to Binghamton to perform and teach master classes, Jones' ballet teacher divided her students into those who would participate in the classes and those who would watch. Jones was in the latter group. As he watched, the movements of one dancer in particular sparked an epiphany for Jones. "He had sailed serenely in an arc of such sureness and purity," Jones writes. "An imitation of his movement I would never achieve, but its essential nature was mine from that moment on."

It was at the University that Jones met Arnie Zane '70, who became his lifelong partner until Zane's death from AIDS-related lymphoma in 1988. In the summer of 1971, at Zane's suggestion, they moved to Amsterdam, where Zane had friends.

A year later they were back in Binghamton, where Jones re-enrolled in the University and discovered the late Percival Borde's African dance class. Jones describes "loving the dance studio," feeling his body recognizing the African rhythms even as he struggled with the movements.

Borde often chastised his students for lacking commitment, Jones recalls, telling his students of the time Borde took the stage for a two-hour performance just as he learned his father was dead or near death. Years later, Jones remembered that commitment when he learned Borde had died of a heart attack shortly after leaving the stage after a performance.

"I thought, what a fantastic way to die. It was in keeping with the foolishness he had attempted to instill in us," Jones recalls in *Last Night on Earth*. "And to which I return sometimes even against my will."

Improvising the future

For all he learned at Binghamton, Jones didn't feel it was enough. After finishing his second year, he transferred to SUNY Brockport. One day not long after arriving there, Jones noticed a flier that read, "Do you like to roll down hills? Wrestle? Make love? Then try contact improvisation."

"He took [the flier] home and said, 'Arnie, this looks like some kind of dance you might be interested in,'" recalls dancer-choreographer Lois Welk, who was teaching the class.

Contact improvisation is a dance form that originated in the early 1970s. At its foundation, two or more people are in physical contact, moving together and supporting each other, perhaps rolling, falling and being upside down.

"Contact improvisation is quite on the edge in the dance world, and it's very challenging," says Welk, founder-director of the American Dance Asylum and director of Dance USA.

"There was this cluster of white female dance students. Men, unfortunately, are rare in the world of dance as it is," Welk says. "To have [Bill and Arnie] walk in with their very striking intellectual and physical personalities was very surprising."

The second day of the class, which was Zane's first modern dance class, only Jones and Zane showed up. "Bill, Arnie and I danced every day for two weeks straight," Welk recalls.

Jones, she says, demonstrated both "incredible strength and incredible sensitivity," which made him a "very interesting improvisational dance partner."

Welk had taught the course to earn money to return to San Francisco to resuscitate the American Dance Asylum, a collective of choreography and dance students she had founded in Brockport a few years earlier. Jones and Zane followed her



Fondly Do We Hope ... Fervently Do We Pray heads to France this fall, but will be back in the United States at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., in February.

ON THE ROAD

The Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company heads to Europe this fall, taking the show *Fondly Do We Hope ... Fervently Do We Pray* to France in September and October.

The show is scheduled to play the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., Feb. 24 and 25, 2011.

Between Us, pieces from the company's repertory created over a decade-long span beginning in the late 1980s, will be in Santa Monica, Calif., on March 18 and 19.

Serenade/The Proposition, another work addressing the legacy of Abraham Lincoln, is scheduled for April 8 at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro and April 16 in Asheville, N.C.

For an up-to-date schedule of performances and appearances, visit <http://billtjones.org>.

The documentary *A Good Man* chronicles Bill T. Jones in the process of creating *Fondly Do We Hope ... Fervently Do We Pray*. It will appear as part of the American Masters series on PBS in 2011, according to billtjones.org.

to San Francisco. When their hopes for the American Dance Asylum were not realized, the trio returned to Binghamton in 1975 because of its close proximity to both Brockport and New York City, where Jones and Zane would eventually settle.

In an old Elks Club building on Washington Street in Binghamton, the American Dance Asylum was reborn as Jones, Zane, Welk and others came together to create and dance. Usually poor as church mice, Jones and Zane often survived on buckwheat pancakes and peanut butter. If anything qualifies as the "big break" for Jones, it might have been when he received his first grant, a Creative Artists Public Service award for a work titled *Everybody Works/All Beasts Count*.

Even then, Welk recalls, Jones was "very disciplined" in his approach to his art and how he prepared his body for dance.

"He has always approached his art with high-quality, in-depth research, whether it's personal research of his emotions or historical research, such as into the life and times of Abraham Lincoln," Welk says. "He's a voracious reader, and what he's reading often has to do with what the next dance is or the one after that one 10 years from now."

There is a difference, however, between how Jones prepares for projects outside of his dance company, such as *FELA!*, and for those created specifically for the company.

"I think it pays to think as if you were an audience member," Jones says. "I think about — for *FELA!*, for example — what people who come to a Broadway show would expect and how can I tweak that just enough to make it interesting for me and make it rewarding for them. Something like having them walk into the theater and having the music already on — cooking, crackling. People love that."

For his company, however, the approach is more personal.

"I've been doing this for so long. Each piece that I make, I usually start out with a series of questions for myself. Questions about what I find interesting in the topic, for instance,

and questions about what is the connection between that personality, that idea and what we do as a dance company," Jones explains. "The audience comes later. But it has to start there: my interest and my company, which is an extension of myself, and what we have to say as a company about the subject."

The audience is considered in how "the text is shaped, how the imagery is dispensed," Jones says.

Making a difference

As he has aged among his company's young dancers, Jones often thinks of the best ways to use the differences in their respective life experiences.

"I ask myself, 'How do you engage them on the deepest level of their hearts?' and one way is if they're invested in what was made, if it comes as much from their imagination as mine," Jones says. "Therefore, they give themselves to the piece in a different way."

That approach is an example of Jones' integrity as an artist, Welk says. "He has always stayed true to his impulses, true to his demons and true to his role as a change agent in the world," she says. "All art is political, and he recognizes that, because art generally is offering an alternative to the status quo."

Looking back, Jones says he would tell his 25-year-old self to "relax, be calm, have faith in the future and trust your future self." When he considers his legacy, Jones hopes that people will say he "fulfilled his wish and participated in the world of ideas and made a difference somehow."

For Welk, there is no doubt that Jones has made, and continues to make, that difference.

"He's a master choreographer, and he will go down in history as one of America's great choreographers, period," Welk says. "For the same reason you would study [George] Balanchine ... Paul Taylor, you should know the best of the best." **B**