

BILL T. JONES

b. February 15, 1952



Bill T. Jones is an avant-garde choreographer and dancer. He earned a Tony Award and a place in the Hall of Fame of the National Museum of Dance.

“Living and dying is not the big issue. The big issue is what you’re going to do with your time while you are here.”

Bill T. Jones is a dancer and avant-garde choreographer who has created masterpieces about race, sexuality, life and loss. He is known for his extraordinary ability to translate human emotion and experience into the language of dance and theater.

The 10th of 12 children, William Tass Jones was born in Florida, the son of migrant farm workers, and raised in Wayland, New York. As one of the only blacks at his public school, Jones believes the experience of living by white norms at school and black norms at home encouraged his self-expression.

Jones attended the State University of New York, where he studied classical ballet and modern dance. It was there that he met his lover of 17 years, Arnie Zane. The two danced and choreographed together. As an openly gay interracial couple, they pushed the envelope and challenged their audiences’ preconceived notions about gender, race and sexuality. In 1982, they cofounded the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company.

In 1986, Zane was diagnosed with AIDS, which claimed his life two years later. Watching his life partner die gave Jones a new sense of passion and urgency.

In his 1994 piece “Still/Here,” Jones took the experiences of people living with life-threatening illnesses and transformed them into a beautiful piece about life and confronting death. HIV-positive himself, Jones wanted to teach those living under the constant threat of death how to express themselves through movement. Jones’s works also draw from existing material. His piece “Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Promised Land” was inspired by Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel.

Jones has won many awards, including a Tony Award, the Samuel H. Scripps American Dance Festival Award for Lifetime Achievement and a Harlem Renaissance Award. In 2007, he was inducted into the Hall of Fame of the National Museum of Dance. He is the recipient of five honorary doctorates.

Jones continues to dance and choreograph for the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company.

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