

Soloists

BILL T. JONES

When Bill T. Jones danced down the aisle to accept a Tony Award for his choreography for *Spring Awakening*, his fans let out a collective cheer across the country. Jones won't go so far as to call himself a crossover artist now. After all, this isn't the first time he has worked with a company outside the dance field. But he likes the idea that other "downtown" artists might find ways to collaborate with Broadway. Alicia Anstead spoke with Jones on July 4th, when he was vacationing in New Mexico.



“ How did you feel dancing down the aisle the night of the Tonys?

It's like the day after the office party when someone asks how did you feel with the plate on your head and dancing on the table. It was an explosion of enthusiasm and emotion and then later—literally when I walked offstage I thought: I don't believe you did that in front of a million people.

When you won, I jumped into the air and cheered. I feel like you won it for all of us.

It felt like a community. Many people said they were up on the furniture. And I think that says a lot about where the

dance world and where the theater world is right now. There was so much invested in it. I had spent the whole day calling people to tell them why I was not going to win so they would be prepared.

The rest of us knew you would win.

I appreciate your enthusiasm.

What most surprised you about working on Broadway?

What a machine it is. I'm a collaborative artist, but I don't think we work at that level of collaboration. The word "auteur" comes to mind. We have a sacred, sacrosanct notion that there is a primary creator. I come from the '70s—a period of collective, it's true. But even then I would take the lead for four months. Here, I noticed everyone was subject to revision and notes, and, in the end, people who are non-artistic have an equal say. That was wild.

So are you a crossover artist now?

We shall see.

What would you like to happen in the dance world in the next 10 years?

I wish I had had the cool to say at the awards ceremony that I embrace the Broadway community and audiences and Tony voters for having accepted me. And that there is a rich treasure trove of personalities and artists working at the margins, and they have so much to offer the world of—dare I say?—entertainment. I think audiences are hungry for something modern dance understands, and yet there is a kind of professionalism and audience-friendly savvy that this other world has. I would hope there would be more people who could combine the discoveries we've made in the art world.

You've performed all over the world. What are the qualities of the best presenters?

They are sophisticated, they are passionate, they are curious. They are the types that have to deal with the board of directors, unions, communities and press. But they have come into this because there's something Socratic in something they are presenting. Their work isn't always their taste, but they do feel the work they present is what their community needs and has asked for in the form of performance.

It's fascinating to think how many people have grown up thinking along with your thoughts because of your art. I'm one of those people—following along. In your way, you've changed the world.

That's a good thing to say to an artist in his middle years. What you said is important for me to hear. As time goes on and you've suffered your reverses, your body aches, you lose sight of the fact that maybe you are able to influence anything in this world. Many of us start out feeling we're renegades; we like this idea of being on the fringes. But then over time, you want recognition. You want to feel you did make a difference, and middle age finds us in a slump—recognized or not, a depression: What was it all for? The man you saw jumping and dancing in the aisle that night—for a moment—forgot that. Just that very day, I was probably complaining to my companion that something was not right: Would there be enough money? Would there be enough energy? Enough interest?

You're such a philosopher. What's your advice to all of us about life?

I truly believe this—it's from a poet friend: If you call life, it will come. What do I do when I don't know what to do? Taoists say stand still and the world will find you. We creators understand that. If you call life, if you want intense experience, if you want truth, do that. Be intent. Be truthful. And the rest will fall into place. It may scare you to death, but we don't want an easy ride, do we? We want something meaningful.

You once told me that there comes a time when one no longer has the drive of youth. So there comes the question: What do you love? What do you love, Bill?

You're putting me on the couch here. I love my companion. I love our life together and all it represents. It was a gift, but it came out of the lowest possible moment in life. We both thought we would never find love again. Finding a stable relationship after a great tragedy has been something I prize. And I never want him to feel I could take or leave this. I'm also in the habit of ambition. Is that the same thing as loving my work? Sometimes I feel like I'm automatic pilot: Is that love or habit? My friend reminds me that I am very happy in the studio. But the business of art does not make me happy. Do I daresay I love that matrix?

Let's say you can't use the word dance, how would you describe what you do for a living?

I am a scientist in the area of that place where feeling, thought and action meet. My primary computer, my primary instrument is the human body, mine and other people's.

What do you love about this country?

I expect that, among the immigrants coming into this country, often under demeaning circumstances, there are geniuses, people who have answers about ecology and human rights, and they will not be disappointed here. For all of its problems, you can say what you need to say here. And that's less and less true in the world. I'm the son of potato pickers. When I danced on that stage and won that Tony Award, I felt like I was probably in a room full of people who all come from the working class, the middle class. Dreams can still happen here. ”



Spring Awakening



Blind Date



61st Annual Tony Awards