

D-Man in the Waters: Reflections, Observations, Histories by Neil Baldwin

Listen carefully to these words of Bill T. Jones: “How was my dance [*Social Intercourse*, 1982] a reflection of its culture? It’s a complicated issue because it’s dealing with the exchange between the artist and the artwork, the artwork and its audience. The work was a commentary on the way I perceived the society I was living in at the time. It was about the way I perceived the relationships between men and women and men and men, as well as the way I perceived the restraints. “ *New Yorker* magazine dance critic Arlene Croce refused to review a performance of Bill T. Jones’ *Still/Here*, labeling it “victim art” because the piece included people who were terminally ill, an accompanying projected video of members of the “Survival Workshop” talking openly about facing death.

“The AIDS epidemic marked the critical turning point in Bill’s career,” Rosalynde (Roz) LeBlanc told me. She danced with the Company from 1993-1999 and, as choreography *repetiteur*, worked closely with the Montclair State University Dance Program on the precise setting of *D-Man*. “Bill has been HIV-positive since 1985. Arnie [Zane] died from complications of AIDS-related lymphoma in 1988. Demian Acquavella passed a year later,” she said. “Over the past two decades, Bill’s work has taken on a measure of full-throttle desperation. That’s where the incredible rigor of his dance comes from. It extends to the way Bill lives his life. In dance, as in life, Bill digs his heels in and uses every muscle in his body, and that’s what he expected of me as a dancer – of all of us – then and now.”

Who was “D-Man?” Demian Acquavella was born in Brooklyn on January 25, 1958. At age twenty, he was a dance major at Santa Monica Community College. Moving back to NYC, he trained with Marjorie Mussman, Cindi Green, and Phil Black, and also danced for a time with the Elisa Monte Dance Company and Alvin Ailey American Dance Center, among others, before joining Jones/Zane in 1985. In the fall of 1987, when Acquavella first found out he was sick, he began to re-channel his creative energies into marketing silkscreened T-shirts decorated with his original artwork.

And he continued to dance. “Just because you have AIDS doesn’t mean you have to stop the world,” he told Maya Wallach in a tape-recorded interview archived in the Jerome Robbins Dance Collection at the NY Public Library. In early 1989, Jones was commissioned by the St. Luke’s Chamber Orchestra to choreograph a work for an ensemble of nine dancers set to the first movement of Felix Mendelssohn’s *Octet in E-Flat Major*. “At first, Bill [and Janet Lilly were] going to call it just *Waters*,” Acquavella recalled. “But then Bill looked over at me, and changed the title [by including his nick-name for me] and I will never forget Bill saying I would be in it, even though I could hardly walk. ‘We all want you to be in the piece,’ Bill said. ‘You will always have a little place in the company.’”

Jones' recollection corroborates: "I had a daydream, I had a vision," he wrote in *Last Night on Earth*. "...I saw Demian and a myriad of friends, living and dead, in a body of water. Perhaps it was a lake as vast as the ocean, a lake emptied by a vast and unforgiving waterfall. This company of people was struggling against the current. "

D-Man in the Waters had its premiere at the Joyce Theatre on March 14, 1989. "As he could no longer walk by the time of the debut," Jones wrote, "I carried Demian onstage, offering my legs as he executed the arm movements of what would have been his solo." With distinctively aquiline profile, meditative gaze, and close-cropped blond hair, Acquavella was especially proud of the arm-gestures he was "very good at," and confessed that he was "amazed [he] even was able to stand up and take my bow. But the company pulled me through it."

When Acquavella could no longer perform, Jones did not replace him in the piece. "Oddly assymetrical groupings [marked] his absence," which made an even more poignant impression on subsequent viewers. Jack Anderson of *The New York Times* was moved by the – literally – diving, belly-flopping, rolling energy of the dance, the diversity of performers of all body types in outlandish camouflage garb that looked as if – as Bill once wryly remarked – "the dancers had emptied their closets." "This was no ponderous elegy," Anderson wrote, "...In one episode, [the dancers] punched in the air with their fists. But no one drowned in any sea of troubles or was knocked out in a battle with adversity."

Demian Acquavella died on June 8, 1990. He was thirty-two years old. Over the ensuing decade and beyond, *D-Man in the Waters* achieved a permanent place in the Jones/Zane repertory. But after awhile, Jones expressed ambivalence about *D-Man's* popularity. In an ironic, admittedly "irascible" diary entry jotted down on November 17, 2000, in a dim, stuffy dressing room at the Milan Teatre Lirico after a performance of *D-Man* in which Jones had to step in for an injured dancer, he conceded that the piece was "perhaps more insistent in its importance than I would prefer...[T]hough I am not old, I am no longer young," he reflected. "...It's sobering and bothersome to realize that people, many filled with good will, cannot hear or see me free of the aura of H.I.V. and the supposed death sentence it represents."

I concur with Roz LeBlanc's astute observation about the way Bill T. Jones "makes" dance with such enduring resolution; there's an all-important verb – "makes." This indomitable, steadfastly de-romanticized ability to appropriate, accept (*and* when called upon, likewise unashamedly to mourn) , revise, and then transcend raw materials, gestures and stories from his own life as well as the lives of his dancers shapes the moral core of Bill T. Jones' artistry.

It is an artistry that has evolved over an astonishing arc since his student-days at SUNY/Binghamton in 1971 when nineteen-year old William Jones, the son of migrant workers and the tenth of twelve children, first met Queens-raised photographer and actor A.M. Zane – whose father was an Italian-Catholic immigrant from Brazil and whose mother was an Orthodox Jewish immigrant from Lithuania. The ostensibly unlikely pair – Bill, lissome,

sensual, lyrical, tender, cool, literate; Arnie wiry, athletic, impetuous, confrontational, hyper, visual -- became lovers and mutually-inspiring collaborative "contact improvisation" partners. They set into motion a corpus of work connecting the initial, trusting intimacy of a "body against body" duet to the finally full-fledged, fashionable, avant-garde, (or perhaps *vanguard* is more accurate nowadays) visceral, multi- and inter-media spectacle of Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane & Co. – from *Pas de Deux for Two* to *Fever Swamp*; from *Whosedebabedoll* (love that title!) to *The Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Blind Date*, and on and on.

Four months after Arnie Zane's death, Jones made this trenchant comment: "I can see his hand in my choreography...But I am Bill, I'm not Arnie, and I'm not Bill *and* Arnie, which was a hard thing to realize. So I'm going deeper into myself, into my tastes. I have to trust them a bit more...How much time do any of us have left? I don't know. The stakes have been raised in our rush to the finish line."

Notes

Acquavella, Demian. *Oral history interview* with Maya Wallach, September 1989. NYPL/Jerome Robbins Collection/Lincoln Center. MGZMT 3-1124

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LeBlanc, Rosalynde. *Telephone interview* with NB, February 4, 2008.

Zimmer, Elizabeth, and Susan Quasha, eds. *Body Against Body: The dance and other collaborations of Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane*. Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1989.

Various reviews, *The New York Times*. March 17, 1989, "Athletic Rapture in Quirky Metaphorical Waters," by Anna Kisselgoff; March 24, 1989, "Arthur Aviles' Life in Dance: Nonstop Exhilaration," by Jennifer Dunning; June 8, 1990, "Demian Acquavella, Dancer, Is Dead at 32;" and October 15, 1992, "Small Scale, Big Ideas from Bill T. Jones," by Jack Anderson.

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