

Writing in the Dark,  
Dancing in *The New Yorker*

Also by Arlene Croce

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*Going to the Dance*

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## Discussing the Undiscussable

I have not seen Bill T. Jones's *Still/Here* and have no plans to review it. In this piece, which was given locally at the Brooklyn Academy, Jones presents people (as he has in the past) who are terminally ill and who talk about it. I understand that there is dancing going on during the talking, but of course no one goes to *Still/Here* for the dancing. People are asking whether Jones's type of theatre is not a new art form. Dying an art form? Why, yes, I suppose dying can be art in a screwily post-neo-Dada sense. (Dr. Kevorkian, now playing in Oregon . . .) But this is not the sense intended by Bill T. Jones, even though he had his origins as a choreographer in the Dada experimentation of the sixties. If I understand *Still/Here* correctly, and I think I do—the publicity has been deafening—it is a kind of messianic traveling medicine show, designed to do some good for sufferers of fatal illnesses, both those in the cast and those thousands more who may be in the audience. If we ask what a show does that no hospital, clinic, church, or other kind of relief agency has so far been able to do, I think the answer is obvious. If we consider that the experience, open to the public as it is, may also be intolerably voyeuristic, the remedy is

also obvious: Don't go. In not reviewing *Still/Here*, I'm sparing myself and my readers a bad time, and yet I don't see that I really have much choice.

A critic has three options: (1) to see and review; (2) to see and not review; (3) not to see. A fourth option—to write about what one has not seen—becomes possible on strange occasions like *Still/Here*, from which one feels excluded by reason of its express intentions, which are unintelligible as theatre. I don't deny that *Still/Here* may be of value in some wholly other sphere of action, but it is as theatre, dance theatre, that I would approach it. And my approach has been cut off. By working dying people into his act, Jones is putting himself beyond the reach of criticism. I think of him as literally undiscussable—the most extreme case among the distressingly many now representing themselves to the public not as artists but as victims and martyrs.

In theatre, one chooses what one will be. The cast members of *Still/Here*—the sick people whom Jones has signed up—have no choice other than to be sick. The fact that they aren't there in person does not mitigate the starkness of their condition. They are there on videotape, the better to be seen and heard, especially heard. They are the prime exhibits of a director-choreographer who has crossed the line time and again between theatre and reality—who thinks that victimhood in and of itself is sufficient to the creation of an art spectacle.

The thing that *Still/Here* makes immediately apparent, whether you see it or not, is that victimhood is a kind of mass delusion that has taken hold of previously responsible sectors of our culture. The preferred medium of victimhood—something that Jones acknowledges—is videotape (see TV at almost any hour of the day), but the cultivation of victimhood by institutions devoted to the care of art is a menace to all art forms, particularly performing-art forms.

In writing this piece, I enter a plea for the critic and risk being taken for a victim myself. But the critic is part of the audience for art that victimhood also threatens. I can't review someone I feel sorry for or hopeless about. As a dance critic, I've learned to avoid dancers with obvious problems—overweight dancers (not fat dancers; Jackie Gleason was fat and was a good dancer), old dancers, dancers with sickled feet, or dancers with physical deformities who appear nightly in roles requiring beauty of line. In quite another category of undiscussability are those dancers I'm *forced* to feel sorry for because of the way they present themselves: as dissed blacks, abused women, or disfranchised homosexuals—as performers, in short, who make out of victimhood victim art. I can live with the flabby, the feeble, the scoliotic. But with the righteous I cannot function at all. The strategies of victim artists are proliferating marvelously at the moment. There's no doubt that the public likes to see victims, if only to patronize them with applause. The main type of victim art (the type that I think gave rise to all the others) is a politicized version of the blackmail that certain performers resort to, even great performers, like Chaplin in his more self-pitying moments. Instead of compassion, these performers induce, and even invite, a cozy kind of complicity. When a victim artist finds his or her public, a perfect, mutually manipulative union is formed which no critic may put asunder. Such an artist is Pina Bausch. Such an audience is the Brooklyn Academy's Next Wave subscription list, which also welcomed Bill T. Jones.

What Jones represents is something new in victim art—new and raw and deadly in its power over the human conscience. Jones's personal story is none of my concern.\* His

\*An autobiography, *Last Night on Earth*, was published by Jones in August 1995.

career, however, intersects vitally with cultural changes since the sixties that have formed an officialdom, a fortress of victim art. Bill T. Jones didn't do this all by himself; in fact, he probably didn't mean to do it at all.

Where it all began is not difficult to see. The arts bureaucracy in this country, which includes government and private funding agencies, has in recent years demonstrated a blatant bias for utilitarian art—art that justifies the bureaucracy's existence by being socially useful. This bias is inherent in the nature of government, although it did not seem to be when I was on a National Endowment for the Arts panel in the late seventies. In those years, art and art appreciation were unquestioned good things to support, and "community outreach" had its own program. Jones, who came along at that time, was one of our favorites because he seemed to be uninterested in conforming to the stereotype of the respectable black choreographer. By the late eighties, the ethos of community outreach had reached out and swallowed everything else; it was the only way the NEA could survive. The private funders soon knuckled under to the community- and minority-minded lobbies—the whole dynamic of funding, which keeps the biggest government grants flowing on a matching-funds basis, made the knuckling under inevitable. But ideology had something to do with this. When even museum directors can talk about "using art" to meet this or that social need, you know that disinterested art has become anathema. (Disinterested art: you have to understand that there's no such thing.) The ideological boosters of utilitarian art hark back to the political crusades of the sixties—against Vietnam, for civil rights. The sixties, in turn, harked back to the proletarian thirties, when big-government bureaucracy began. And now once again after a thirty-year lapse we are condemned to repeat history.

I'll say one thing for the sixties: the dance profession flourished in a climate of aesthetic freedom it hasn't enjoyed since. Jones's main connection to the sixties experimenters was to the power they'd claimed to control the terms on which they could be artists and be written about as artists. This, it turns out in retrospect, was their lasting legacy, and Jones has been their most conspicuous legatee. Members of the sixties generation, seeing themselves as picking up where Merce Cunningham's revolution left off, had decided that walking and other forms of nondance locomotion were in fact dancing. Their authority was John Cage more than it was Cunningham (who continued to use pure-dance movement), and for a few years there was lively controversy in New York over the direction of the new post-modern (as it was then not yet called) modern dance. It seemed to many that this kind of dance had a built-in resistance to criticism—not to writing but to criticism. There were critics who specialized in this art, or antiart, but few of them went beyond description. They hardly ever wrote about conventional dancing, but then writing about conventional dancing is hard. It's easier to describe actions that can be "danced" by you and me and require no formal evaluation.

Quite a number of the practitioners of the new dance assumed that because they abjured formality of expression they were beyond criticism—I don't know why. Dance critics have traditionally interested themselves in all sorts of "movement theatre"—puppets, skating, the circus. Theoretically, I am ready to go to anything—once. If it moves, I'm interested; if it moves to music, I'm in love. And if I'm turned off by what I see it's seldom because of the low-definition dance element. It was still possible in the sixties and seventies to unearth values in post-modern dance and write about those values as if they were the legitimate con-

cern of the choreographers. Motion is motion; the body is the body. Multimedia theatre, a big thing then, enforced its own disciplines; you could write about it. The concerts that Bill T. Jones gave with his partner, Arnie Zane, were different from the ones he gave after Zane's death, though both were fairly typical of the post-sixties atmosphere of "conceptual" dance. Talking and singing were mixed with dancing; dancing was mixed with nondancing. It was Jones who split the mixed media from the message, with his baiting of the audience. This was an aggressively personal extension of the defiant anticonventionalism of the sixties, when you were manipulated into accepting what you saw as art. With Jones, you were actually intimidated.

At first, I saw the intimidation as part of the game that post-modernists played. Choreographers as different as Kenneth King and David Gordon and, later, William Forsythe had fun heckling the critics—anticipating or satirizing the reviews. Jones also did this. When I blasted an early work of his with the phrase "fever swamps," he retaliated by using the phrase as the title of a piece. It wasn't long before the Jones company became openly inflammatory. Politically provocative, accusatory, violent, it was a barely domesticated form of street theatre. And it declared war on critics, the most vocal portion of the audience. Jones's message, like Forsythe's, was clear: No back talk! Anything you say not only will be held against you but may be converted into grist for further paranoid accusation.

Many writers who discovered dance in the sixties and seventies felt as if they'd stumbled into the golden age of the art. All the way up and down the line, the most wonderful dancing, the most brilliant choreography were all about dance. What happened to politicize it? The promotion, for one thing, of the new arts-support networks, which began

to stress the democratic and egalitarian aspects of nonformal movement. Academics, teaching newly accredited dance history courses, also laid heavy stress on these aspects. By the eighties, when the culture wars got under way and the NEA was targeted by pressure groups left and right, it had become painfully clear that New York-centered, disinterested, movement-game, do-your-own-thing, idealistic post-modern dance was doomed. It was élitist. It had no audience. It produced no repertory. Most fatally, it did not establish itself in the universities and influence the coming generations. The sixties, it turned out, had been not the golden dawn but the twilight of American modern dance, and suddenly there was Pina Bausch and Butoh. And AIDS.

The kind of dance that was against criticism because it was "against interpretation" wound up a dependent of taxpayers who wanted a say in the art forms they were supporting. But didn't the problem really originate in the self-awarded privileges of the sixties radicals? The kind of "innovation" that seeks to relieve critics of their primary task of evaluation is always suspect. In the sixties, if you didn't like the rules you made your own; you fought the critics because they impinged on your freedom. In the eighties, you fought the critics because they hampered your chances of getting grants. Criticism had always been an issue in post-modern dance. I'm not sure that criticism wasn't *the* issue: the freedom of the audience to judge versus the freedom of the artist to create. In the visual arts, Warholism had pretty well demolished the need for serious criticism. And the same kind of trash-into-art transformations in dance tempted lesser talents than those who had thought them up in the first place. "It's art if I say it is," the Humpty-Dumpty war cry of the sixties, was a pathetic last-ditch attempt to confound the philistines, but now the

philistines are likely to be the artists themselves. From the moment that Bill T. Jones declared himself HIV-positive and began making AIDS-focused pieces for himself and members of his company—from that moment it was obvious that the permissive thinking of the sixties was back, and in the most pernicious form. Actually, I'm not sure who came first: Jones the AIDS victim or Mapplethorpe the AIDS victim. But Jones and Mapplethorpe, parallel self-declared cases of pathology in art, have effectively disarmed criticism. They're not so much above art as beyond it. The need for any further evaluation, formal or otherwise, has been discredited. Where will it go from here? If an artist paints a picture in his own blood, what does it matter if I think it's not a very good picture? If he mixes the blood with Day-Glo colors, who will criticize him? The artist is going to bleed to death, and that's it.

Painting pictures in their own blood was, metaphorically speaking, what many artists of the nineteenth century were doing. Even when they weren't mentally unsound or dying of syphilis or tuberculosis, they were preoccupied with death—their own or that of the Beloved. One's personal disease and impending death were unmentionable—Keats wrote no "Ode to Consumption"—but through art the individual spirit could override them both. Even in music, which can name nothing, which can only attract names (the Funeral March), and which can therefore speak freely, it is the surging spirit of Chopin that calls out, not the raging bacillus. One man, one death, one art. And what an art. After two world wars and the other unspeakable terrors of our century, death is no longer the nameless one; we have unmasked death. But we have also created an art with no power of transcendence, no way of assuring us that the

grandeur of the individual spirit is more worth celebrating than the political clout of the group.

A few weeks ago, I attended a seminar on Schumann and mental illness. The psychiatrists who spoke were unanimous in the conviction that though Schumann's ailments were clinically real and debilitating, they were not accountable for the generally perceived decline in his later music. Because Schumann went mad, we think the madness must have told in his art. But the later Schumann is not derailed; it is dry. The composer had exhausted himself in the rigors of his music. Drained of inspiration, he thought he heard themes being sung to him by angels, and they turned out to be variations on themes he had already composed. The depletion experienced by Schumann is haunting the world of art in which we live today. We are all, artists and nonartists alike, survivors and curators, shoring up the art of the past, rummaging among its discards for new ideas. The nineteenth century and its wealth of art almost can't be comprehended; the bravura individualism that drove Schumann on is almost alienating. Personal despondency is not so easily sublimated today, nor do we look to sublimate it. Instead, it's disease and death that are taking over and running the show. As in the old woodcuts of Famine and Plague, a collective nightmare descends from which no one may be spared. And the end of twentieth-century collectivism is the AIDS quilt. The wistful desire to commemorate is converted into a pathetic lumping together, the individual absorbed by the group, the group by the disease.

The morbidity of so much Romantic art is bearable because it has a spiritual dimension. The immolation of the body leaves something behind: it's like a burning glass through which we see a life beyond life—not "the afterlife" but an animation of spirit, a dream life more abundantly

strange and real than anything we know. The Romantics did not use art, they were used by it, consumed by it as much as by killer diseases. The mass-produced art of the twentieth century, art that has no spiritual dimension, is art that you can use. In fact, the potential of mass-produced art, whether for general enlightenment or gross dehumanization, was a prime topic of intellectual debate for most of the century. It wasn't so very long ago that people were arguing the merits of "educational" TV. They don't do that anymore. The last quarter of our century, which has seen the biggest technological advances in mass communications since the first quarter, hasn't sensitized us to the uses of mass-produced art; it has simply canonized as art that which is mass-produced. And it's the mass-production sensibility operating in terms of high art that's so depressing today—in these grisly high-minded movies like *Schindler's List* (show-ered with Oscars while the Serbian genocide goes on and on), these AIDS epics, these performance-art shockers like *Still/Here*. Artists today, whether their medium is popular art or not, work in a climate dominated by TV and the passive narcissism of the TV audience. The quasi-clinical attention to suffering that is the specialty of the TV talk show may be a sham, but it's not such a sham as pretending to tell us how terminal illnesses are to be borne or what to make of Schindler and his list. And can we really displace the blame for our cultural deprivation on the wars, the death camps, and the bomb? It's worth remembering that most of the masterpieces of art and literature of this century were created by exiles or by those who worked on despite evil conditions in their homeland.

And, despite everything that is being done to discourage them, good artists are at work today. *The Family Business*, a play written by David Gordon and his son Ain Gordon,

which will return for an extended New York run next spring, deals with sickness and dying in cathartic terms that are the polar opposite of those employed in *Still/Here*. The main character, a helpless, ranting, shrewd old woman around whom the other characters form a death vigil, is played by David Gordon himself, in a housedress, with a foolish-looking barrette in his hair. There are no videos, no testimonials, no confessions, yet every word seems taken from life. How David Gordon, one of the original radicals of post-modern dance, escaped being trapped by the logic of sixties permissiveness and Bill T. Jones did not is a question that can't be answered by some presumed cultural advantage that Jews have over blacks. Jones, caught up in his own charisma, didn't seem to hear the trap being sprung. But there was also a more invidious logic at work, in the campaigns of the multiculturalists, the moral guardians, and the minority groups. Together with entertainment-world evangelism and art-world philistinism, they made up a juggernaut that probably no one in Jones's position could have escaped.

Bill T. Jones seems to have been designated by his time to become the John the Baptist of victim art. (His Christ was Arnie Zane, who died of AIDS in 1988.) For me, Jones is undiscussable, as I've said, because he has taken sanctuary among the unwell. Victim art defies criticism not only because we feel sorry for the victim but because we are cowed by art. A few years ago, a jury in Cincinnati acquitted a museum director who had been charged with obscenity for putting prints from Mapplethorpe's "X," "Y," and "Z" portfolios on public display. Members of the jury told reporters afterward that they had based their verdict on "expert" testimony that the photographs were art. Art sanctifies. The possibility that Mapplethorpe was a bad artist or that good

art could be obscene seems not to have occurred to anyone. Naturally not, since this is a subject for critics to discuss, not juries.

I do not remember a time when the critic has seemed more expendable than now. Oscar Wilde wrote that the Greeks had no art critics because they were a nation of art critics. But the critic who wishes to restore the old connection between the artist and his audience appeals in vain to readers who have been brought up on the idea of art as something that's beneficial and arcane at the same time. People for whom art is too fine, too high, too educational, too complicated may find themselves turning with relief to the new tribe of victim artists parading their wounds. They don't care whether it's an art form. They find something to respond to in the litany of pain, and they make their own connection to what the victim is saying. Of course, they are all co-religionists in the cult of Self. Only the narcissism of the nineties could put Self in place of Spirit and come up with a church service that sells out the Brooklyn Academy.

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