

DANCE

From one minute to the next, Jones builds a life story

By Karen Campbell | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT FEBRUARY 01, 2014



PAUL B. GOODE

In “Story/Time,” the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company performs excerpts from three-plus decades of Jones’s choreography, as he reads up to 70 one-minute stories, which embrace everything from historical snippets and biblical tales to poignant memories.

Choreographer Bill T. Jones is a born storyteller. His dances are usually seeded with provocative underlying narratives, often conveyed via spoken text. But get the man in conversation, and he’s off and running. As anyone who has read Jones’s memoir “Last Night on Earth” knows, he has a vast trove of stories and reflections — from his

colorful childhood (he was the 10th of a dozen children born to migrant workers) to his adult life as an artist whose work has embraced postmodern experimentalism as well as populist Broadway.

Jones's latest work, "Story/Time," which he and his company perform at the Institute of Contemporary Art Feb. 21-23, is all about stories, and the choreographer/director is right in the middle of it. As his company performs excerpts from three-plus decades of his choreography, Jones reads up to 70 one-minute stories, which embrace everything from historical snippets and biblical tales to poignant memories, including vignettes of the vibrant life and painful death of his longtime partner, Arnie Zane. Observations range from flip to insightful. Personal reflections address issues of race, sexuality, identity politics.

David Henry, the ICA's director of public programs, calls the work "remarkable."

"There are so many things going on simultaneously that your mind wanders from one thing to the next," Henry says. "Sometimes you're totally fixated on Bill, and other times you're really watching the dancers and have lost the thread of the story. It really is minute to minute."

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Inspired by John Cage's "Indeterminacy," a landmark collection of anecdotes, musings, and jokes designed to be read aloud in the space of one minute, the vignettes of "Story/Time" are randomly selected from a book of roughly 170 stories before each performance, and the dancers work with an ever-changing "menu" of movement sequences. "Story/Time" unfolds using chance procedures, and each performance is a unique layering of stories, movement, and live music. The work, which premiered in January 2012, leaves to audiences the task of finding connections and creating meaning amid the random interplay of elements.

STORY/TIME

Institute of Contemporary Art, 617-478-3103. <http://www.icaboston.org>

Performing company: Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company

First performance: Feb. 21

Closing date: Feb. 23

Ticket price: \$25-\$50

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The constant changes make the work especially challenging for the dancers. Every two days, they are given a different chart with 70 graph lines outlining who is doing what each minute. Jones credits the company's associate artistic director, Janet Wong, for tracking and teaching the movement.

Wong also tapes each performance for Jones to study later, since he can see very little of the dance as he attends to the order, timing, and delivery his stories. "I might be really attached to a story, and it might be obliterated or subverted by something going on onstage," Jones says. "But when I offer stories that have meaning to me and they go into this [random] system, it's always a discovery for me."

There are, however, points in the work crafted to intentionally coincide. "That was how I broke the rule," he says. "As we got to know the piece, we got freer with it and more focused in certain aspects. The point with Cage was to get out of the way and don't get attached, but some stories do deliver emotional elements that the evening can use. One of my favorite reprimands by my colleagues is 'You're not John Cage,' and that's a liberating thing."

After two Tony awards for choreography (for "Spring Awakening" and "Fela!"), a Kennedy Center honor, and a MacArthur "genius" award, Jones, who turns 62 this month, returns to his more experimental side with "Story/Time." "Coming out of 'Fela!' and 'Spring Awakening,' having done so many other things as a director, I wanted to come back to the company. The company is a voracious entity that needs to be fed."

"Story/Time" also marks Jones's return to the stage, albeit not as a dancer. "I'm not interested in the physical rigors of what I can do but in addressing ideas of art and history and performance," he says. "It's very different than most things I've done, very self-consciously a piece with me at the center, but somehow aloof."

Though foreground and background shift, as the eye and ear wander from the visual of the dancers to the aural of Jones's resonant baritone and Ted Coffey's electronic score, it is clearly the stories that anchor the work. "A lot of the stories are telling about what I grew up with, stories my mother told me, stories of migrant workers, of black people, of the man who made 'Still/Here' and 'Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin' but has all kinds of other narratives running through him all the time. This let me hone my writing skills and tap into that huge store of narratives that sometimes literally drive me crazy. Every minute of every day is a story."

Jones is asked, “Why are stories so important to us?”

“When you say that, I immediately become emotional,” he says with just the slightest catch in his voice. “Stories are a way of distilling down the ineffable, the mysterious, to give it shape and form. It’s a time-honored human device for communicating values and meaning. My mother and father could communicate to me something of what it was like to be a black person growing up in the Deep South in the ’20s and ’30s simply by telling stories of their life. I think the language I’ve inherited has served me well.”

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