

# Preview

## Something to Believe: An Interview with Bill T. Jones

As a gay men of color, dancer/choreographer Bill T. Jones has had more than his share of experiences with the forces of oppression. When his life-long lover Arnie Zane died of AIDS nearly three years ago, Jones found himself faced with an even greater number of challenges. Perhaps the greatest challenge—and, in Jones's case, the greatest achievement—came from trying to express in his own work the incredible number of overwhelming thoughts and feelings which surrounded the death of his partner, and of the AIDS crisis in general.

On Thursday night, January 17, Jones will present two works at the Flynn Theatre: "Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin" and "Promised Land." Drawing on the talents of a number of local dancers (and some non-dancers) and the live music of Julius Hemphill and his Sax Sextet, Jones hopes to present a controversial evening of dance which will haunt the audience long after the house lights have come back up.

*OITM* asked Jones about some of those questions, and about his life and work in general.

*OITM*: What are your thoughts about the piece, the work, about coming to Vermont and doing it here? There are rumors that this is one of the few places that's going to do the piece in its entirety.

**Bill T. Jones**: Yes, in the New England area - it's going to be done fourteen places across the country. I want the people doing it to be comfortable doing it, to be really motivated, because it demands a lot of me, and as a result I say to each community, "Help me do it, and I'll demand a lot of you."

It demands first of all a willingness to bring a work that attempts to articulate a lot of marginalized groups. There's a lot of talking in this piece, but talking that's saying things about slavery as a metaphor for

any host of people, second-class citizenship as being something that we really understand in the popular mind associated with slavery and the civil rights movement. But can we take this philosophy of liberation as was so perfectly espoused by the early women's movement, the abolitionist movement, the civil rights movement, Dr. King...how far does it stretch? Can you see it in sexual preference? Can you see it in the deeper struggle women have for equality and personhood? Can you see it in terms of biases against age and body type and that sort of thing? The piece wants to do that.

*OITM*: So really bringing these issues in the piece as a microcosm of the bigger society, raising issues of race, of sexuality, of clothing, of nudity...

**BTJ**: Of body, period.

*OITM*: And putting them out there, within the constraints of the piece, but also to say to the community as a whole, "Do you buy into *doing* this?"

**BTJ**: Right. Where do you stand on this? You don't have to agree, but first of all, do you believe we have the right to *do* it—that's a big one—and where do you stand on the issues, and maybe the most central one? They're all central; they all swirl around in the way I talk about them. You'll see that when you see the work. It's a big work, a sprawling panorama; it visits lots of countries and then it ends up in this country called the "promised land."

One central image and question in it is "What do you believe?" I can't tell you what to believe, but do you have any beliefs? Or are you a late twentieth-century automaton?

I say to my gay brothers, "Guys, who are we except a bunch of wounded concerns at this point? How human are we? Can you see yourself in this woman's



*Dancer/choreographer Bill T. Jones will appear at the Flynn on January 17*

struggle? Can you see yourself in this fat man? Can you see yourself in this depiction of slavery in 1852? What do you care about? What do you love?"

There's one section called "Faith" in the piece in which we use an area minister, who tells the story of Job, and I dance it, and then I interview the minister about faith.

The whole thing is a classic bit. Job is a rich man who gets everything taken away from him. God lets the devil kill Job's two kids, a house falls on them, all his cattle are slaughtered and stolen, and he's pretty crushed. And then the devil covers him with welts and sores—sounds familiar, right?—and he is a miserable sight. And his  
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**ROBERT W. ZEUNER**  
ATTORNEY AT LAW

Member National  
Lesbian and  
Gay Law  
Association

**Bauer, Gravel and Watson**  
362 Main Street  
Burlington, VT 05401  
863-5538

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