

The Arts

An Interview with Bill T. Jones *(from preceding page)*

friends come and sit with him and they're really stunned at how he looks. "My God, look at him." Also sound familiar? And they don't even talk to him for several days, and he then the first one gets up his nerve to talk and he says "Well now look, Job. This

doesn't happen to an innocent person, you know. Obviously you did something wrong." Job says, "No, I couldn't have." And the next one

says, "See Job, you're just too proud. Obviously you think you're perfect but God knows you're not, and that's why you're being punished." Or "It's original sin," says the third one, "It's a sin even before..."

Nothing shakes Job's faith, and in the end, God gives him back everything: his cattle, his health, he has more children than before, and he lives to be 140 years old or something like that.

So I say to the Reverend, "What are we to make of this? How do we, as modern people, believe it? Is AIDS punishment from God?" And I ask him to answer those questions honestly in an auditorium in his own community.

OITM: So that's not scripted.

BTJ: No, never scripted. I want him on the spot, to answer the questions as he would if I went to him privately. And you know, there's a lot of talk these days that the so-called religious community exerts a lot

of influence on our lives. Well, let's talk about it in the open, and let's hear your answers, because they have this particular ring to them in the open.

I want people who don't believe to at least see someone who does believe and to

turn the question back on themselves - "What do I believe? What sense do I make of the world and the suffering and what have you?" It's ultimately about us.

No, his answers may not be satisfying to you, but do you have a set of answers that are satisfying to you? That's the most honest way I can put it in dealing with sophisticated people with very sophisticated late twentieth-century problems.

I know that when we look at death, and I think many of us in the gay community have plenty of opportunity to look at death - the closer we get to it, something happens. We change, we expand in some ways. Some of us go out shrieking and crying and afraid, but many, I think, meet it in incredibly noble ways that illuminate everyone around them. I'm saying, "Do we have to wait to get to that point to find out what these people know, what those who go before us know?" That's one thing that was an influence in the making of the piece.

It's not a piece about AIDS per se, but it is a piece that asks questions in the time of AIDS, the deepest questions in my life

right now. "What do I believe? What do I love? What would I die for?" Now everyone should answer them in their own way, but I ask you in Burlington, you've got to come with your whole self.

Diversity is one of the things that I ask of the community. The last image is a stage full of naked people singing. Yes, it's a very precious image; it is; I know. It makes some people really uncomfortable, and it's too easy and sweet and it's a cliché and all, but I think it's worth stating.

You know, my mother is in this piece. She's seventy-five years old; she's a Southern Baptist; she's very religious. She had the issue of homosexuality come to her, and she had to ask God to help her deal with it. And she is dealing with it, and the thing I prod her most about is that she stands beside me in this.

Every night she does a prayer, which is done from the heart. She asks the Lord to take care of her son. Tonight she wants Him to come into this room and move this room and give her son and his dancers power to do this...and she really means it. She'll go there with me. She will go.

That is to me an aspect of the piece which is about healing, and I offer it. Yes, it's very personal - "Oh, how dare he show his own personal life?!" - but I'm saying that is what my work has always been made of, and it's what I have to offer.

I said to someone, "I came out in this piece as a New York artist who had a desire for the sacred, who had a desire to reunite with his personal tradition and tradition at large, and I did it all publicly." I came out. It's like coming out in a way, this work. Everywhere I go, I'm assuming that people right now want to feel less alienated.

A lot of us are very angry, and rightfully. We should be. But there is an anger that is a constructive one, that we pull back the bow and we aim with a steady hand - it's when all of our mind and our passion are united and we let it fly. When it's gone, we let it go. But it was all about the pulling back of the bow and the focusing - just put it all into that moment.

That's what I want this work to be. It's something like a ritual I've given myself to do, and it's a good one; it's not just for me. I think it can really heal. It can make a difference.

**"Who are we except
a bunch of wounded
concerns at this point?
How human are we?"**

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