

Creating Consciousness in a Card Shop: OLOC Tackles Ageism in the Marketplace

by Joy D. Griffith

The author is a member of Old Lesbians Organizing for Change (OLOC), a group dedicated to consciousness-raising regarding age discrimination against all women in the state of Vermont.

Two Golden Threads/OLOC women and I walked into a Hallmark Card Shop in northern Vermont to purchase "ageist" birthday cards. We hoped to use the cards as props at a sexism/ageism workshop at the Vermont Coalition for Lesbians and Gay Men annual "Town Meeting" last October.

When we presented ten ageist cards, one package of black "over-the-hill Age 40" balloons, and a box of "over-the-hill" black candles to the cashier, the woman behind the register stated, "You must be going to celebrate a BIG birthday!"

"Quite the opposite," we replied. We politely explained that it took us less than ten minutes to find these items of discrimination against women.

Our society promotes this devastating propaganda via one of the country's largest industries: the greeting card industry. The more denigrating the verse, the "funnier" the joke against aging women.

We continued explaining other daily examples of ageist experiences, and were soon joined by two other women in the shop as well as the store manager, who had overheard our conversation. Suddenly the assistant cashier stepped to our

side, saying that she understood our position and agreed with us. She based her decision on her college-bound daughter, whom she had encouraged to take a gun to school with her for self-protection.

One of our OLOC women took the time to explain the pain felt by the jokes and taunts against her age in the owner's birthday cards. The shop manager said that his female card buyer did not find these cards to be harmful.

"She must be young," said the woman.

"Why, yes," the manager replied.

We explained to the owner how these types of cards make older women feel. Even with so many beautiful, meaningful, and lovely cards on the market, our society insists on ridiculing older women, with shops like his perpetuating the insult.

We explained to the owner that we wouldn't be making any purchases in his shop after all. He asked for our names and addresses before we left; two weeks later, he phoned us to announce that he would no longer purchase ageist cards.

Older women have as much purchasing power as any other age group, perhaps more, and we have the right not to be offended by merchandise. It behooves us to speak up and raise the consciousness level of merchants who may not even realize that a large portion of their potential buyers are being insulted.

We shall send this particular shop owner a note of thanks on one of his own cards. ▼

Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company Comes to Vermont

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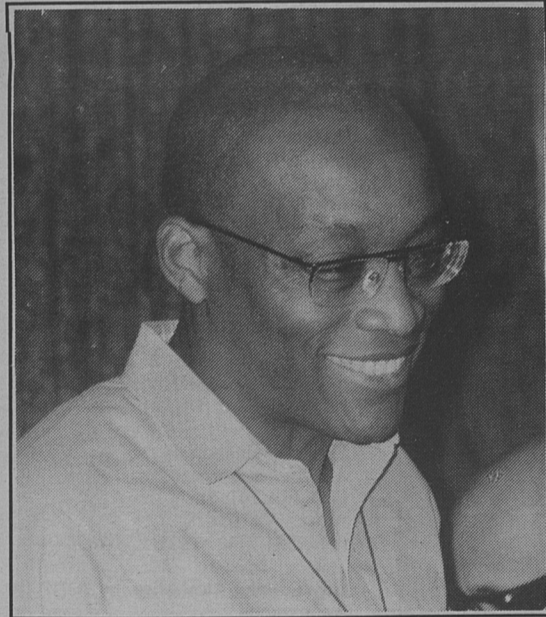


Photo by Staci Visco

Artist Bill T. Jones, whose dance show "Still/Here" played to a full house at the Flynn Theater in Burlington.

Jones was candid about his lack of expertise on issues of death and dying. "Speaking purely as an artist, I really don't know about life and death," he said, adding, "I invited articulate people to help me (with "Still/Here"). I asked them: 'What about pain?' 'What about fear?' 'What about the people

I love?" Jones characterized "Still/Here" as a "piece about hope, because I saw those things in people living with life-threatening illness. I didn't make my work to talk about dying. I wanted to make a work talking about how to live."

Criticized by some as "victim art," "Still/Here" has been described as both depressing and uplifting. The March 30 Flynn performance marked the eighth anniversary of the death of Jones's lover and dance partner, Arnie Zane, from AIDS-related complications. Shortly after Jones appeared on stage to dedicate the performance to Zane to encourage audience members to and vote in November, the ten-member dance company (sans Jones) began the two-hour performance.

Performed in two parts ("Still" and "Here"), the show incorporated music, modern dance, shadows, audio and videotaped interviews Jones conducted with terminally ill people, and a projected collage of open mouths, hearts, x-rays and hands. Multiple moving screens provided colorful backdrops for much of the action.

Following the performance, Jones and the dancers re-appeared to speak with audience members in an open forum. He ended his comments with a discussion of what he described as a trick question. "People always ask me if art can heal?" Jones said "If healing means 'coming to harmony with,' then I think we can be healed. Art can heal."

Based on the standing ovation received at the Flynn Theater in response to "Still/Here," Jones may be right. ▼

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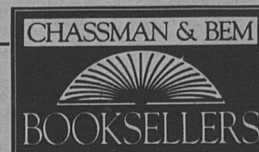
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