

“That Unspeakable Somewhat”: Bill T. Jones, Abraham Lincoln, and the Question of Iconicity

by Ariel Osterweis Scott
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Trying to secure an interview with Bill T. Jones is like trying to secure a lunch date with Madonna. Here we seem to be in the presence—or absence—of icons. So what ensues when Bill T. Jones decides to choreograph a piece based on an icon such as Abraham Lincoln? All kinds of associations enter the scene: blacknesses, whitenesses, emancipations, restorations, miscegenations, memorializations. Jones is quick to dissociate himself from iconicity, telling me, “Icons are rare, gather dust, or [are there] for someone to break. I’m a working artist.” As quickly as Jones rejects his own iconic status, he admits, “I wanted to make a work ... about what it means to be an American icon. An American icon is the way ... we think of ourselves.”

Far from collecting dust, Jones is currently working on *Fondly Do We Hope ... Fervently Do We Pray*,¹ the third in a triad of pieces based on Abraham Lincoln’s legacy. Commissioned to commemorate the bicentennial of Lincoln’s birth, *Fondly* will premiere on September 17, 2009 at the Ravinia Festival in Highland Park, IL. It is slated to tour (among other venues) to San Francisco’s Yerba Buena Center for the Arts this October. On May 9, Jones will engage in a community conversation at YBCA. He tells me, “I want to find out how people in a hip city like San Francisco think about Lincoln and his legacy. I was a bit shocked when I realized my young dancers had so little engagement with him, whereas he seemed to be huge in my life.... Lincoln was the only white man I was allowed to love unconditionally.... I want to find out what the dance- and theater-going audience thinks and feels, and I want to try to share something about the struggle between the 5-year-old [in me] who believed everything ... with the 57-year-old who struggles to believe anything. Lincoln is going to be the petri dish for this struggle.”

It is not accidental that dialogue should serve as a formal entry into this choreographic material, for in Lincoln’s nineteenth century, “oration was all the rage.” Jones, always one to interrogate the relationship between dance and text, explains, “People would stand to listen to a two-hour speech. All sorts of people were interested in oration and the ideas.” *Serenade/The Proposition*, Jones’ first meditation on Lincoln (which premiered in July 2008 at the American Dance Festival) is based on the notion that a “‘serenade’ in the nineteenth century was one way of asking someone to give a spontaneous oration.” Thus, in this community conversation, Jones will stage a cross-serenade of sorts.

This project has everything to do with consistency: If an icon is typically rigid, static, and breakable, Jones attempts to reclaim its claylike malleability, to return to Lincoln's time in order to upset the violence enacted by distance. After all, distances change substances. Temporal distance freezes an image. If Lincoln was once his own type of "working artist" (albeit a political one), he has become sedimented in history on the one hand, and yanked in all directions on the other. According to Jones, "Lincoln would probably scratch his head about what has been done with his legacy ... the stolen legacy." Appropriated by both the liberal left and the conservative right (not to mention President Obama himself), Lincoln's iconicity has undergone defacements in the name of political power struggles. Such defacement is that of chipping away, of repainting, of tipping over, of graffiti scribbling. As opposed to ice-picking at one of Lincoln's various frozen images, Jones enacts a melting, a clay-making, reminding us of Lincoln's porousness. Nevertheless, in a bit of text that may or not make it into the final production, Jones addresses the legend thusly: "Lincoln, tonight we want to use you.... Everyone wants you to be their Lincoln. I am also going to be doing that." Eschewing a definitive stance on Lincoln's legacy, Jones hopes to avoid allowing this "use" to become "abuse." Jones explains, "If Lincoln came back and he was really going to hold up this mirror, what would he in fact say to us [about his legacy]? Would his answer be Mr. Obama? In that case, I have nothing to say." For Jones, Fondly lingers in the exploratory, not the explanatory: "If [Lincoln's] legacy is a black president in a multiracial country, then there's nothing we can learn. But I think there's something else there, and I'm digging around for it."

Where Jones does see similarities between Lincoln and himself is in what he calls Lincoln's "heart of an artist.... I recognize in him those twin wholes." A lover of opera and folk music who listened to sentimental songs during the worst moments of war, Lincoln was a dedicated reader of the Bible and Shakespeare. "For someone with so little schooling," Jones explains, "he became an expert on Shakespeare.... You can hear the moral pulse [of the Biblical] and the use of metaphor and speechifying that is like very fine theater, which he got from Shakespeare. Those two together—I think there's something [like that] in my own heart. I am the son of a Southern Baptist mother; by the same token, I am a great lover of Shakespeare and moral literature. That can be a problem in a strictly modernist environment such as the avant-garde that produced me—but not impossible."

Moreover, Jones keeps it soft: "Sometimes when I speak ... to hard-nosed theoreticians or historians or academics I feel a little soft. That softness is the only thing that's going to actually keep me making art, I think. The hardness of cynicism would dry me up." Jones' self-proclaimed softness should not be mistaken, however, for weakness. In fact, he has had to endure personal/political struggles of the direst kind in order to move forward with his particular artistic vision: "One of the hardest things in the 57 years I've lived is that I've really tried to believe in 'free at last, free at last,

thank God Almighty we are free at last,' and that meant that I could publicly love Arnie Zane to the point of establishing a company with him, that I could love the world of art so much so that I still believe it is as important to me as religion is to some people, and that I could truly believe that a man like Lincoln still deserves to be treated as the head of our—what we call—'civil religion.' "

Despite his ability to cite likeness between his own artistic sensibility and that of Lincoln, Jones continues to grapple with the seeming disconnect between the medium of dance and the subject matter of Lincoln. He asks himself, "What [does] my brand of dance have to do with a historical giant like this?" Although the company has always explored text, Jones' emphasis remains on movement—choreographic patterns, dynamic footwork, challenging partnering, and rhythmic surprise—not linear narrative or an attempt at historical accuracy. In *Serenade/The Proposition*, text sets a tone more than it provides particular characterizations. For example, an excerpt from Oliver Wendell Holmes is recited over the sound system while dancers perform choreography: "You know that man has in him that unspeakable somewhat which makes him capable of miracle, able to lift himself by the might of his own soul, unaided, able to face annihilation for a blind belief. It could be said that this history is distance, a distance between that man and me."² Of note is that these words originally comprised an oration, not a printed document. Jones muses, "My penchant for abstract movement, my penchant for a kind of athleticism that goes all the way back to Arnie Zane and I grappling and rolling about when we were young men: How can we yoke that to a time where oration reigned supreme, where you would stand ... in glorious and often ponderous language and talk about why the country could not stand half slave and half free, or [talk] about what makes some people human and some people cattle?" No novice in his field, Jones points out that, while "dance shows power well, dance shows human interaction well, [and] dance shows personality well, it's not great with ideas." And more than anything, *Fondly* is a piece about the idea of the ever-elusive yet ever-present Lincoln, and the ideas surrounding that idea. "How can I make this a piece about ideas, conveyed primarily through moving bodies? I'm struggling with that more than anything else.... In trying to forge *Fondly* ... I've embraced the period, the question of expansion of slavery, the power of the federal government, our sense of the religious destiny of the country, our economic destiny, and our political destiny, all ... wound up together like a group of snakes, biting and kicking each other. How do I show that in dance? Maybe 'show' is a bad word, but how do I respond to it?"

If playwright Suzan-Lori Parks' initial interest in Lincoln's mythic character was propelled by "his costume: the hat, the beard, the height ... [his] high voice,"³ Jones' response is spatio-temporal in character: *100 Migrations*, the second installment of the Lincoln project, featured a huge bed, evoking Lincoln's Pythagorean death (the tall icon died lying diagonally across his bed), and *Fondly's* "visual device [is a] white oval stage surrounded by a curtain with the inclusion of classical columns." The observations of a

choreographer grappling with an idea-driven piece differ from those of a plot-driven playwright: Parks notes, "He was shot in a theater by an actor.... How good is that? If you're a playwright, it just doesn't get any better than that." Jones, instead, focuses more on what could have been—had Lincoln not died early—as opposed to the dramatic perfection of his death.

It is impossible to engage with ideas about Lincoln without engaging in questions of race. Jones says, "Race ... was something I resisted for a long time because I thought, what is the legacy of this man?" Nonetheless, race remains one of the most pressing issues of Lincoln's legacy, not to mention Jones' body of work: "When I want to show what it's like to be a person on the auction block, who do I choose—my short Mexican man, a tall white woman, or one of our beautiful black men? I feel more comfortable when I choose him. Maybe he's a proxy for me." This type of distanced autobiographical gesture—of imagining oneself in another violent era via another body—dances around representation, allowing audiences to imagine various possible protagonists in the affective scene. Jones' piece, *Reading, Mercy, and the Artificial Nigger*, based on Flannery O'Connor's 1955 short story, *The Artificial Nigger*, played explicitly with "colorblind and genderblind casting," in which a tall white woman stands in for a black man, for example. In Jones' choreographic world, marked bodies never stand in for themselves, exactly. Thus, in viewing *Fondly*, we will certainly find discrepancies between our own image of Lincoln and the white man portraying him onstage. If, as Jones states, "an American icon [reflects] the way ... we think of ourselves," flaws emerging in the distance between our own preconceptions and the staged images will undoubtedly unsettle us. Herein rests the force of Jones' work—its ability to so gorgeously perform violence on our own selves. What lies onstage becomes our own disillusion.

Presented with our own disillusion, isn't it about time we dismantled over-rehearsed notions of "America" and reclaimed our own place in it? Jones' seemingly naïve embrace of Lincoln, which consciously avoids easy allusions to Obama, reveals itself to in fact possess the ability to agitate both the left and the right, black or white. I suspect the title, *Fondly Do We Hope ... Fervently Do We Pray*, traces a performative path: although we may enter the theater with a fondness for Lincoln and his legacy, we will leave its gates otherwise, fervently praying. But for what, exactly? Perhaps as we witness a dismantling and multiplying of the self, we will pray to regain a sense of collectivity, a politics that recognizes the importance of song and literature in Lincoln's life before craving war—military war and its subsequent rhetorical wars. None of us will agree on Lincoln's legacy, but some of us will agree that Jones and his company won't settle for stasis: this choreography moves ... and moves us to move out of our own way.

Bill T. Jones quotations are from an interview with Ariel Osterweis Scott on March 26, 2009.

Bill T. Jones will be in San Francisco for a community conversation: "Bill T.

Jones on Performing Lincoln's Legacy," Sat, May 9, 2pm, YBCA's Forum, free. See calendar.

Ariel Osterweis Scott is a Ph.D. candidate in Performance Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Her research lies at the intersection of race, gender, virtuosity, and temporality in contemporary dance in the U.S. and Africa. Her writing has appeared in *Dancer Magazine*, *In Dance*, *Women and Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, and *e-misférica*. Having danced with the companies of Mia Michaels, Heidi Latsky, and Dwight Rhoden and Desmond Richardson (*Complexions*), Scott has choreographed works based on doubling, pregnancy, translation, and the Drawing Poems of Robert Grenier.