



MEMOIRS - FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS | **MEMOIRS** - CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES
MAPS - PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS: UMA CARTOGRAFIA PÓS-COLONIAL | **MAPS** - EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES: A POSTCOLONIAL CARTOGRAPHY

Saturday, 24 April 2021

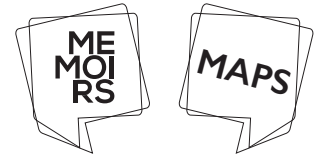


The Problem | Bill T. Jones, Janet Wong | 2020 | Holland Festival | courtesy of the artists

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM

António Pinto Ribeiro

Bill T. Jones (born 1952) is an American black dancer and choreographer who in 1982, together with his partner Arnie Zane (1948-1988), a white artist, founded the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company (1948-1988). Present in Europe in festivals and theatre circuits, the company became particularly well-known with the presentation of the work *Still/Here(1)* (1994) that, at the time, came from the US wrapped in a controversy promoted by the sensationalist media who accused the choreographer of opportunism because the work in question resulted from research conducted on patients suffering from terminal diseases such as AIDS, leukemia and cancer. The choreographer, who was himself HIV-positive and the widow of Arnie Zane, who passed away as a result of complications from AIDS, responded



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by stating that *Still/Here*, like all his works, had a simultaneously artistic and political nature: “It is impossible to separate the formalism of the work from its political content. One can never say that a work is not political, just as one cannot say that one does only political work”.

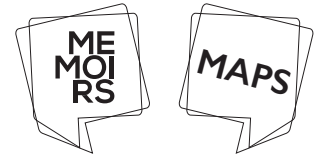
Bill T. Jones is part of the fifth generation of American dance, the one which was jubilatory, which brought together theatre, performance, rock, cinema and integrated diversity as an artistic quality, in the way he summoned non-professionals to dance, and all the diversity of bodies and qualities of movement. Apart from these qualities, the company’s works always included texts, many of which were written by Bill T. Jones himself, as in *Continuous Replay* (1982), in which the choreographer recites while he dances: “My eyes are not my enemy. My desire is not my enemy. My penis is not my enemy. My memory is my enemy.(2) Or in *Still/Here*, in which the whole of the choreography is accompanied by a libretto and one can hear lines like the following:

Can anyone open the door?
Who will give me a drink of water?
Will I become part of the water?
Touching hands
I’m still here.
I am taken by a wave.
I’m flying.
Immobile.
Immobile.
Still here.(3)

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The words and the literature, be it fictional, poetic, or essayistic, have a fundamental presence in the works of this choreographer, and for three fundamental reasons. Literature is a crucial element of the choreographic web and is inscribed in the score of each piece, functioning as a commentary on the work in question. The fact that it is verbalized adds another physicality given by the timbre of the voice and the strength of the speaker’s emission which, in rhythmic terms, provides huge surplus value to the dancing.

To confirm the importance of words and literature in the plays of Bill T. Jones, in addition to the examples already cited, one might refer, due to its originality and choreographic power, the works *Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Promised Land* (1993), based on Harriet Beecher Stowe’s anti-slavery novel *Uncle*



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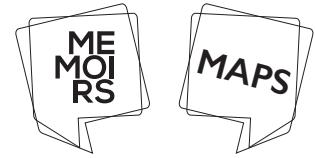
Tom's Cabin (1996), *Ursonate*, based on a poem by Kurt Schwitters, *Ballad* (2008), created on the basis of a poem by Dylan Thomas, and, more recently, *What a Problem* (2020), based on excerpts of "I Have A Dream" by Martin Luther King, Jr, of the American Constitution, of *Moby Dick*, by Herman Melville, and W.E.B. Dubois' *What Problem*. The selection of texts is always marked by a political statement in which the theme of discrimination in the most diverse forms, ethnic segregation, poetry of praise and the founding narratives of communities are present.

What a Problem is the title of a part of a work - *Deep Blue Sea* - that premiered in February 2020 at George Mason University's Center for the Arts. Because of the pandemic, all other performances and international circulation that were scheduled were suspended until it becomes possible to perform the piece again. In the immediate term, one recognizes stylistic features that are common to dozens of pieces created by the choreographer: in the execution and composition of the broad gestures of bodies, curved contractions, expressive hand gestures, the permanent play between the weight and lightness of the sequences, large openings, connecting movements between high and low, always relying on the choreographer's own physically and corporally striking interpretation.

What is the *Problem*?

In relation to the *Problem*, the choreographer enunciates it right at the beginning of the piece, drawing on a fundamental text of the *négritude* thought of the thinker and activist W.E.B. Dubois.

Dubois, who in several of his works, and in particular in *The Study of the Negro Problems* (1898), states that the Problem is the color of black person: how whites look at blacks, how they associate blacks with darkness, and whites with light, and how these dichotomies were incorporated by blacks. That is the problem. According to the choreographer, this problem remains current and has been amplified to the extent that it is now present in sexual, gender, social division of labour and immigration policies. And this *problem* is further amplified by creating despair, insanity, loneliness. All this justifies, for the choreographer, the urgency of creating this work that is in line with the proclamation of Black Lives Matter. There is nothing new in this *problem*, we could say, because it is a *problem* that arose following the Atlantic slave trade and, before it, in the genocide of the first peoples by the occupiers of the Americas. That's why the choreographer resorted to the memory of his childhood and remembered a character who had passed him almost unnoticed at that first reading: Pip, an African-American ship's



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boy, an Alabama lad that no one on the boat cares about; Pip, who, though intelligent, sensitive, capable of heroic acts to help the crew, is “invisible” to that same crew. To this reference he adds two others that we can take as the solution to the *problem*: the quotation of the American Constitution beginning with “We the people” and an excerpt from “I Have a Dream”, by Martin Luther King Jr.

These excerpts and quotations serve as commentary on the choreographic evolution that, starting with Bill T. Jones walking alone on stage and whispering these texts, evolves into group compositions with his dancers. In the last part of the play, we see the presence of anonymous people who come together on stage and create a community work, a work that expresses a “We”, the first manifesto, the sense of artistic and political creation of Bill T. Jones, who has long called for the idea of creating a community in which one can live in common.

What a Problem is a work of our time and for our time because it confronts the present with memories of the past: from the memory of the slave trade and racism, to the memory of the choreographer, who says that this is a “good time to be alive”.

May we have the opportunity to watch a performance of “What a Problem” soon.

An excerpt of the work [here](#).

(1) Still/Here was performed at Culturgest in Lisbon in May 1995 and the Company would return some years after to Culturgest and Culturporto with other repertoires.

(2) In Bill T. Jones & Arnie Zane , *Body against body, the dance and other collaborations of*, ed. Elizabeth Zimmer e Susan Quasha, Station Hill Press, N.I. 1989.

(3) In *Programm of Stiill/Here Performance*, ed. by Culturgest, Lisbon, 1995.

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