

INFORMANCE - MARCH 26, 2008

How can we know the dancer from the dance?" – Martha Graham, Murray Louis, and Bill T. Jones

I begin this Informance talk by thanking Linda Roberts and Lori Katterhenry. In early November (the 9th, to be exact), Lori asked me if -- in view of my "obvious enthusiasm and expertise" -- I would be interested in writing study guides for the three guest artist works of the 2007-08 MSU Dance Program: *Steps in the Street*, by Martha Graham; *Four Brubeck Pieces*, by Murray Louis; and *D-Man in the Waters* by Bill T. Jones. "We have never done this before," Lori said, "and I know it is quite common in theater." ... "Great idea," Linda Roberts declared the next day, "This information would be very useful for the Informance. I know the students are interested in discussing the movement philosophies and stylistic differences of the three choreographers, and the challenges these elements present in performing and bringing to life the reconstructed dances we are rehearsing."

A few days thereafter, Lori, Linda and I were brainstorming in Lori's spacious executive office suite and I cautioned them that I was not a dance critic by training; I am an historian and biographer. They were well aware, and that was precisely the reason they asked me to become involved. They were looking for insights about the "historical" side to each work, the social and cultural circumstances that engendered them, the aesthetic contexts against which they were created. I then said that I was not sure I would end up doing actual "study guides," per se. I have nothing against study guides, it's just that I find the format constricting. I told Linda and Lori that I felt more comfortable writing three interlocking "study-talks," envisioning a gathering just like this one where we would all be sitting around, somewhat informally, listening and learning from each other. At the end of that memorable meeting we invented a new word to describe what I was about to do – "danceaturgy."

As all of you dancers listen to my brief remarks – intended to provoke dialogue -- it will become evident how much I have learned and, I hope, evolved, in the past few months, relative to my initial expectations for this innovative project. Everything changed once I began to sit in on rehearsals in Life Hall and Memorial Auditorium, to watch the immensely talented young dancers in this wonderful program, to listen to the wise and inspiring teachings of Denise Vale and Tito Del Saz and Joelle Van Sickle. Yes indeed, everything changed, once I moved out of the rarified intellectual shell of my cloistered writing study surrounded by books and papers and into the actual dancer's world of "classes, calluses, and coffee," to quote Murray Louis' words. That's why I chose the title of this talk from the famous line in *Among School Children* by the great Irish poet, W. B. Yeats.

But wait – I am getting ahead of myself.

STEPS IN THE STREET Let us begin at the beginning, with Martha Graham (1894-1991), or, rather, “Martha.” The first thing I noticed when I began my research into what we now acknowledge as the “heroic age” of American modern dance and the career of this formidable woman was the way in which her early students at the Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance in the late 20s and early 1930s, and the girls at the summer program at Bennington College in Vermont several years later were always struck by her spell-binding directness: “I want you all to call me *Martha*,” she told them at first meeting, speaking softly. “We have no time for manners and artificial behavior. We’ve got a very important thing to do.” When I watched Denise Vale in rehearsal for *Steps* in January, I immediately noticed the way Denise, too, consistently referred to “Martha,” as, for example, “Martha says [notice the present tense, always the *present* tense] your thought is being carried through over a period of time...Martha says it is all from the center, from the *pelvis*, from the waist...Martha says the dancer lives in the moment of reality...Posture, for Martha, comes from the emotional state you are in...The spine must seek that which is above it...Martha says, Either the foot is pointed or it is not. There is no ‘in-between’ in dance. Martha says Dance is more than a series of steps...Dance is a time beat...Sixty-four ‘ones’...just like a clock!”

This determined *presence*, in every sense of the word, was reinforced when I viewed the vintage black and white documentary, *A Dancer’s World*, filmed in 1957, and saw at first hand the philosophy Denise transmitted borne forth from its source: There she was, Martha Graham in her sixties, speaking to the camera, her head tilted slightly upward so as to display the all-important arc of the throat and jaw-line, her luminous, confident gaze boring directly into me. She spoke with quiet, truthful authority of the dancer’s “mastery of her instrument,” and of “discipline with the goal of freedom...the spontaneity that is arrived with only after years and years of training” and how the dancer must work to “hold the stage and dance with clarity the deep matters of the heart.” While she proclaimed her mission and conviction, speaking in a tremulous, oracular and slightly imperious voice, Martha gradually donned the elaborate costume for her starring role of Queen Jocasta in the ballet, *Night Journey*, with haunting music by William Schuman and angular sets by Isamu Noguchi. While arranging her necklace, hairdo and exotic sculptural crown, she talked of the dancer’s “responsibilities to herself and to her audience,” being compelled to understand and appreciate “the privilege of the instant.” While she meticulously prepared and slowly, with great care, applied dark kohl-makeup to her huge deep-set eyes and curved lashes, Martha continued to talk, determinedly, into the mirror, of the dancer’s capacity to be divine and mortal at once; and, most memorably, of the “function” of *The Modern Dance* as above all else, “communication.”

I have dwelled upon the powerful language and rhetoric of Martha Graham because it may -- indeed, should -- sound appealingly mysterious and mystical to you all; it certainly does to me. Being a writer, I was thrilled to discover what a fine writer Martha was, and so widely-read! After all, in a 1929 program note to one of her NYC concerts, she quoted the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s belief in the necessity of “strong, free joyous action.” Yet this is the very same woman who also said – and some of you will be familiar with this from your dance history classes as I have already shared the quote with Lori – “You do not realize how the headlines that make daily history effect the muscles of the human body.”

As Lincoln Kirstein wrote in response to seeing *Steps in the Street*, “The news from Spain in daily cables...the large events smashing around us... alternately frightens and thrills us.”

Let’s hold that thought and consider the “current events”-Depression-era based origins of the work. *Steps* premiered at the Guild Theater in New York on the evening of December 20, 1936 as the central part of a larger work called *Chronicle*. The opening section, *Spectre – 1914* was divided in three: *Drums—Red Shroud—Lament*. *Steps*, the middle section, was likewise in three segments: *Devastation—Homelessness--Exile*. Part Three of *Chronicle* was entitled *Prelude to Action* and had two parts: *Unity—Pledge to the Future*. The score by the composer Wallingford Reigger was never recorded, and thus lost; the original was replaced with Reigger’s composition for the “Variations and Conclusion” segment of Doris Humphrey’s 1935 *New Dance*. Reigger recalled how Martha had conceptualized *Chronicles* in the summer of 1936 when the Spanish Civil War broke out, and was “ready to call upon” him by the ensuing fall “for [the music for] her first large dance creation based on a social theme, war.” Reigger called *Steps* “the choreographic embodiment of the most eloquent sermon, the most scathing indictment of the great scourge of mankind.” There is no question, in historical retrospect, about where Martha stood with respect to opposing the dictatorial Spanish General Francisco Franco. She, like many American artists of her time possessed of “proletarian sympathies,” supported “the cause” of the Popular Front against the rise of Fascism in embattled Spain; and again, like many of her colleagues in the arts, performed in charity benefits to raise money for the International Brigade to help the oppressed peoples of Spain.

And now we come to the first paradox of my talk this afternoon. Let me give you a comment by the noted dance critic, John Martin, writing in 1937, one year after the premiere of *Steps*, when he warned against perceiving “*propaganda or mere timeliness* about a theme deriving from the Spanish War. Let it be said,” he wrote, “that this will be a moving dance long after the tragic situation in Spain has been brought to a conclusion.” I raised this pivotal point about the ostensibly political aspect of Martha’s work in a recent conversation with Dr. Barry Fischer, who wrote his dissertation on *Steps in the Street*, unearthed a long-lost, old film of the dance, and pioneered its modern scholarly reclamation more than twenty years ago. “Martha did not like to be called a ‘political’ choreographer,” Fischer -- who knew her intimately -- told me. “Remember that during the 1930’s it was quite popular to employ art as a ‘weapon’ against social injustice – but still, Martha’s motivation was always, first and foremost, empoweringly feminine and personal.” Fischer insisted to me that “Martha was affected by the immediate tragedy of War. But *Steps* is *not* a ‘war-dance.’” (By the way, if you have not already done so, I urge all of you to take a field trip some time to the Jerome Robbins Dance Division of The New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, and take a look at the video of the fascinating 1986 reconstruction of *Steps*, directed and introduced with commentary by Barry Fischer. Look closely and you will notice, with great delight, that our very own Nancy Lushington is one of the dancers.)

What, then, does *Steps* “represent?” I thought to myself, sitting in the fourth row alone, watching Denise’s rigorous rehearsals in Memorial Auditorium. Is the martial, backward pacing *not* meant to “represent” the regressive course of events hastened by war time? Are not the wrenched, release-contraction torqued torsos like the agony of oppression and loneliness? Those interrupted lock-steps and repetitive jumps – “little stag leaps,” Anna Kisselgoff called them – could they be the disjunction of

battle? Is the dancers' studied introspection and unbroken ignorance of the audience a demonstration of the relentlessness of conflict? As if in response to these questions, my mind drifted to a reminiscence by Dorothy Bird, a member of Martha's Company from 1931-1937 who danced in the original *Steps*. "It was definitely '*American dance*,'" Ms. Bird told critic Deborah Jowitt in an interview sixty years later. "Martha was breaking the mold. We were American pioneers and when we got our parallel feet we were like railroad tracks that never came together, either back or front, out into the distance...Nothing was ever to be done in any dance that was already done in another dance!"

FOUR BRUBECK PIECES It feels right – in keeping with the spirit of this next irrepressible, exhilarating dance -- to start part 2 of my talk in an impressionistic way: my interview-meeting with Alberto (Tito) Del Saz on a torrentially-rainy night in February at a small round table next to the front window of a little downstairs café on the Lower East Side. Tito, as most of you already know, was born in Bilbao, Spain, and began his professional career as an ice-skater. He made his debut as lead soloist for Nikolais Dance Theater in 1985, and now is the Artistic and Reconstruction Director for the Murray Louis and Nikolais Dance Foundation. His incessant mission is to preserve the Nikolais/Louis technique, repertory and legacy through teaching and directing, accomplished through constant travel around the country and the world, conducting residencies on university campuses and in professional dance companies. How appropriate, therefore, that the first major insistence from this energetic and emphatic man – a man, I realized after less than five minutes' chat, who knew *exactly* what he was talking about – was that "Nikolais/Louis is about *motion* – not emotion."

Tito said this several times during our couple of hours together, and reiterated the precept on the day I watched him rehearse our students. Everyone took their places. The music came on. The dance began. Tito sat in his chair, silent, expressionless, arms crossed, legs stretched in front of him. Six or seven minutes into the piece he suddenly stood up and signaled to stop. He shook his head. "You are not concentrating," Tito told the group, his tone matter of fact with a slight edge. "You are distracted. Stop fooling around, stop smiling, and start over from the beginning." To my utterly untrained eye, nothing seemed wrong. Soon thereafter, I sat in on Joelle Van Sickle's jitterbuggy, "partner-y" (if I may coin another new word) rehearsal. Everyone was jumping and springing around like intoxicated birds. Joelle urged the *Brubeck Pieces* dancers to "take a space and lift it and take it back." And this time, I "got" it – as Tito had told me, he thought of himself "as a performer, not a dancer;" and the theatrical magic of *Four Brubeck Pieces* has to convey to the audience that you as dancers are having fun, but as a contribution to the show, which is different than allowing your emotions to slip out of control. A fine, tricky balance.

The story of the genesis of *Four Brubeck Pieces* begins with an earlier work, *Glances*, dating from 1976. Murray Louis (1926-) was asked by the American Dance Festival to commission a composer to write a piece of music for him, after the fact, as the choreography had been set in place. "Who composes music, where am I going to find my Stravinsky?" Louis recalled in a 2005 interview. Peter Koletzke, his production manager and lighting designer, suggested Dave Brubeck, the jazz master with a classical background who had studied with Darius Milhaud, and was renowned for his uncanny ability to play improvisation off against structure. "I gave [Dave] the counts of the piece and a video of the dance...a spirited, lively thing," Louis went on, "and then we both went on our separate tours...and when I got

back, I played Brubeck's score, and I nearly died. He had composed it in half time...twice as slow, twice as long!" Frantic modifications ensued; the show went on, as it always must. However, the experience was so unnerving, Brubeck told Murray Louis' principal dancer Janis Brenner, "That's the first and maybe the last time I will compose music *for* dance."

Therefore, the next time around, in 1983-84, the friends reversed the process. "Murray choreographed to my existing music [*Unsquare Dance, Koto Song, Three to Get Ready, and Take Five*]" Brubeck said in his Foreword to *Murray Louis on Dance*, an exquisitely-written book that I fervently recommend to everyone in this room. "For live performances with my Quartet, we had set beginnings and endings, and a known number of bars, but 90 percent of the music was improvised each night. Murray's choreography reflected this freedom, and every night the finale *exploded* with high energy. His young dancers took off like jazz soloists, improvising on movements from the established choreography, expressing the core of their beings in a dance that allowed them to say, '*This is me!*'"

Or, as Murray Louis recalled with different emphasis, "I made it *kinetic*." That's another one of his important buzz-words. "I gave everyone variations that knocked their asses off. *Four Brubeck Pieces* has been choreographed in such a way that there is an opening at the end, a finale, for the dancers to do their own variations, because they're fearless. They were *free* – they didn't have to land on a note or begin on a note. It just builds, as a finale, and then it ends."

Before we get too carried away by all this rhetoric of liberation, a quick reality-check. *Four Brubeck Pieces* premiered on the night of February 10, 1984, at the City Center. During the preceding studio rehearsal process, Brubeck realized with chagrin that with each new iteration of the music he was gradually increasing the tempo, elevating farther away from its ruminative, laid-back origins. The young dancers, energetic as they certainly were, were being egged on to go ever-faster, ever higher, and they could not keep up. Brubeck selected Janis Brenner, senior member of the Company, to set out the correct tempo for him, whisper-counting from the wings. He nick-named her "The Pulse-Princess." In a recent interview, Brenner concurred that improvisation was the touchstone of the Brubeck piece, and that Louis encouraged them all to "do their own thing," *but* – and this was the big however – "even when our endorphins were flowing at the peak, and I was on the verge of tears of joy, Murray molded the final version of our improvisations for us. Murray always had in his mind a signature way that he wanted us to move. There was freedom, but it had to be within his boundaries." Donna Scro Gentile, who danced with Nikolais/Louis in the early 1990s, told a strikingly-similar story: "Murray would tell us we were 'on our own,'" she said, "and to go ahead and take an opening shape. I would start an exploration across the floor in my own way, according to how it made sense in my body, and he would yell out, 'No, Donna! You missed your improvisation! Go back to where you were!'"

Alwin Nikolais -- "Nik" -- (1910-1993) encouraged his dancers, Murray Louis among them from the outset in the late 1940s -- in what he called the "decentralized technique," a system of movement based upon a "fluid center," where, as I noted earlier, motion itself was paramount. Nikolais said that he "wanted to knock the hardness of self out of the dancers and free them from egocentricity;" that is why there were no mirrors in his practice classes. This belief was an important component of his "total theater concept" wherein the dancer would become a dramatic element within a "time-space canvas" rather than an

actual character. The dancer could be subjected to a loss of specific identity by wearing a mask or holding a prop or having iridescent lights projected onto his leotard to form animalistic shapes while he or she followed a “route” or “itinerary” across the floor -- dance as spatial concept rather than classic narrative. “Not merely the drama of boy meets girl,” Nikolais wrote, “but rather the dynamic musicalities of action.” Action – in and of itself, while still conveyed by human beings – that was the challenge of what dance should become. The dancer’s art, Nikolais said, should be integral to itself rather than “portray” an idea from the outside.

“Murray Louis,” an admiring member of the audience commented during the intermission after *Village of Whispers* (1955), “is not dancing in a dark corner. He *is* a dark corner.” How Nik loved this praise! He used to repeat it often when speaking of his longtime student, collaborator, partner and friend. “To Nikolais,” wrote critic Claudia Gitelman, “[this remark] affirmed that dancers could embody what he called a ‘state of space,’ that motion contained its own intelligence.”

Murray Louis, of necessity, took on the gospel of the founder; and then, like all good disciples, went off to create and shape his own company from 1969-1989, after which the two men reunited for four final years together. As I oscillate between the two charismatic participants in this endearingly odd couple, I sense that Louis espoused a more humorous, down-to-earth, somewhat less-intellectualized vision of the dance. It’s a perspective he still endorses -- even now, as a mercurial, 81-year-old living icon spending most of his time in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, where he says he is “happy as a bedbug in a warm bed.” Respecting -- and promulgating through Tito Del Saz -- the formative aesthetics and strictures of “Nik,” Murray Louis moves with natural ease to the human side. Once the dance is finished, he is quick to admit and acknowledge the rest of life, expressed so well in “The Curtain Falls,” the final chapter of *Murray Louis on Dance*. Everybody here at our Informance today will appreciate these knowing words.

Listen: “At the other end of the performance, the final curtain. Once it comes down, the performing world ends, and another flood of sensibilities washes over the dancer...But now the guests are gone,” Murray Louis says in this bittersweet essay, “makeup off, washed and dressed, you look about and the heartbreak begins. Bouquets of fresh flowers remain behind staring at you, confused by your departure...You walk out into the cool night, out into that other world...And tomorrow, all that work to re-create again.”

D-MAN IN THE WATERS And now for the final work in our trilogy in this afternoon's Informance, and once again I remind you of Linda and Lori's original assignment to me while you all listen carefully to these words of Bill T. Jones: "How was my dance [*Social Intercourse*, 1982] a reflection of its culture? It's a complicated issue because it's dealing with the exchange between the artist and the artwork, the artwork and its audience. The work was a commentary on the way I perceived the society I was living in at the time. It was about the way I perceived the relationships between men and women and men and men, as well as the way I perceived the restraints. "

New Yorker magazine dance critic Arlene Croce refused to review a performance of Bill T. Jones' *Still/Here*, labelling it "victim art" because the piece included people who were terminally ill, an accompanying projected video of members of the "Survival Workshop" talking openly about facing death. "The AIDS epidemic marked the critical turning point in Bill's career," Rosalynde (Roz) LeBlanc told me. She danced with the Company from 1993-1999 and, of course, as choreography *repetiteur*, worked closely with many of you here on the precise setting of *D-Man*. "Bill has been HIV-positive since 1985. Arnie [Zane] died from complications of AIDS-related lymphoma in 1988. Demian Acquavella passed a year later," she said. "Over the past two decades, Bill's work has taken on a measure of full-throttle desperation. That's where the incredible rigor of his dance comes from. It extends to the way Bill lives his life. In dance, as in life, Bill digs his heels in and uses every muscle in his body, and that's what he expected of me as a dancer – of all of us – then and now."

Who was D-Man? Demian Acquavella was born in Brooklyn on January 25, 1958. At age twenty, he was a dance major at Santa Monica Community College. Moving back to NYC, he trained with Marjorie Mussman, Cindi Green, and Phil Black, and also danced for a time with the Elsa Monte Dance Company and Alvin Ailey American Dance Center, among others, before joining Jones/Zane in 1985. In the fall of 1987, when Acquavella first found out he was sick, he began to re-channel his creative energies into marketing silkscreened T-shirts decorated with his original artwork. And he continued to dance. "Just because you have AIDS doesn't mean you have to stop the world," he told Maya Wallach in a tape-recorded interview which, again, you all can listen to in the Jerome Robbins Dance Collection at the NY Public Library. In early 1989, Jones was commissioned by the St. Luke's Chamber Orchestra to choreograph a work for an ensemble of nine dancers set to the first movement of Felix Mendelssohn's *Octet in E-Flat Major*. "At first, Bill [and Janet Lilly were] going to call it just *Waters*," Acquavella recalled. "But then Bill looked over at me, and changed the title [by including his nick-name for me] and I will never forget Bill saying I would be in it, even though I could hardly walk. 'We all want you to be in the piece,' Bill said. 'You will always have a little place in the company.'"

Jones' recollection corroborates: "I had a daydream, I had a vision," he wrote in *Last Night on Earth*. "...I saw Demian and a myriad of friends, living and dead, in a body of water. Perhaps it was a lake as vast as the ocean, a lake emptied by a vast and unforgiving waterfall. This company of people was struggling against the current. "*D-Man in the Waters* had its premiere at the Joyce Theatre on March 14, 1989. "As he could no longer walk by the time of the debut," Jones wrote, "I carried Demian onstage, offering my legs as he executed the arm movements of what would have been his solo." With distinctively aquiline profile, meditative gaze, and close-cropped blond hair, Acquavella was especially proud of the arm-gestures he was "very good at," and confessed that he was "amazed [he] even was able to stand up and

take my bow. But the company pulled me through it.” When Acquavella could no longer perform, Jones did not replace him in the piece. “Oddly asymmetrical groupings [marked] his absence,” which made an even more poignant impression on subsequent viewers. Jack Anderson of the New York Times was moved by the—literally—diving, belly-flopping, rolling energy of the dance, the diversity of performers of all body types in outlandish camouflage garb that looked as if—as Bill once wryly remarked—“the dancers had emptied their closets.”

“This was no ponderous elegy,” Anderson wrote, “...In one episode, [the dancers] punched in the air with their fists. But no one drowned in any sea of troubles or was knocked out in a battle with adversity.” Demian Acquavella died on June 8, 1990. He was thirty-two years old. Over the ensuing decade and beyond, *D-Man in the Waters* achieved a permanent place in the Jones/Zane repertory. After awhile, Jones expressed ambivalence about D-Man’s popularity. In an ironic, admittedly “irascible” diary entry jotted down on November 17, 2000, in a dim, stuffy dressing room at the Milan Teatre Lirico after a performance of *D-Man* in which Jones had to step in for an injured dancer, he conceded that the piece was “perhaps more insistent in its importance than I would prefer...[T]hough I am not old, I am no longer young,” he reflected. “...It’s sobering and bothersome to realize that people, many filled with good will, cannot hear or see me free of the aura of H.I.V. and the supposed death sentence it represents.”

I concur with Roz LeBlanc’s astute observation about the way Bill T. Jones “makes” dance with such enduring resolution; there’s an all-important verb—“*makes*.” This indomitable, steadfastly de-romanticized ability to appropriate, accept (*and* when called upon, likewise unashamedly to mourn), revise, and then transcend raw materials, gestures and stories from his own life as well as the lives of his dancers is the moral core of Bill T. Jones’ artistry. It is an artistry that has evolved over an astonishing arc since his student-days at SUNY/Binghamton in 1971 when nineteen-year old William Jones, the son of migrant workers and the tenth of twelve children, first met Queens-raised photographer and actor A.M. Zane—whose father was an Italian-Catholic immigrant from Brazil and whose mother was an Orthodox Jewish immigrant from Lithuania. The ostensibly unlikely pair—Bill, lissome, sensual, lyrical, tender, cool, literate; Arnie wiry, athletic, impetuous, confrontational, hyper, visual—became lovers and mutually-inspiring collaborative “contact improvisation” partners. They set into motion a corpus of work connecting the initial, trusting intimacy of a “body against body” duet to the finally full-fledged, fashionable, avant-garde, (or perhaps *vanguard* is more accurate nowadays) visceral, multi- and inter-media spectacle of Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane & Co.—from *Pas de Deux for Two* to *Fever Swamp*; from *Whosedebadedoll* (love the title) to *The Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Blind Date*, and on and on.

Four months after Zane’s death, Jones made this trenchant comment: “I can see his hand in my choreography...But I am Bill, I’m not Arnie, and I’m not Bill *and* Arnie, which was a hard thing to realize. So I’m going deeper into myself, into my tastes. I have to trust them a bit more...How much time do any of us have left? I don’t know. The stakes have been raised in our rush to the finish line.”

NOTES TOWARD A CONCLUSION “Martha’s vocabulary came out of her body,” Janis Brenner replied when I asked her to reflect upon the distinctions between these three choreographers. I do not like to be reductive. This talk cannot be tied up neatly with a little bow and resolved.

That said, Martha Graham’s approach to dance is imposed rigor of beauty occasionally predicated upon some “headline,” as she herself stated, or upon a mythic story -- but ultimately her dance is meant to stand tall and proud in singularity.

Nikolais/Louis seeks out, honors, but then willfully subsumes the identity of each dancer, because freedom is in the form.

And Bill T. Jones asks, “What can you *bring*?” When he looks at a group of dancers, he “[sees] their origins, histories, power plays, genders.” The entire canvas of life is fit material for his dance.

I am grateful for the privilege of being here today.

You all are even more privileged -- to be part of this superb program.

--Neil Baldwin, PhD. Distinguished Visiting Professor,

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