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Oral history interview with Bill T. Jones, 2018
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Bill T. Jones on March 23, 2018. The interview took place in New York, NY, and was conducted by Svetlana Kitto for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Visual Arts and the AIDS Epidemic: An Oral History Project.

Bill T. Jones and Svetlana Kitto have reviewed the transcript. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

SVETLANA KITTO: Alright. This is Svetlana Kitto interviewing Bill T. Jones in his office at New York Live Arts, in the neighborhood of Chelsea, New York, New York, on March 23, 2018, for the Visual Art and AIDS Epidemic Oral History Project, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is card number one. So, we're going to start just by you telling me where and when you were born, and a little bit about your early life. Okay?

BILL T. JONES: Yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SVETLANA KITTO: Okay.

BILL T. JONES: Yes. I was born on February 15, in Bunnell, Florida, in 1952. I am 10 of a family of 12. My mother and father were agricultural workers in the South, who then decided, as an entrepreneurial gesture, to do this thing which was big money at that time for African Americans. They would start migrating up and down the Eastern seaboard. That meant they would start, in probably the spring of the year, in the South, and then harvest. As fruits and vegetables ripened, they would travel up the Eastern seaboard, ending in the Finger Lakes region, which was probably a couple of hours from the Canadian border, hopefully able to make enough money to head back South before the cold came. [00:01:45]

In 1955, my father decided to become a black Yankee and live permanently in the Finger Lakes region. I started school in 1958. So I always have felt like a Northerner. I was probably an average student, oftentimes the only person of color or black person, in a German, Italian group of children. These were the kids that my parents probably harvested fruits and vegetables for. The community had probably a minority community of Catholic people. Most were Protestant. As far as I know, there were no Jewish people, which I know is impossible, but the nature of the community was such that it would be whispered that someone might be a Jew.

So I was one of the only blacks there. I didn't even know what that meant. I was not very good with sports that involved hand-eye coordination, but I was a good runner. I was also fortunate to join drama club. This is during the Kennedy era—Camelot, some people called it—when there was liberal dollars around for projects that were going to uplift the poor. So our school was able to get money to hire a drama teacher. The drama teacher was probably one of the most important persons in my cultural development, if we put aside the television set, which is how the world came to most of us at that time. Mary Lee Shappee was the name of this drama teacher. Shappee, S-H-A-P-P-E-E. She gave me opportunities to sing and dance, to debate. I became a member of a debate team. And I even got to direct *The Crucible* in high school, which was unheard of. [00:04:03]

I was convinced that I wanted to go through Broadway. What else did I know, other than commercial theater? But the school I chose was—well, [laughs] the school—when I applied to universities, I was accepted at New Paltz, SUNY Binghamton, and one other that I forget right now. I should have been trying to come to a performing arts school, but I really didn't even know the difference. So I went to SUNY Binghamton, which was called Harpur College at that time. H-A-R-P-U-R. Full of New York and Long Island peoples. Small. Harpur College was 3,000 around the time that I came in. It jumped up to 10,000.

I had an opportunity to continue my athletics there, but athletics soon gave way to a love for performing. I tell a story, which I've repeated so many times, about the two kinds of sweat. I knew that there was a sweat that came with working in fields, and a sweat that came with athletics, but I was not prepared for what I call poetic sweat, that one found in a dance studio. I met Arnie Zane in 1971, and—let me be clear about that. The dates get kind of confused after this many years. [00:05:40]

Yes, March 17, 1971, I met Arnie Zane, who had just returned from living in Amsterdam, Holland. He was very different than everybody—anyone I had ever met before. Something as simple as, at that time, everyone—most white people were shaggy. They had long hair. He—close-cropped hair, having been living in kind of an avant-garde milieu in Amsterdam at that time. He was wearing an antique sweater from the '30s in Holland, and he

looked—I had never had a relationship with a man before, but I knew that I was interested in doing that, and he moved me, for some mysterious reason. We met at the pub on campus, through my sister-in-law, Mary Ellen Hearn, who later changed her name to Sweet Grass in the counterculture. She put us together, and we immediately became intimate.

The long and the short of it is that, when the school year ended, I did not go back home to my parents. I, in fact, moved in with him, and we even—I wanted to, quote, go out and hitchhike back to the West Coast again, which I had done with my brother the previous summer. But he said, "Don't go more into America. Go to someplace you don't know. Come with me. Let's go back to Amsterdam." We went, and it was in Amsterdam that I really began to think about what the life of the artist was. I met many eccentric, odd people. I saw Dublin's Dance Theater [ph], but I think it was the Dutch National Ballet. I think that's what it was called at that time. I saw professional dance. [00:07:41]

I began to take dance classes. Of course, they were kind of jazz classes, what I call an archaic kind of jazz. You know, looked very show business from the '30s to me, to my eyes, but it was a form. The room was full of tall, statuesque, Dutch secretaries, quite frankly, who were exercising at the end of their day. And I was there, trying to do one thing—I was the only man in the class—and the rest of them were staying fit, I guess.

SVETLANA KITTO: [Laughs.] Right.

BILL T. JONES: He and I came back in, I think, February of that year, maybe March, back to the States, and decided to get serious, and went back to the university again, and shortly thereafter decided to transfer to Brockport University, or Brockport College at that time—or was it a university?—not sure—where there was a dance program, a dance program run by a very adventurous former jazz musician and choreographer whose name was Richard Bull. He had very expansive ideas about what choreography was, what improvisation was, the place where music and dance met. He made a lot of room for an assortment of people.

It was there that I met Lois Welk, who had been working, I think, in Vermont with Steve Paxton, studying contact improvisation. So she was bringing a whole new vocabulary to us. Arnie and I took her workshop in Brockport. We were blown away by the possibilities of a movement form, or a dance form, that wasn't built on ballet or even modern dance, but was built on something more like human mechanics. It was also incredibly democratizing. Like I say, I was really—the first time that I realized I was being lifted off the ground by a 98-pound former ballerina, whose name was Judy Bender. Because of a leverage instead of the traditional way of upper body strength, it was liberating and exciting on many, many levels. [00:10:14]

Is that early life enough? We're probably at 19, 20 now.

SVETLANA KITTO: [Laughs.] Yeah, yeah. The one thing I just wondered about that early part of your life was sort of what—in terms of your family and growing up, what your relationship was to story, and language, and literature. I know that your mother was a religious woman. So were you invigorated in that direction around language and story? And if so, how were you?

BILL T. JONES: Yeah, I'm only reluctant because I've written a book about this. The first few chapters in *Last Night on Earth* deal with just that. So yes, I come from a tradition of storytelling. My father was a wisecracker and a person who told jokes, but also had a sharp, kind of philosophical take on the world. And he told us stories of growing up in the South. Ghosts, werewolves.

My mother's stories were the stories that a woman would tell, oftentimes about painful things between men and women, mothers and children. My father—they both were believers, but he was a bit more circumspect in his. She would send us off every Sunday to the local church. There was only a white church in the area, which she found boring. She wouldn't go, except on Christmas, and maybe on Easter. She would like to go to the city of Rochester, New York, which is 43 miles away. She would go to the black community and hear some real preaching. [00:11:55]

She herself was an expert preacher. Her mother was Pentecostal, and she was Southern Baptist. I only learned in later years that these distinctions were very, very important. Mothers and daughters, in a matrilineal sort of way—if your mother had a certain faith, at least in our family, there was a rebellion that happened, and the daughter would go to another sect or religion. So Pentecostal versus Southern Baptist.

Yes, she was a great inspiration to me in that, as I often tell the story—and as I've written about it in my book, *Last Night on Earth*, from 1994—I say this was the first performance that really registered for me, on Christmas morning, when she would do a prayer built on lines that you might find in James Weldon Johnson, or you might find in black writers of the early 20th century. These formulas of a way you address the Lord, but you can fill in the blank with your own observations and needs.

It was a terrifying spectacle to see my huge mother down on her knees, pleading with God like a child for her

personally, for her husband, for her family, then for the President, then for the soldiers overseas, and the whole planet. "Please, Lord, please crying Savior, come into this house today. Help make—[inaudible]—weak. We need you." Until she was completely exhausted and covered in sweat. Then you would be allowed, on Christmas morning—then you could open the gifts. But it started at that pitch. That very, very moving, frightening, and—it's one of the gifts that she gave me, understanding what public expression of spirituality is, the public and the private, or the inside and the outside. [00:14:13]

SVETLANA KITTO: Like, rolled into one. Yeah.

BILL T. JONES: Like, rolled into one?

SVETLANA KITTO: Yeah.

BILL T. JONES: [Laughs.] Yeah, yeah, you could say that. Yeah. Because they had removed us from the black community, all of those tropes of black culture had to be held in the house. Which was good, and it was also lacking, because very quickly, we—the underpinnings, our cultural underpinnings, which would have been reinforced by a black community—I wouldn't say they atrophied, but they mutated in such a way that we felt—I felt alienated when I went to Rochester, where my older sister was, and she lived in a black neighborhood. I didn't feel—I didn't understand the codes, the—at that time—dances, social dances. Literally, almost every few months, there was a new social dance, probably built around a new song that was coming out of Detroit or some other place like that, and the new dance.

So we were used to, quote—we were "out in the country." I wouldn't say we were isolated, but certainly, in that community that we were living, blacks and whites did not socialize. We went to school together, and this became a problem later, when puberty happened, and you are looking to socialize, and you're forced into interracial couplings. But the whole cultural—the way that culture helps us develop and directs our development was very much in question. I am not—I don't regret it, ultimately. I think it's made me the man I am, and even my taste in art, and my taste in people, my worldview, came from that schism. My dad deciding to be a black Yankee—what that meant is a black Yankee in a white neighborhood, and yet my parents were very much rooted in what they had been raised with. [00:16:21]

So, yeah, storytelling. In my book, I talk about the kind of nightmare stories that my mother would tell, which were full of the kind of weight of being a mother, a woman, and the contract between parents and children. I suppose you would say a Hansel and Gretel story is that, when the father is overcome by a circumstance, he marries an evil woman, sends the kids out, literally, to get lost in the forest—[laughs] I never understood that—and they meet a witch, who almost destroys them. They destroy the witch, and they come back—and I don't remember what happens—they come back.

But my mother told stories that had an African-American flavor, about women being beat, or a woman so angry at her husband, or so afraid of her husband, that she actually kills a child and feeds the child to the husband. These were the stories. With those stories, also, were stories of what the white man did to them when they were young. Or being beat, ritually, in front of—her mother being beat, ritually, in front of the children by a white farmer who didn't want her to go to the next farm to take care of her older daughter. So, yeah, it was a storytelling tradition, and it came into my notion of what honest performance was onstage. It was rooted in the I.

SVETLANA KITTO: The first person.

BILL T. JONES: The first person. And it was rooted—it had to have an element of confession to it. And it had to be able to—at once, be able to talk to a community as if it were a congregation. As you can imagine, in the dance world, the white avant-garde dance world, this was maybe charming, but also a bit like, "This is not art. We don't know what we're looking at now." But now we live in an era where everybody is down now. We know better now, right? [00:18:24]

SVETLANA KITTO: Right. But that was not then.

BILL T. JONES: On the record, you should put that he is smiling ironically as he says this.

SVETLANA KITTO: [Laughs.] Right. Right, yeah.

BILL T. JONES: So where do you want to go?

SVETLANA KITTO: So, yeah, I'm interested in this relationship to—your work, and your relationship to storytelling and narrative, and grappling with those things in your own work. And so going back to when you met Arnie Zane

BILL T. JONES: May I offer one—I'm sure we'll get there, but I'm thinking of one other time that that was—that

notion of storytelling—

SVETLANA KITTO: Sure, please.

BILL T. JONES: —and biography. We were—as much as I have railed and oftentimes criticized the past and that rather conservative community I came from, they had some good teachers there, I believe. And I don't know whose class it was, but we were encouraged—maybe, I think I might have been in the sixth grade, seventh grade, which means I might have been 12, 13—and we were asked to write a story. Was it an essay? What was it? Anyways, they were actually—someone was ambitious enough to be putting together a kind of anthology of the, quote, best of them. Mine was included, and I wrote something called "Monkey in the Middle." I was—now, I don't know that it's—I'll tell as much as I can, and then maybe the listener can figure out what it was that story was trying to do. [00:19:55]

I described—I even surprised myself that I could describe a fall day when I was in the second grade. It was in the autumn. School starts in the autumn, after usually a long, [laughs] wonderful summer. At that time, though my family had stopped migrating, there were still migrant folks coming into the community, and they were black people. They lived, usually, outside of the city. We also lived outside of town, but they lived—who knows what the conditions were. The kids were required, for a few weeks, to take classes at the school, the Wayland Central School.

On the playground one day, I noticed that some of my classmates—and we were on a first-name basis; I had been with them since kindergarten—they had surrounded a young black boy. They had taken his shoe, if you want to call it a shoe. It was run-down, it was scuffed. He had stepped on the back of it. It was, literally, almost a piece of leather around his foot. But they had taken it, and they were playing a game, the way children would, and they were running and throwing it as he tried to get it from them, throwing it back and forth. They were—I had never seen them look the way they looked when they were engaged in this cruel game. Did they say "monkey in the middle," or did I do this? I called the story that. As I tell the story in my book, one of the most gentle girls in the class—a little blonde girl whose name was Nancy, I think—she literally had spittle on the corner of her mouth as she was yelling. There was such a contorted feeling of—what is it? That hate—[00:22:02]

SVETLANA KITTO: Rage? Violence?

BILL T. JONES: Yes, well, there was something like rage, violence—what makes children bully. Whatever it was, that's what it was. I remember jumping into that circle and grabbing from somebody the shoe, and staring my classmates down, and handing the shoe back to him.

As I said rather grandly in the story—I tell this now because, some 20 years ago, as my reputation began to grow, the school became very interested in the evidence of my having been there, and one was that it was published in a journal at that time, and I was interviewed, even at that time, about the story that I'm trying to recount. I said that I saw the need in his face for his shoe, for his ashen foot. I remember Mr. Shappee, Mrs. Shappee's husband, who was the English teacher, said, "Now, that's good writing, that detail of his foot being described as ashen." I had never used that term before, but we would say "ashy." I see you shaking your head as if you're familiar with African American ritual.

SVETLANA KITTO: I've heard that word. [Laughs.]

BILL T. JONES: We say "ashy." But I used the term "ashen foot." This story was—I was applauded for the reality of the story, the point of view of the story, and what was—who was the monkey in the middle? Yes, he was, but I realized at that moment that I was a monkey in the middle, and I took it to be—this is my analysis at age 12 or 13—I was caught between two cultures, in the way that he was caught in a circle. So, "Monkey in the Middle" is what that story was. [00:23:57]

It was maybe the beginning of a tendency that I continued to develop as I became a professional artist. I do remember Mr. Shappee saying, "Write something. Write about what you know." Ah, that's what it was! "Write about what you know." And that's where that story came from. I think that that gave me permission to think that biography, storytelling, was always going to be where power could be found, and the specific, and—my critics [laughs] will say that was a terrible thing—the personal.

SVETLANA KITTO: The personal, right.

BILL T. JONES: The personal was where the power was. It was how one distinguished oneself from others, and where you established—and here's another loaded word in our era—your identity. Which was ambiguous, because it was not the identity, necessarily, of being black, but it was the identity of being other. And ambiguity of being.

Now, you were talking about storytelling tradition. Those anecdotes, even though they've been told a number of

times, for the record, I'm telling them again.

SVETLANA KITTO: [Laughs.] Thank you.

BILL T. JONES: You were about to ask me something about Arnie Zane?

SVETLANA KITTO: Well, I was going to say, like, how that figured in the work that you created together.

BILL T. JONES: You want to jump that far ahead?

SVETLANA KITTO: Well, that's where we were—you had sort of taken me—

BILL T. JONES: Oh, no, no, we weren't making work yet. We aren't—

SVETLANA KITTO: Oh, you weren't making work yet? You—

BILL T. JONES: No, no, we just got back from—

SVETLANA KITTO: Oh, you just got back. Okay.

BILL T. JONES: From Amsterdam.

SVETLANA KITTO: Why don't you just keep—

BILL T. JONES: [Laughs.]

SVETLANA KITTO: —taking me through the chronology, and then I'll ask questions as—

BILL T. JONES: Right. When we got back from Amsterdam, I had to decide—that's when I had to decide what did I want to do. And I wanted to go deeper into dance. That's why SUNY Binghamton was not enough, and we went to Brockport. At Brockport, I met Lois Welk. Lois Welk had already been living on the West Coast, and she had been a member of something called American Dance Asylum. Some of those members had all migrated to the Bay Area. She invited Arnie and myself to join them out there, and we went out, and that was a very important thing to do. [00:26:15]

It was very—even though the Summer of Love was many years—had already passed, there was still this feeling of possibility in San Francisco, and you could live cheaply. It was a time when Arnie and I were on a spiritual quest. Everywhere, Eastern philosophy and Eastern religion was there. I was doing—trying to teach myself yoga from Swami Iyengar's great book, *Light On Yoga*. I was chanting "Om," trying to do all those things. I discovered Krishna consciousness. There was a person, one young guy, who stood alone in the quad, in saffron robes. Everyone thought he was such a pain in the ass and he was crazy. Probably a young Jewish guy who had been given another name, and he was chanting, "Hare Krishna." By the time we got to Brockport, SUNY Brockport, this was our religion. We had a little altar. We were doing the prayers. We would visit the temple that was in Buffalo, which was down the road from us.

We did bond with Lois. Lois became a mentor, and in some ways she continues to stay to be a mentor. She said a choreographer, a former Paul Taylor dancer, whose name was Cliff Keuter, and his wife, Elina Mooney—I understand Elina Mooney just died recently—were going to be teaching a workshop in San Mateo. Every day, she and I would hitchhike [laughs] the freeway, down, and take this workshop. It was—it had technique classes, and we made a huge piece. [00:28:21]

Around that time, what had been the American Dance Asylum, a loose group of people—I believe it was Lois Welk; Jill Becker; a guest, Pat Taylor Fry; I believe Donna Joseph—had reconnected in the West Coast, at Project Artaud. They had changed their name to Ring of Bone Dance Collective. And they had an opportunity to do a show in Santa Cruz. Was it Santa Cruz or Monterey? Santa Cruz, I believe. Somewhere or other in the book. I think it was Theater 101, and we—one night or something. We did—each of us showed a piece. I can't remember what I did, but I do know that Lois Welk did a piece called *Hardware* that was an object piece, wherein we found a lawn mower part, barbells, a toaster—I don't know, I'm making this up, but—and they were laid on the floor, and we stood in a line, and each one of us had developed a phrase. A phrase with a toaster, a phrase with [laughs] a lawn mower, a phrase—whatever. We would make this phrase and work with it, and then move onto the next. That's what the piece was. [00:29:56]

Arnie—I know this because, even as you and I speak—on Sunday, we will be doing a remembrance of Arnie Zane, and he talks about doing what he called first portrait drawing. His interest in photography had been there before he met me, and it continued to expand when we were living in Amsterdam, and it even picked up momentum when we came back to the States. He made a piece called *First Portrait*, or *First Portrait Drawing*, that incorporated that photography, and he did this kind of—he jokes and says that it was a great performance

piece in my repertoire. We would stand on a stool, and as Enrico Caruso sang "La Donna é Mobile" from *Pagliacci*, he would very artlessly fall backwards, flat on his back, in this piece, shocking everyone, because it was so destructive. But he didn't know the difference. He says in this tape, "I thought that dancing meant you had to be hurt." So, very interesting. We were just making it up.

That was the one performance that I know of in the West Coast. Lois, Arnie—who were always the architects—and myself. I always wanted to be with him. I was excited about what she represented. They wanted to go back to the East Coast, because San Francisco was not serious enough. Because Arnie and I knew Binghamton. We knew about the downtown of this city that had never really recovered from the Depression. And it was in the upper—it was described by some as being the upper point of what was called Appalachia and had been designated as the Poverty Belt at that time. Maybe it was one of those designations that came from the Kennedy era, or Johnson. [00:31:59]

Anyways, it was this little city, with a university, and there was lots of places to live. We moved into an old Elks Club that our friend, Phil Sykas—S-Y-K-A-S—Greek-American, gay man, who had come from that area of southern tier Binghamton and Pennsylvania—he had been living there before we went to Amsterdam. I believe that's true. I could be wrong. So we knew of the space, and we came, and we took over the space in the old Elks Club, covered with dust. Would be a dream right now if you could afford such a loft in Manhattan, but we were able to live there on practically nothing. Arnie and I made our first duet there—because we were always making, as members of the Dance Asylum. It was called *Begin the Beguine*, danced to Benny Goodman's classic of the same name. And we got a taste for it.

Around that time, I was in—well, let me be clear. Was this the weekend? Doesn't seem—that we all decided to go down to New York to see Robert Wilson—was it *Letter for Queen Victoria* at the Uris? I don't think so. Was it to see Laura Dean and her drumming? I'm not quite sure. But for whatever reasons, we were in Manhattan. We took—did we go by bus? I'm not quite sure. We didn't have much money. We were a bit like—we were intimidated by New York, but we also felt superior to it, because it was a craven place of—about business and profit, and true art couldn't be made there. It had to be out, close to the land, out away from the big city. This is what we thought. [00:34:14]

We went down, and I saw a flyer advertising open calls for choreography for Clark Center Festival. Clark Center was the brainchild of Louise Roberts, a feisty Jewish woman who was obviously very left-wing, coming out of some sort of political left cultural scene in New York. It was a thing called Clark Center. And I don't know if their mission was people of color, but that was there, that—I believe there was a relationship to the Ailey company. Was it the Ailey company had been rehearsing in the space that was there? It was on that program that I met Kate Dakay [ph]. It was Senta Driver, formerly of Paul Taylor's company. A woman whose name I forget right now, who was a graduate from Purchase. It was an audition, and I, at my audition, was doing a dance that I had developed up in Binghamton.

As I'm telling you the story right now, I feel like so many different stories are being compressed in so many years. I'm not sure what space, but I'm going to tell it this way, and then if there are fact-checkers, they can go untangle it, because I probably told it in different ways in other instances. [00:35:51]

I remember the audition was—I was tense. I had been staying at my friend, Kathy Kramer, who was a friend of the American Dance Asylum, who had come from Rochester, who was now living in New York, on the Bowery. I had this kind of performance art piece, I thought. I had a slide projector, with slides of papier-mâché Northeastern, Native American-inspired headdresses that had been worn in this kind of pageant in Binghamton with the local kids. I had taken photos of them. And I was on a pair of high—well, they were actually platforms, pieces of two-by-four sewed together and painted white, strapped to my feet. I thought I was dressed as Malcolm X or something. Some people said, "You look like a waiter." I was in black pants, which we never would have worn—dress pants. That was too uncool. A white shirt that was supposed to look crisp, like Nation of Islam or something. Was there a bow tie? Yes, there was a bow tie. All things that were very, very—to us, being so hip as we were, they were all the monikers of the straight world, of which we were not—not in a gay sense, but we were not. We were radicals. So we were commenting on it, and it had a black dimension.

So the piece was called *Everybody Works, All Beasts Count*. Two things were going on in it. *Everybody Works* was a reference to the great one-man band, Jesse Fuller, who used to play in San Francisco. He was a legend in San Francisco. I think he—the tune "San Francisco Bay": [sings] "Got the blues from my baby down by the San Francisco Bay/Ocean liner took her so far away/Thing that made me feel so bad, she was the best girl I ever had/Oh, she made me cry, then she said goodbye/Want to lay right down and die." And this is a one-man band, harmonica, drum, and all. I used his recording, but I've heard Richie Havens do it years later. So that was a kind of ironic take on African American experience. [00:38:11]

Second, *All Beasts Count* was the monthly ritual of having to go to the unemployment office and get your card stamped, so that you could get your government check. I had taken it to a surreal place, that we were lining—at

least in the version I did with my group, everyone was lined up as if they were at the—what's it? Social Security? I'm not sure. Unemployment. Unemployment line. But they were all, like, these mythological creatures. It was all very, very [laughs] vague, but visceral. The solo that I made was what I took to audition.

Kathy went with me that morning, with my—was supposed to have a projection surface. All she had was a sheet. We needed time to put the sheet up. We needed time to set the slide projector up. Of course, the audition was going on. You can imagine what things were being shown to that poor panel of people. I was late. There was no time to do my tech. So I had her put, quickly, pushpins in the wall. God knows were we in the studio—pushpins, set up, and the lights were just a light up and down. Panel—to this day, I don't know who they were. Over the years, people have come up to me and said, "You know, I was there that day."

SVETLANA KITTO: Oh, wow.

BILL T. JONES: But at that time, there was this kind of feeling, like, "This doesn't matter anyways, because after all, it's in Babylon"—which is New York. "We know that this means nothing. It's uncool to be living here, and to try and be making a living out of this. This is a spiritual thing we're doing. I'll just—this is just a lark." [00:40:05]

And here, I have to ask your listeners to use their imagination. Here you have this young man, with this white shirt, these dress pants, and standing on these ridiculous boxes made out of two-by-fours, gesticulating. He has been dancing to Jesse Fuller, and dancing in the way that I thought was a parody of commercial dance. Black person dancing, dancing for clams. And yet it gave me a chance to really madcap around and be whatever I was. And I think it had power.

There was a repetitive movement, in which I would go through a series of hand gestures that were cyclical, and they were ingratiating. Someone asking for love, someone actually laughing maniacally. The right hand is made into a fist. The fist comes from underneath, by the crotch, comes up into the face of whoever is watching, and then explodes, as if resigning, was all a joke, and the whole cycle starts over again. But that part wherein the hand came up from by the crotch and a fist comes over, I improvised, and I turned the fist over and I gave them the obscene finger, the judges. This is my—the belligerence in the face of authority or whatever it was, and it kept going. [00:41:48]

Audition is over. I said, "Well, they probably don't like what I did, but then again, I don't think I respect them. They don't matter. These are"—[laughs] you know. So it is with youth. I came—we all came back. I don't know, did we see Laura Dean? Did we take a Susan Klein workshop in release technique? All these things you would do when you had one weekend in Manhattan. We went back to where true art was, our collective, the American Dance Asylum in Binghamton. I get a message—how did it get to us? There was no phone, no cell phones—that the panel—that Louise Roberts wanted to speak to me. Oh, my God, that lady, she wants to speak to me?

I was nervous and collected my quarters and went to the Woolworths next door, the phone booth, and I called her. She said—and I've told this so many times. I hope that it has some semblance to what happened. She said, "Look, Mr. Jones, the panel is interested in what you did that day. But there were certain things that you did and said that we want to be sure that you will not be doing them again." So, giving the finger to the panel, talking extemporaneously to Kathy and to her—"Turn the lights on." There was a black woman standing there. I said, "Yo, soul sister, hit the light switch." I was just improvising it. You've got to make it happen. She said they were interested, but they want some assurance. I said, quote, "Are you trying to censor my work?" She said, "Listen, buster, you've got a chip on your shoulder, and New York is going to knock it off. Do you want this or not?" I stammered, thought about it. "Ye—well, yes, I do." I was accepted. I came down. I danced it at the CUNY mall. [00:43:59]

If you know the mall—City University of New York, there used to be an underpass that Bryant Park is on one side, and then there was a classroom on the other. They would set up audience and a stage in that passageway, and it was—on that festival was, as I said before, Kate Dakay [ph], Senta Driver. Some other persons were on it. And the piece was a big hit. Anna Kisselgoff wrote, "This young man is a humanist. Although I'm not sure anyone else—it's as much about him as it is about the work, and I don't think anyone else could do this, but he is a young humanist to watch." That was my first review in the *New York Times*.

SVETLANA KITTO: Not bad. [Laughs.]

BILL T. JONES: Not bad at all. Not bad at all. And it meant that we then had invitation to come to New York. And sure enough, we were brought back to Clark Center, and I came back with the entire Dance Asylum. I did a solo to Otis Redding, "This is My Lover's Prayer." Did a piece to Rahsaan Roland Kirk, for four people, called *Da Sweet Streak To Love Land*—D-A, *Da Sweet Streak*. "Sweet Georgia Brown" of Rahsaan Roland Kirk. Lois and Arnie and I did something. I believe we did a version of a piece that combined contact improvisation with structured improvisation, called *Six Five Four*. Phrases in the length of six counts, giving way to contact, four counts, giving way to contact—six, five, four—whatever. All those things are on there. [00:45:58]

And suddenly, someone is calling and saying would I like representation? Around this time, Arnie and I have—as I told you before, we had made a piece called *Begin the Beguine*, where he and I were madcapping, in a kind of camp fashion, to a version of Benny Goodman that we found at a junk store. We were always in junk stores. It was a favorite preoccupation, particularly for Arnie. He was making a lot of work that was about found objects and looking for timeless gestures.

We had such a success there that he and I embarked on making another work, which was called *Monkey Run Road*. *Monkey Run Road* was a place in upstate New York where a potato farm, I believe—it was mythic in my mind, because it was also a place where black people could meet on the weekend. I think it was also a nightclub. My mother would say, "We're going to go—your daddy and I are going to go to Monkey Run tonight." I had—as a child's imagination, I thought this was a place where the hills were covered with wild monkeys running free. I don't even know now why they call it Monkey Run Road. I imagine probably because of the terrain being curvaceous and hilly or something like that. There were so few black people there, it was a big deal when black people got together. All of this was, in my imagination, the stuff of myth. That was our first duet after *Begin the Beguine*.

The next one was at what was Dance Theater Workshop at that time. I had had success with another piece on their Fresh Tracks, which I thought was called Split Stream, but I was told, at that time, it was called Fresh Tracks. A piece called *Dance with Durga Devi*, which was a way to connect this ironic show-biz performance with what I was making of Hindu Vedic philosophy. As you know, Durga is the goddess of death. One of the avatars of Shiva's consort, Kali, the goddess of destruction, the dance with Durga Devi. The music was, I believe, Tibetan Buddhist monks chanting, and Bessie Smith. [00:48:35]

Deborah Jowitt wrote that seldom did you see onstage, in these times, such showmanship. In other words, someone who fixes their eyes on the audience and performs to the audience. Very explosive and unpredictable shifts of emotion and assault toward the audience. I didn't know I was doing any of those things, but that's how she wrote about it. One of the four nights—let me get this straight. I know, one night, I thought I would smoke a joint before. That [laughs] was the one time in my life I went into a performance stoned. It was the worst mistake. I learned a lot about what performance is, that it's not the same kind of expansion and subjection to multi-focus that we enjoy when we're altered with pot. You don't use that in performance. I was completely lost. I was alienated from the audience. I felt like I was in a hole. I think there were four different weeks. I'm not sure if I'm combining this. Once a week, you would go, and this thing would happen. I believe that's how it happened. I chose one week to do that. I learned a big lesson. [00:49:52]

So, *Blauvelt Mountain* was the work that—now—oh, my God, so much. Because after—was it the success at Clark Center, at least the exposure, and someone saying, "Come and I'll represent you," that Arnie and I began to think seriously about leaving Binghamton? Now, he tells it differently. He says it has something to do with disappointment, and trying to be a mid-state performing presenter organization that was underfunded, and because we were not being supported by NYSCA—which is not quite true—and the community, we were being offered an opportunity to go from being, as he says, big fish in a self-created pond in upstate New York, or coming to New York and possibly swimming in international waters, and we chose that.

Whatever the reason, we made a duet, the second part of this one that started with *Monkey Run Road*. I didn't really say what *Monkey Run Road* was. I'll come back to that. We made this duet that was called *Blauvelt Mountain*, that was extremely constructivist. Arnie Zane was, as I said, an art history major and a photographer, so he was extremely acute visually. There was something about Oskar Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet*, and the hieratic gestures, posing, strict attention to space, that met very much with what we could glean from the new aesthetic of Minimalism, as represented by Trisha Brown—no, maybe not Trisha—but Lucinda Childs, who was Arnie's favorite, Laura Dean. It was a piece that the two of us got to integrate everything we understood about leverage from contact improvisation, about repetition, spatial repetition and time repetition. [00:52:04]

It was performed, once again, on—I believe it was Fresh Tracks, at the then New York—I'm sorry, Dance Theater Workshop. A new friend that we had made on our first sojourn to New York, Bill Katz—an artist, a man about town who knew everybody, and everybody knew him—he designed the décor. We said we wanted to have a wall, and he said, "Well, what is a wall?" He suggested 157 cinder blocks, built [laughs] along the back. That's a lot of cinder blocks for the Economy Tires Theater, which was upstairs. So the cinder blocks would be kept downstairs, and once a week, we had to get it up there, and then after the show, take them back down. The show became a kind of runaway must-see. I remember there were a lot of—for some reason, a lot of gay people of prominence—a councilwoman, other people—were coming to see what these guys were doing. And on the last night of four nights, we invited the audience to each take a cinder block down. That made a legendary kind of impression, that the audience got into the act.

Blauvelt Mountain had two sections. The first section was called *A Fiction*. This is, as I say, this repetition shape, this pattern that's repeated. It must have been 45 minutes of repeating material, which would probably would have been done in maybe under 10 minutes, if it had not been deconstructed and recombined and so on. The

second section, *The Interview*, was Arnie Zane's job. We were both dressed in white. We start out singing a Swiss-German version of, [sing] "*Hejo, spann den Wagen an/dum, dum, dum, dum, ba, da, da, da/Hol die goldnen Garben/Hol die goldnen Garben/Hejo.*" [ph] Do you know it? A camping song. [00:54:11]

SVETLANA KITTO: I don't, actually.

BILL T. JONES: Oh, I see.

SVETLANA KITTO: But I like hearing it.

BILL T. JONES: Yes. Well, it's the sort of thing that you would learn around a campfire, but we had been in—when we were in Europe, we had learned the Swiss-German version of it. It's a work song about the golden *garben*, the golden wheat, gathering the golden wheat. Arnie would proceed to dismantle this wall, this Carl Andre-type wall, from the back of the auditorium, and build it down the center of the space. Whereas me, Bill T. Jones, was allowed to dance freely anywhere in the room, in the audience, out into the lobby, coming around. Had those two different types of work.

And we had placed—[laughs] this part, I always regret. We thought that if we timed it right—we put under all the chairs in the audience alarm clocks, and at a certain moment in the performance, the performance would end, because it was just Bill—it was just made of Arnie constructing a wall and Bill dancing—that the alarm clocks would go off, and it would be apocalyptic and [laughs] what have you. Well, you know, they went off like a minute apart. Some of them didn't really go off. But it was still very, very successful. Then we started getting the interest of Val Born at the London Dance Umbrella, and we started going to Europe, and we became an element.

I wanted to go back for just a moment to *Monkey Run Road*. *Monkey Run Road*, as I say, was also this interest in constructivism, and a sort of tongue-in-cheek irony about a number of things. One was that we thought that the central image would be a puppeteer, a black puppeteer, and a black puppet. Arnie, who, in our mind, was much smaller than I was—but he wasn't really [laughs] that much smaller—he was going to be the black puppet, and I was going to be the black puppeteer, and we were going to sit, and I was going to pretend that I have my hand in his back, and I'm manipulating what the movement is going to be. [00:56:22]

We went to, I don't know, 24th Street in San Francisco or someplace, and we bought an afro wig, and we tried putting him in blackface and all. [Laughs.] It was totally not—that did not work. Something of the manipulation of two people, something of a kind of doll-like, mechanistic, non-lyrical notion of shape and form and movement, came out of *Monkey Run Road*. There was this huge, beautifully conceived—it was about four-by-four, in terms of the width, and about two and a half feet from the ground—a box with a door on one side of it.

SVETLANA KITTO: I have seen it. I watched some of it.

BILL T. JONES: Okay. Well, then you know.

SVETLANA KITTO: Yeah, I can picture what you're saying.

BILL T. JONES: That was the first one that we made. It was called *Monkey Run Road*. I don't know if you got to the end of it, but the very ending of it, we had done a lot of repetitions, complete with a litany of names, the names of my family, the 12 of them. Then the place where there had been a litany of names before became a retelling of me being alone at home, on Miller Road, with my two brothers, back years ago, in upstate New York, when the Cuban Missile Crisis was happening. We were convinced that it was the end of the world. Parents were off working. [00:58:06]

So the end of the piece is me talking—as Arnie goes down to the box, just like talking into a well. I think he is—there was one version where—he was very proud of his Dutch, and he had taken a speech from Queen Juliana, [laughs] a very kind of boilerplate speech that a monarch would give to her people, and he had memorized it. He was reciting that as I'm reciting a litany of family names and this story about the bombers and the three boys, my two brothers and I, home alone and thinking about the bombers, and we thought it was—and as I say "end of the world," the box flies open, he jumps into my arms, we turn as the light goes down. Apocalyptic childhood fantasy. This informed *Blauvelt*, which was also, in its own way, looking for a similar trajectory, but different. There was another one called *Valley Cottage* that took this even further.

So that's how we got to Bill and Arnie. We got back from Amsterdam in 1971, '72, I'm not sure. Late '71. I performed at the Delacorte under the auspices—coming out of the piece that had been done at the CUNY mall, Clark Center. Now I had been invited to the Delacorte to do it. Maybe that's when the review happened, not at the CUNY mall. That had been '77. We made *Monkey Run Road* maybe around that same time, or maybe the next year. [01:00:04]

We moved to New York in '78—not to New York. We didn't want to live in New York, but we moved to Rockland

County in '78. We made *Monkey Run Road* in 1980, and I believe—I'm sorry, *Monkey Run Road* is 1977, because we were performing that, I believe, when the Three Mile Island—the meltdown almost happened. So you could check—when was that? I believe that was in the fall of '77. I had appeared that summer in Central Park. I believe that's how it works.

Then *Blauvelt* was '80. The last section, *Valley Cottage*, which was my home now, the place where I've lived since June of 1980. And Arnie Zane died in that house in March, March 30th of 1988. So that last piece was called *Valley Cottage*. *Monkey Run Road*, *Blauvelt Mountain*, *Valley Cottage*.

We made one more significant duet, which was called *Rotary Action*, informed, I think, by the kind of overheated go-go '80s. We had connected with a group of movers and shakers in the visual arts world—Robert Longo, Gretchen Bender, Cindy Sherman—when nobody was even pretending to be counter—[01:02:06]

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BILL T. JONES: —culture anymore. It was—

SVETLANA KITTO: —full-blown '80s.

BILL T. JONES: '80s. Yeah. But from the art world point of view. And let's face it, there is something—these friends of ours, many of them identified as the Pictures Generation. They're very much about appropriation of existing imagery and recombining and so on. They were not Romantic. They thought that painting was masturbatory. It was a dead form. New reaction was in media, a critique of what Gretchen used to call the corporatization of American culture. Commercials, the medium of video, all of those things, hard edge. But you must admit that there was something about dance—persons sweating with each other, acting out a ritual of love, attraction—all very formal, but that was implicitly Romantic.

I do remember Robert Longo—still is a good friend—saying, "Man, you've got to realize that artists, by their very nature, are transcendentalists." That was a very important thing to hear, because I was still trying to resolve the spiritual nature of what my life was. Not through religion, but I wanted the art to be about something. For lack of a better term, something transcending this world. As we know, by what was coming, by '88, Arnie was dead, and a whole generation had had their first world war, and second world war. So a lot of our certainties had been rattled. That's where our story takes us at present. [00:02:00]

SVETLANA KITTO: So maybe you could just tell me a little bit about—like, keep talking about the work you were making at that time. I think it's a good way to—

BILL T. JONES: —to tell the story?

SVETLANA KITTO: To tell the story, yeah. You did make work up until the year before Arnie died, right? I think.

BILL T. JONES: Actually—

SVETLANA KITTO: Two years?

BILL T. JONES: —our last BAM performance happened—*How to Walk an Elephant* was a piece that was commissioned by the Ailey company, following *Fever Swamp*. *Fever Swamp* was—I was trying to talk to someone—*Fever Swamp* was, I think, '83. So I was—and *How to Walk an Elephant*, we were performing at BAM in late '86. Is that possible? We toured that piece. The last time that Arnie appeared onstage was at the—I believe it's called the Ohio Theater, in Cleveland. The company was starting a tour.

That was in February, I think, of 1988. He was stricken while there. We already knew that he was struggling with lymphoma since 1986, March of '86. He went out on the tour, but then he was so ill that he had to come back home. I finished the tour. I know we went to Berkeley. We maybe went to Arizona or someplace else as well. I came back, and he had to go to the hospital. He was in the hospital—is it a month? I'm not quite sure, but I know I spent much of my time there with him, until, as I told you earlier, somewhere around March 28th, they decided there's nothing else they could do. I still remember the day that this news first hit, because everyone held out hope. [00:04:39]

They were trying all sorts of new therapies, you know, non-orthodox homeopathic therapies. And Robert Longo, who was a pretty [laughs] rather macho Italian man, was outside Arnie's room crying when it was clear that they were going to release him the next day to go home. In his mind, to go home and fight this thing. I think the nurses who had grown to really appreciate him, his incredible circle of crazy people who were coming through to visit him, our relationship, our friends, they were pretty convinced that he was going home to end his life. No one knew how fast it was going to be.

As I remember it, I think it was on the 28th that we—it's hard to do this without going through the emotions

again. I'll do it for the Smithsonian—that me and a friend of mine—maybe it was Robert, or was it Keith? I'm not sure, Keith Haring—paid to have me stay in a hotel. I think it was Robert, maybe, who did it. So I could go every day down the street to visit him. When they put him into the ambulance, he was sitting up in the ambulance, and we go home. I'm following him up the West Side Highway, across the bridge, the Palisades Parkway, and getting home. He was so glad to be back in his house. Very house proud. He really was. He wanted to take a shower and so on. We had a nurse—two nurses. One, a man. He was a gay man, a white man, and one was a black woman. They were doing 24-hour cycles. Two days, he died. [00:06:36]

Yeah. Right. But maybe we should, before we go there—because then the world changes.

SVETLANA KITTO: Yeah.

BILL T. JONES: You know?

SVETLANA KITTO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BILL T. JONES: I wonder if we've covered as much as we could.

SVETLANA KITTO: Had you known other people who had died before?

BILL T. JONES: Oh, yes.

SVETLANA KITTO: Yeah?

BILL T. JONES: Oh, many, many.

SVETLANA KITTO: Many. Like, close people to you?

BILL T. JONES: Yeah. Yeah, close. Close. Hard to describe. When you say close, there was a—when we left the Dance Asylum community and came to New York, there were people who were left over from those experiences, even a few people from Amsterdam every once in a while. There were people from California.

I remember Jim Tyler, who was a former Erick Hawkins dancer, who was a tall, beautiful man. He was married to a lovely Dutch woman named Pauline de Groot, but he himself came out as gay, and he subsequently—did he die before Arnie did? I'm not sure. But he was a friend. He used to come.

There was a Frenchman, named Michel Slubicki [ph], who taught at the Sorbonne, taught philosophy. He was a good friend of Arnie and mine. Of course, there was Bill Katz, who we had known since 1977. There was Keith, and one of his Juans. There was a Juan Rivera and Juan Dubose, or the other way around. Juan Dubose was the first one, and Juan Rivera was the second one. [00:08:14]

Then there was this one that is now considered Keith's great love, who was actually a straight man, who I never really knew. It was Willie Smith, the designer, who died a year before Arnie. As a matter of fact, I remember the morning—Willie Smith had designed the costumes for *Secret Pastures*, our second piece at BAM. The first piece had been *Intuitive Momentum*, with Max Roach and Connie Crothers, with Robert Longo doing the set, and Ronald Kolodzie designing the clothes. The second one was *Secret Pastures*, with décor by Keith Haring, music by Peter Gordon, and Max—no, no, nothing to do with Max. Sorry, I'm going in circles.

Then there was *How to Walk an Elephant*, and *How to Walk an Elephant*, as I say, had been commissioned, at least one part of it, by Ailey. They had done it at Wolf Trap, to the music of *Conlon* Nancarrow. Do you know his music? Player piano music. We found out later, Merce Cunningham had choreographed to it, I believe, in the '60s, or was it the early '70s? But very much—very interesting Modernist music. That was the last time we were probably onstage in New York together, doing *How to Walk an Elephant*, which had three parts: *How to Walk an Elephant*, *Sacred Cow*, and *Lifting a Calf Every Day Until It Becomes an Ox*. [Laughs.] Those were the titles. [00:10:06]

That was the piece that I believe we were touring in part when he became ill. We were already, at that time, in conversation with the wonderful Harvey Lichtenstein from BAM about our next work, which was going to be called *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin Featuring 52 Handsome Nudes*. That later became, because of the panic around Jesse Helms versus Robert Mapplethorpe versus—maybe you do know, or they definitely know about it at the Smithsonian, what that period was like. To have "nude" in a title was already giving a flag that we were unhealthy, anti-family values. And as you know, they were cutting the funding for people who were promoting anti-family, anti-American values, and so on.

So that was a piece that Harvey Lichtenstein came to Arnie's hospital room to discuss. I came in late. I just remember walking in. I tend to dramatize the memory, but as I said in a *New Yorker* article or something, I saw Harvey, such a big gentle man, with the big hands of his on Arnie's head, saying, "How you doing, bubby? How

you doing?" Harvey always listened to the artist. "So you want to do this piece?" Arnie, of course, had initially conceived it was going to be a phantasmagorical, Hieronymus Bosch exploration of—what?—*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, [laughs] the novel of Harriet Beecher Stowe. [00:11:54]

He was inspired by the notion of a huge black diva—Jessye Norman, we thought—on an ice floe as the heroine of the book. In a segment of the book that was much popular in the early part of the 20th-century minstrel shows, *Eliza on the Ice*, the young octaroon is clutching her child, is running from the evil slavers, and jumping from ice floe to ice floe across the Cincinnati River—I think it's the Cincinnati—the Ohio River? That area where Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is set. I think it's—I don't know, what is the river in Cincinnati?

SVETLANA KITTO: I'm not sure.

BILL T. JONES: Anyways, that's what we thought the image was, kind of tongue-in-cheek. Then the last section was going to be called *52 Handsome Nudes*. It was going to be in-your-face. Seán Curran was working at what was called Little Ricky, a kind of novelty shop in the East Village that sold things like decks of soft-core porno cards, gay porno cards, called "52 Handsome Nudes." Arnie loved the title, so it was going to be *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin Featuring 52 Handsome Nudes*. I changed the title to *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land*.

So that work I did on my own, because he died before I actually began making it. Is that true? I'm not quite sure. Yeah, he did. He had died. The last—I keep saying "the last," but there was a work called *History of Collage*, to the music of Charles Amirkhanian, who was, at that time, a Berkeley—I believe—Berkeley-based new music composer, and "Blue" Gene Tyranny. Have you heard of him?

SVETLANA KITTO: Mm-mm [negative]. [00:14:00]

BILL T. JONES: He was another queer artist. He was playing on Gene Tierney, but "Blue" Gene Tyranny is [laughs]—

SVETLANA KITTO: Right. I like that. That's good.

BILL T. JONES: —is what was his stage name. Something called *White Night Riots*. Charles Amirkhanian's *History of Collage* was a rather dreamlike, hallucinatory telling of the history of collage in visual arts. "Blue" Gene Tyranny's *White Night Riot* was literally manipulating tape, and I think there was some sort of a sound score—those tapes of actual riots following the assassination of Harvey Milk. So it was a big—that was a piece—oh, my God, I'm going down a rabbit hole. I'm sort of going backwards. That was the piece—

SVETLANA KITTO: That's okay.

BILL T. JONES: —that we—one of the pieces, maybe it was the only piece—that we showed, *New Contemporary Masters* at City Center. [Laughs.] One of those ideas, before—what's the thing they do now? Not *Eye on Dance*, but every year that happens at City Center now. Dance—you know, the kind of populist ones. You can go every evening and see six different—

SVETLANA KITTO: Right, right, right.

BILL T. JONES: Dance—chance dance? Dance chance?

[They laugh.]

BILL T. JONES: You know what I'm talking about?

SVETLANA KITTO: I do know what you're talking about, yeah, but I don't know the name of it.

BILL T. JONES: Anyways, but this was an earlier permutation they chose. I think it was Laura Dean. There was our company, Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane Dance Company. There was—I can't remember the other groups. There might have been at least two other choreographers, up-and-coming, avant-garde choreographers. We did *History of Collage* on that program. [00:15:54]

And he never—we were opening there on April 5th, I think. Is that right? He died, as I say—maybe it was later in April, because I remember there was a few weeks. He died on March 28th, and we weren't [sic] back in the studio like the next week, rehearsing for that important engagement.

SVETLANA KITTO: You were back?

BILL T. JONES: We were back in the studio. He died on March 30th, and we were back in the studio at least by the next weekend, which was probably April 1st or something, which makes me—it couldn't be April 5th, but it

was not very much—because it had been scheduled ahead of time. It couldn't have been much more than two weeks later, a week later. You can imagine. That's show business. We were breathing on our feet, so to speak. I've often said I'm so grateful that we had the form, the dancing, to—

SVETLANA KITTO: —grieve.

BILL T. JONES: —focus the grief.

SVETLANA KITTO: Yeah, yeah.

BILL T. JONES: You know? There was a thread I had a moment ago of something I had wanted to share with you, and now I've lost it.

SVETLANA KITTO: You were saying—you were talking about *History of Collage*, and then—

BILL T. JONES: Yes, and then—

SVETLANA KITTO: —you were going back.

BILL T. JONES: Yeah, because I was thinking what was our last work together.

SVETLANA KITTO: Yeah. You kept saying what your last work was.

BILL T. JONES: [Laughs.] Yeah. So, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was proposed to be the last work, but he died. That was supposed to have been in the fall of—was it going to be the next—he died in March. Was it going to be—it probably wasn't that fall. It was probably the next fall that the work was going to be shown, because I remember we developed it in Minneapolis, and we developed it in Ringmer, in Sussex, in England, when I was working in England. [00:18:05]

We went a lot of places working on that piece. Up in Lexington, New York. I think it was probably near the place where Stephen Petronio now has his center. So we had about a year of development on that. We went a lot of places. It was going to be a big, ambitious work with many different parts. That was the first time my mother appeared onstage with me, in the prayer section. It wasn't the first time she did it. That was actually at a black choreographers' festival at Memorial Hall in West Hollywood—not West Hollywood, but what's the next one? Where's UCLA?

SVETLANA KITTO: Oh, Westwood.

BILL T. JONES: Westwood, right. That's the first time I sat onstage with a person of faith, who was my mother, Estella Jones, and who didn't read very well, who believed that one should take the Bible, take a little meditation, and then open it, and wherever you open it and your eye falls, that's what the Lord wanted you to read. She did that. She didn't read very well. Then I asked her the question, "Is Christianity a slave religion?" This was a huge room full of black people, choreographers—it wasn't only black people. And she said, "Well, if it took slavery to help us find the master, it was worth it. We were over there in Africa, running around like savages. And if it took slavery to help us find the master, then it was worth it." [00:19:52]

That was the first—one of the most provocative things anyone ever said to me. Because I also would—later on, in other versions of that section, which was called *The Prayer*, I think, or was it—I'm not sure. I asked people that, and people would say things like—oh, I would ask, "Is AIDS punishment from God?" And they would chew on that. Some people, very few, would say yes. But maybe once or twice, someone did say it.

Just trying to collect the biography, and—

SVETLANA KITTO: You have this way of asking questions of people, and it's interesting, because it feels like you're also just very kind of innocently asking for help, in a way.

BILL T. JONES: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SVETLANA KITTO: [Laughs.] Like, "Help me understand this." Like, bringing people into your process, that could be such a tortured process, but bringing—anyway—

BILL T. JONES: Well, I thought that's what Modernism was. Modernism was not coming up, necessarily, with answers, but it was an investigation. Others would disagree. Picasso is often quoted, or misquoted, as saying, "Others seek. I find."

[They laugh.]

SVETLANA KITTO: Note for the tape, interviewer's eyes rolled.

BILL T. JONES: Rolled.

[They laugh.]

BILL T. JONES: I thought that the purpose of art-making was a kind of investigation, and informed by one of the modus operandi of—what would you say it was, the Judson Church, or was it Grand Union? Which was a different thing, I know, but task-based choreography. You don't have to know where a work is, you just set out a set of questions that you want to investigate. It's a language that I see in many of the artists we present here at New York Live Arts now. It's the legacy. "I am investigating," "I'm asking questions about—," "We have gone in search of—," you know. [00:22:11]

You think Martha Graham said, "I'm investigating [laughs] the relationship to the female sexual response to Jungian philosophy" when she was working on *Phaedra* or any of those ballets? Probably not. But that was our language. Her job was to—she felt they were to bring forward jewels that had come out of the crucible of her gut and her mind, and then present it, fully formed, to the public, and the public would wrestle with it. The Grand Union—

SVETLANA KITTO: Genius.

BILL T. JONES: —they thought they were showing process.

So maybe my questioning is coming—I've been between those two impulses. Wanting to make something that's beautiful, meaningful, about form, but by the same token, something that is open, and you have to come to it, if you choose to, and complete it. Back in college, back at the university—and I must have been a bit of a handful—I was taking my poetry teacher—or was it my philosophy teacher?—to task with the notion that, "Isn't art about creation or recreation?" In other words, it's about something being made. The artist is in the process of making something, and the public sees what the artist is doing, and, in their own image, they recreate it. So it's a shared—that was my notion. It's probably not original, but that's what I thought at a very early age. It's how we understood what was elliptical about—or not elliptical, but unfinished in a lot of work that we loved. [00:24:20]

SVETLANA KITTO: I think a lot of contemporary choreographers, or if you want to say modern choreographers, would say that their project is investigation and questions. But I think that you're very faithful to that, in that you really don't stop, literally, asking people questions. So it's fine to be like, "Oh, we want to show our process," et cetera, but to actually bring voices into the work. I mean—

BILL T. JONES: You mean like a person of faith, who's asked in the middle of the performance, to stop the whole performance and sit down and have a conversation—

SVETLANA KITTO: Yeah, exactly.

BILL T. JONES: —about the nature of faith?

SVETLANA KITTO: Yeah. Like, I am not—I can't be orating to you if I don't hear back from you. Like, I can't—this sort of—it's almost like—yeah, the orating, the call-and-response or something, it's like, I can't—"You need to help me here. Help me!"

[They laugh.]

SVETLANA KITTO: Something like that.

BILL T. JONES: Which raises a question and leads us into our present discussion about, "Who are we?" Do you understand the rules of call and response? And, "Oh, I thought that all people understand"—well, that's an African American tradition, and you assume that you're going to import that into another context, in that rule of call-and-response. But I was doing that, and assuming that we all were righteous people bedeviled by the dilemma of being alive, and that we all were—that made us a community, that was a bit like a huge church. And everybody—one person would stand up and speak the truth in the community—be it the critics, be it the historians, be it the audience, ticket-buyers—would—their spirits, and they would say, "Yes, we hear you," or—that's the model that I didn't own up to for many years. I didn't know that's what I was doing. [00:26:26]

So, you've identified in our discussion my penchant for asking questions, and there's another one for this inference that we're—it's some sort of a spiritual exercise that the artist is having with the public. Now, that language, maybe the spiritual aspect of it, turns some people off, because they think it smacks of religion, but I wonder if in fact that is what a lot of artists, particularly artists in this performing medium, depend on. That we are all in this together. And the question of we—raise questions about: What color are we? Whose language are

we speaking? Who has a right to speak? What are the bounds between personal confession and literature, art? Who is the we?

SVETLANA KITTO: There's also just profound vulnerability in the asking, though.

BILL T. JONES: Yes.

SVETLANA KITTO: That's what I think I'm trying to get at.

BILL T. JONES: No, I hear you.

SVETLANA KITTO: It's taking me a minute to—

BILL T. JONES: [Laughs.] No, I appreciate it, though. Yeah, the vulnerability part.

SVETLANA KITTO: I mean, to be so vulnerable in public.

BILL T. JONES: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SVETLANA KITTO: And—I mean, yeah.

BILL T. JONES: Well, let's go back. Let's go back to AIDS.

SVETLANA KITTO: Okay.

BILL T. JONES: You know my problem with it. But I do—[00:28:01]

SVETLANA KITTO: Yeah, and it really links up with what we're talking about, I think, so maybe—

BILL T. JONES: Yes. When *MacNeil/Lehrer*—what was her name? Carly Simon's sister. What was her name? Joanna Simon? She was a bonafide journalist.

SVETLANA KITTO: Oh, yeah. Okay, yeah.

BILL T. JONES: They did a thing called—it was one of the first programs, called *AIDS in the Arts*. Who did they interview? Me and Arnie, because no—I say "because," but nobody else was rushing, at that time, to really be identified. And Arnie was—have you seen it?

SVETLANA KITTO: I tried to find it.

BILL T. JONES: I'm surprised—

SVETLANA KITTO: It's really hard to find, actually.

BILL T. JONES: Really?

SVETLANA KITTO: Yeah. I almost got access to it, [laughs] but I saw—

BILL T. JONES: It's worth seeing.

SVETLANA KITTO: I saw a little bit of it, and—

BILL T. JONES: You see that Arnie is walking around with a—

SVETLANA KITTO: Yeah.

BILL T. JONES: —saline solution, because he was doing this kind of vitamin C therapy at that time, large doses of vitamin C all day long, while this person is asking us these questions. We were coming out. Arnie was willing to talk from the position of being a man who was dealing with this. Now, that was extreme vulnerability. But he, in his way of thinking—and that's something I think I took from him—this is the only way you can fight back. I used to say—when people said, "Why are you so open about your homosexuality?" I said, "I'm never going to"—I remember this at Jacob's Pillow. We were all sitting around. What was her name, Deborah Riley? We used to dance with Douglas Dunn. I remember her—did she ask me that question, or did I direct my answer to her? I said, "Nobody is going to blackmail me."

Because what the question was, was if you were in the military—"That's why you shouldn't have homosexuals in the military, because they are vulnerable to being blackmailed, because they're clandestine, they're hidden, and they don't want to be outed." I said, "The reason I'm this way, because I am not going to be—no one is going to

blackmail me." We had a lot of ever-growing heat about that. Someone says, "Why are you so in our face about your sexuality?" It comes from this history that, you know, at the end of the movie, the gay is supposed to be outed, and then kill themselves, or they are supposed to be this miserable creature who slinks into the shadows and is a pervert. But what if you say, "I'm not in the shadows"? [00:30:40]

Now look. Look at the generation we are in now. I have a right to my pronouns. I know that gender talk is a whole other—it's different. And I have a right to marry who I want, and I am Anderson Cooper, I am now figures, and—remember when Ellen DeGeneres came out, what a big deal is? But where did that start? People standing up. There was always queers. There was always flickers, Nancies, poofers, right?

SVETLANA KITTO: Poofa.

[They laugh.]

BILL T. JONES: Poofa. But then you hear people say, "No, I am not your plaything. I am not the punchline." We're still trying to get over that one, though. I'm not the punchline at the end of your super cool stand-up monologue about my sexuality. No, it is truly another—an alternate way of human sexuality.

Which goes back—why do I associate that with Reagan? Something he said about that. During the time of Reagan is when we first began to hear—not "we first," but the right-wing was pushing back and saying, "We do not want sexual education taught in schools, because they teach things like homosexuality is simply an alternative human sexual expression. We reject this. It is not. It's aberrant." And others were saying, "No, it is just another choice of human sexuality." You can't get to that point unless somebody has owned it, journalistically, scholarly, artistically. And—"I have a right." Anyways, it was all a piece in our way of thinking. This openness. [00:32:30]

I was trying to tell some group of people—I don't know where it was, I do so many addresses at different places—about how the climate has changed. It's very important when young, hip people now, particularly young LGBT people—I'm just now getting comfortable with calling it "queer." I have not conceded that. I don't want to be called—

SVETLANA KITTO: —"queer."

BILL T. JONES: I don't want to be called a nigger, and when I was a child, to be called "queer" was just like being called a nigger. But no, black people have appropriated "nigga," right? And gay people appropriated "queer." So I was telling them that there was shock and consternation and eye-rolling when we had our opening night of *Secret Pastures* on the Brooklyn Academy stages, and at the end of it, in the ecstasy of the moment, the ovation, Arnie and I kissed each other on the lips.

There was a man who had been working with me on *Intuitive Momentum*, who was a scholarship student at—Merce Cunningham, and he was saying to David Vaughan that—no, no, David Vaughan said to him that he had seen that performance and that kiss, and he said, "Why did they have to rub our noses in it?" Now, Merce is gay. John Cage is gay. David Vaughan was gay. But yet, to see us onstage, in front of everyone, kiss on the lips was somehow, "They're flagrant." It was somehow, "They're rubbing their noses in it," in our relationship. Funny how we've traveled, isn't it? [00:34:21]

SVETLANA KITTO: Yeah. In some ways, yeah.

BILL T. JONES: And somebody had to do it first and take a chance on being called boorish.

SVETLANA KITTO: Because none of those—John Cage wasn't an out person.

BILL T. JONES: He and Merce were not out. They were offered to be on the cover of *The Advocate*, and they turned it down.

SVETLANA KITTO: Yeah. You know, there was this whole Julius Eastman—

BILL T. JONES: Yes, mm-hmm [affirmative].

SVETLANA KITTO: —and all the controversy around Cage and Eastman. I mean, that's really devastating stuff.

BILL T. JONES: Around the performances in Buffalo?

SVETLANA KITTO: Yeah. Yeah.

BILL T. JONES: Where Julius took it too far?

SVETLANA KITTO: Yes, exactly.

BILL T. JONES: You can tell a story, a personal story, but it can't be that kind of a story.

SVETLANA KITTO: Don't rub our noses in it.

BILL T. JONES: Don't rub our noses in it.

[They laugh.]

BILL T. JONES: Right. Yeah. Well, this is an oral history, isn't it?

SVETLANA KITTO: Yeah.

BILL T. JONES: Yeah.

SVETLANA KITTO: Yeah?

BILL T. JONES: Yeah. So, lest I go off into philosophizing about the nature of history—I was going to say there's a tendency when you're doing an oral history to try to argue a philosophical point of view, and I think you want as much factual information about what happened. Right?

SVETLANA KITTO: Or just memories, I mean—

BILL T. JONES: Memories.

SVETLANA KITTO: Memories. It doesn't have to be factual. Even the dates aren't as important. But also, it's both. It's the stories, and it's the way you make meaning of the stories, which is what you're saying, the philosophizing. So, I'm enjoying this very much.

[They laugh.]

BILL T. JONES: I return to this well again, but once you open it up, it's almost self-perpetuating. And it's never really gone dormant. Every time I meet—like, I was at Holy Cross University in Worcester, Massachusetts yesterday. There's a whole new group of fresh-faced, young people wanting to know—or at least their teachers and their handlers want them to be exposed to art. This is an important artist, this Bill T. Jones, because he has done these works that deal with the big things. Racism, mortality, all of this stuff. And here he is, in front of you. Now, what do you want him to do? "Well, this is what I thought I was doing, and this is what happened." They're there, taking their notes, or not. They've come to study you. Well, what are they studying? Were we rubbing people's noses in it, or were we being? [00:36:48]

SVETLANA KITTO: Just existing.

BILL T. JONES: Yes. I, a few weeks ago, was the keynote speaker at Dance NYC Conference, a big affair, get me downtown. I was being interviewed by a dynamic woman whose name is escaping me right now.

SVETLANA KITTO: That's fine.

BILL T. JONES: [Laughs.] I hope she doesn't hear this. She was there. Now, it has turned. "Well, you, who have articulated areas of conflict and have shown leadership in talking about these social problems, and these social problems"—I said, "Wait a minute. Hold on." I didn't think that what I was doing at that moment, either with Arnie and I onstage handling each other—was it a display of homoerotic art-making? Was it queer art? Or Arnie and I—me making a piece after we were publicly known, and Arnie died of AIDS, and I was HIV-positive. "Everything you make must be art about AIDS." Wait a minute. This is just coming from the same place that everything has always come from, the experience of life being—what is it?—transmuted [laughs] into this thing that we call art, or aesthetics. Now, what do you mean by art, and what do you mean by transmuted? [00:38:11]

My nephew, the other—he and I speak once a week, the same nephew that I did the piece called *Letter to my Nephew* and *Analogy/Lance*. We work on his reading, because unfortunately all those wild years, he was not getting educated. There's a poem called "Transubstantiation," and he could barely say it, but what do you think it means? I'll explain what that is. Transubstantiation. "Trans" means going from one state to another state. One substance is made into another substance. "Oh, you know, like when you go to Holy Communion, and the wafer is put in your mouth. The wafer is Christ's body. The wine is Christ's blood. So that's transubstantiation. Things like that happen in art as well."

So, that kind of education process—how do you take an experience of the tragedy of Arnie's life and transubstantiate it? How do you take it from personal tragedy to something that hopefully has a place in the

marketplace of ideas, or the history of artistic development? How do you turn it into gesture? How do you turn it into form? This is the theory of art-making from a personality like myself. Self-involved as I am, but not so much more so than a lot of artists. I always—the confusion and the ambiguity I have about life, I'm looking for a corollary in form. Decisions have to be made. Will it be movement? Will it be text? [00:40:01]

Now, when I'm talking to these young people, then it becomes a theory of art. But it starts with something which is searching. Is it psychological or is it spiritual? Then there is a political dimension, because there are strictures, recognized or not, that an artist is attacking by the gestures they make. So, "Oh, your work is political." No, it wants to be free. "Well, what's the difference in searching for freedom and political—determining yourself?" Well, I don't know. Was—here I'm making a jump. Emily Dickinson, was she an activist? [Laughs.]

SVETLANA KITTO: Emily Dickinson?

[They laugh.]

BILL T. JONES: Emily Dickinson. The writer is taking a note [laughs] about Emily Dickinson. Yeah, I love her, actually. I've grown to appreciate her more.

SVETLANA KITTO: Death.

BILL T. JONES: Are you a fan of her?

SVETLANA KITTO: Well, I've been thinking about her. I mean, I do these interviews, so I've been thinking about—well, no, basically, I did an interview that is for the Smithsonian, but for another project, with someone who is very ill. It just made me think so much about my grandparents, who—I was with both of them when they died, and I saw them die. And that look of death, and how—like, you don't know it unless you know it, but if you know it, you never forget it.

BILL T. JONES: You never forget it.

SVETLANA KITTO: And you can see it, and it's startling. Anyway, it's been making me think about Emily Dickinson. [Laughs.]

BILL T. JONES: She was always right there, able—had this uncanny ability to describe those things that you have to live a lot to understand what she—just two words side by side, and she suggest—

SVETLANA KITTO: Right, and it's so crystalized, but it's so illuminating. It's—

BILL T. JONES: Illuminating is the word, yeah.

SVETLANA KITTO: That's exactly it. [00:41:54]

BILL T. JONES: I remember the moment that—after that two, two and a half days when Arnie was there, and the whole company had gathered at the house. That moment where his mother—after much struggle between his parents and us and so on, finally there was a détente, and they realized that he wasn't just pretending. He had really been getting sick. Then he dies, and they—my sisters are there. They fell in love with—who were singing everything from show tunes to spirituals. We're all sitting around the bed, and I'm holding his head, and I swear I felt a breeze. You know? And something changed in this person, and she said, "He's gone!" You know, like that. So I think there is something—I don't know what we mean by death, the look of it, but I remember the moment.

SVETLANA KITTO: I don't really understand it entirely myself, you know, but I—it's [laughs]—I mean, because I've been trying to think of it like, can I think of it oppositionally, like birth? Is there a look? You know, because it's not the absence of life. It's something else, and I—

BILL T. JONES: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SVETLANA KITTO: And it reminds me of Emily Dickinson, because it's like, it's coming. It is a thing that is coming, and—I mean, it's really hard not to demonize it as a thing.

BILL T. JONES: And I'm trying not to do that these days. I'm trying to make my peace with it.

SVETLANA KITTO: Yeah. But as I describe it, it makes me upset.

BILL T. JONES: I know.

SVETLANA KITTO: It makes me mad and upset. [00:44:01]

BILL T. JONES: [Laughs.] I know.

SVETLANA KITTO: [Laughs.] So it's hard not to—

BILL T. JONES: To use that term, it's the most natural thing in the world.

SVETLANA KITTO: It's the most natural thing in the world. So—

BILL T. JONES: And why are we—

SVETLANA KITTO: Yeah.

BILL T. JONES: And there we are. Philosophy, right?

SVETLANA KITTO: Because it's foreign.

BILL T. JONES: Or art.

SVETLANA KITTO: It's just—it's so hard to comprehend. We can't comprehend it.

BILL T. JONES: We can't comprehend it, except art can grapple with it. We can represent it, we can interrogate it, and—yeah. Yeah.

SVETLANA KITTO: So just to sort of—we can kind of start wrapping up. Hold on.

[Audio break.]

BILL T. JONES: Always asking questions. The question was in fact, "Where were we?" And I was trying to take responsibility for where the narrative is. The question—what I was saying was, where am I in the narrative at this point? He dies, and it's a dramatic—for me, it's very dramatic. I've written about it. Wake up the next day. The world has changed. And, quoting myself, I say that, at that point, life became before Arnie and after Arnie. I don't feel that way anymore, but for quite a few years, I did.

The company. Maybe you can break it down into categories. The company. The company equals art practice, the business of art, personal art. Maybe you could help me keep this focused around those. In terms of the company—I've told this so many times, I can hardly believe that it really happened. In those last months and weeks of his life, we had intense conversations, one of which was him saying, "You don't have to keep this company." It's hard. You know, the fundraising, the dealing with making a new work. He said, "You're not temperamentally suited for it. You can go off and do solo career or do something else." It was when he died that I—this is a dramatic way of putting it—I said, "No, this is the child that he and I had, and I'm going to honor that child." [00:46:22]

Was that because I just didn't know what else to do? Or truly it was almost a personal cry of independence and resistance. I like to think that. So there was—using the times, the death of Arnie, to position us again, to position me again. And as always, I was thinking about, "What are the big questions that I'm having?" I think that's where *Uncle Tom's Cabin* came from. That, as I told a group of European French journalists, "I am the surviving member of a celebrated, interracial, homosexual duet team." And of course, they loved that.

And what did that mean? And being the surviving member, I happened to be the black one. There's something, a kind of provisional relationship, an interracial couple has in a racist society. As long as the two of you work it from both points of view, you can get by. But when one of you dies, what happens to the other? Particularly the black one. Would it have been different if I had died? I think it would have been different. So that meant *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became more urgent. [00:48:11]

What did it mean? *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin*, telling that story—which I had never read. Just either—not too lazy, but somehow maybe afraid of reading a narrative about slavery, because it would make me almost crippled with despair or anger. I was never one of those black people who read slave narratives. You know? I wish I had read them more. I was never a scholar, a student, of civil rights. I was never any of that. Now I had to start thinking, what does it mean when you are the black person?

We talked about "we." [Laughs.] I spoke of us being young artists, living in Johnson City, New York, and trying to rent an apartment. He would always go first. He would charm them, and then he would bring his partner. And his partner happens to be, one, a man, two, a black man. "Oh, so you're homosexuals?" They probably knew he was homosexual, but then they see how complicated it is. Which was—renting an apartment was already a negotiation. Getting a reservation at a restaurant. Who goes first into the restaurant if you want to be treated with respect? Things are never talked about. We just did it.

Now, could that be imaginary? If I was a black heterosexual man, do I have the same anxieties about renting an apartment or going into a restaurant? Probably, big time, but I had the white man. You know? And then he's gone. The world changes. *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land*, and the promised land was trying to give the lie to all of my alienated feelings. I said I was bred to be alienated, but I refused to be cynical. [00:50:29]

When I do a work, I get interviewed a lot. These formulations do sort of coagulate around a feeling, or a kernel of a thought, and that was around this point, about what that last scene of a stage full of people of every color and shape and size and age, bathed in golden light and singing like children—what were you getting at? Oh, that is the artist's right to create a view, a stylized view, of heaven, a place of full acceptance. Around this time of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—that probably had—did it have its premiere at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in the fall of the very year that he died? I can't believe it was that fast. It might have been the next year.

SVETLANA KITTO: Was it the Joyce?

BILL T. JONES: No, BAM.

SVETLANA KITTO: Oh, it was BAM? Okay.

BILL T. JONES: BAM. I know that we had worked on the last section, the—what was it called?—*The Promised Land* at Northrop Auditorium in Minneapolis. Forty-five-minute version of it. The whole thing was three hours-plus. It was very long. [00:51:49]

But I would say that that was my vision of the world I wanted to live in. Arnie and I had developed a formulation—and you realize that I'm sitting here talking to you, and things have been said so many times, but even though it's been repeated, oftentimes I will have to say "we," because I'm not sure whose idea something was. So we had this idea that we wanted to create a company, not as the world as it is, but a vision of the world as we would like it to be. And that is one thing I was saying to these young students just the day before yesterday about the nature of art being, at once, a fantasy. There's very little you can control in this world, but you can present, you can project, a vision of the world you want to live in. Such was *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

So that was—an answer was the business of the art, because that really gave us a bounce. The company continued to live. The company could thrive in the way that I knew. I have sometimes—there's been a lot of stuff that's happened between me and the, quote, downtown dance world. I'm famous for a lot of reasons, and fame is suspicious. I say to them that it is—I was taught that I was—I learned. The lesson I learned was: When you get the opportunity to have a platform, you've got to work it for all its worth.

Sounds crass. Well, maybe you think it is crass, but I believe that that is—literally, I think that's what it means to be an American. Maybe not the best thing, but it is part of it. Particularly for people who are of the underclass. You get a leg up, and for you to walk away from it almost insults the persons that made it possible for you to be there. Am I just juxtaposing a self-involvement and self-promotion? Maybe. Maybe it is. But there's truth in it as well. [00:54:20]

SVETLANA KITTO: Yeah. The downtown dance world—you were saying?

BILL T. JONES: The downtown dance world distrusts—

SVETLANA KITTO: Distrusts, okay.

BILL T. JONES: —fame—

SVETLANA KITTO: Right, I see.

BILL T. JONES: —celebrity.

SVETLANA KITTO: Yes. That's your—you were saying that's the conflict.

BILL T. JONES: That's been the conflict. That's been my conversation since I've been here, in this—New York Live Arts. I'm not in love with the myth of poverty.

SVETLANA KITTO: Yeah, or the romanticization of it, or something?

BILL T. JONES: Well, yeah. Yeah. Is it a myth or is it romanticized? I'm not sure. I always go down a hole here, because when I'm speaking about this, I also hear my parents scraping, literally, in the dirt, picking potatoes. I hear their shame of being on welfare. So what—if you don't want to be a menial worker, get an education, or find something you can do that gives you a leg up in this competitive, profit-driven culture. And I'll do that as the person I am, with these desires for spiritual transcendence, and do that with my art historical hat. I want to be

part of a big conversation about the development of art, artistic practice. I don't want to make revelations, like Mr. Ailey did. Which sets very well with everybody, black people, white liberals. It's a nice story of the black American experience. Beautifully made, lovely. Everything you love about black people is there. [00:56:20]

But I want to be as cantankerous, and even obscure—I want to be as cantankerous as James Joyce was. James Joyce says that he put—he made that novel so full of naughty references, because he said he wanted to give the academics something to really chew on. He said, "I put a lot of stuff in there, to keep them constantly"—yeah, that's kind of perverse, but there was something in that.

Or, what about Merce? What about this very dry, this non—it doesn't taste good. You've got to develop, you've got to change your taste buds to appreciate it. And yet I am not—I couldn't really get down with being punk. I'm not a shaggy white kid, or—I make these kind of—it's meant to be biting, but I don't think people [laughs] understand what I'm saying. I said I think that the downtown art world is populated by refugees from the middle classes.

SVETLANA KITTO: Fair enough.

BILL T. JONES: You know?

[They laugh.]

SVETLANA KITTO: But you were punk. You were just punk when it—you were punk in the '70s—I mean, you—

BILL T. JONES: What do you call punk? I was never a nihilist.

SVETLANA KITTO: But you were counterculture.

BILL T. JONES: Counterculture was not punk.

SVETLANA KITTO: You were queer. How about that? Let's just leave it at that.

BILL T. JONES: And I was not owning "queer." We were not hiding it, but we did not want to—"queer" was to say that you were perverse, that you were somehow or other "other." That you are—God knows how long your shelf life is. You know, queer looks good on the very young. [00:58:09]

SVETLANA KITTO: But you all were bold.

BILL T. JONES: We were bold. That's the point.

SVETLANA KITTO: Yeah, you were really bold.

BILL T. JONES: That's the point.

SVETLANA KITTO: But not just in your work, but in the way that—

BILL T. JONES: In our life.

SVETLANA KITTO: —you were conducting yourself, and the way you dressed, too, right?

BILL T. JONES: Well, let's just—yeah, the way we dressed, of course, but we owe a lot of that to the counterculture. We shopped in Goodwill, and we found the nostalgia, and we—

SVETLANA KITTO: But didn't Arnie dress in drag, too? Or wear women's clothing, or wear dresses?

BILL T. JONES: He cross-dressed—not cross-dressed. No, no, no, no, no, no, not—what should I say? He would—first of all, he was a small man and he refused the boxy suits that small men were assigned to. He thought, oftentimes, if he found a jacket with—a woman's jacket from the '40s or '50s—it fit his body in a way that he found attractive. And he was right, it did. It did. I remember him wearing a hat, which was maybe from the late '40s, early '50s, that we found in this junk shop. He said—and he was very pointed and getting on my case—"A liberated man can wear whatever he wants to wear." And that word "liberated" made me think, "Oh, my God, am I not liberated?"

I didn't really ever—I did do pieces, or made maybe a couple of films of his, in which I wore a dress. In this oral history that he did for Lincoln Center, in 1987, he says, "I was never interested in camp." He said, "I wouldn't even know how to do camp." He thought he was doing something that's more complicated. Timelessness, gender-blurring, elevated. You know, different than camp. [01:00:07]

SVETLANA KITTO: Different than camp, yeah.

BILL T. JONES: The preoccupation that drag queens have with some vision of conventional women gone wild. You know, I—it's funny, but I don't know if women find it funny. I guess they do.

SVETLANA KITTO: Some do.

BILL T. JONES: Some do.

SVETLANA KITTO: Yeah, I guess I just meant—not like drag queens, but just wearing women's clothing [laughs] on the street sometimes. Cross-dressing, as you said.

BILL T. JONES: Parts, yeah.

SVETLANA KITTO: Yeah. Just doing things that were bold and—

BILL T. JONES: Holding hands and walking in a working-class neighborhood, holding hands. Even now, it's difficult. But then, you can imagine—in Binghamton, New York, not in Greenwich Village. Alright? So yeah, what we're trying to get at is: What was the rebellion? On our terms? We led with the notion of personal freedom, and I think we led with the notion of living a life that was aestheticized. Maybe that is something about gay people. You know? Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas were our patron saints. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* was a bit like a Bible for us. We loved that period between the two wars, and the description of the parties, and the conversations around life and meaning, and bohemia.

SVETLANA KITTO: Without the clandestine, so you—

BILL T. JONES: Without the clandestine. Yes. Yeah, no—

SVETLANA KITTO: A new bohemia.

BILL T. JONES: Pardon?

SVETLANA KITTO: A new bohemia.

BILL T. JONES: A new bohemia.

[They laugh.]

BILL T. JONES: When we came here, when I did this merger, I was still using the term "avant-garde." He goes, "Don't use that. It dates you." You know, fuck that. I know what it means. I think you know what it means. And bohemia. "They're old-fashioned. They're"—[01:02:00]

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BILL T. JONES: —"exhausted terms." You're implying that the whole culture now is just so down, so with it, the lifestyle that—yes, everyone has wild-colored hair now.

SVETLANA KITTO: [Laughs.]

BILL T. JONES: They do. Yeah? They do. But I remember when Estella Jones—it was somewhere around the early —when she died in 2001, '02, but it might have been 10 years before that, when she was with me a lot, in a wheelchair, a lady from her church in San Francisco, touring with her son, the choreographer. She came into rehearsal one day. She had a series of wigs. Those ladies, they dress. You know, there are shops about the hair, the clothes, the shoes, the bags. She came in wearing a wig that was copper red. Copper red. At the time, the dancers were all like, "Woo! Look at Estella. What is she doing? Look at her hair." For her, this is fashion. It's not punk. Because if you were a hot number, which the sisters are, inside of them, you just have to grab attention, and you have to do it with style. Let's call it style.

Or with Max Roach, what I learned about black jazz musicians: These guys, their tailors were very important, and they were proud to tell you, "I go to the same tailor that the Prince of Wales goes to." You know? Miles, Max, you know. Now, the counterculture says, "Oh, they're so materialistic. They're so obsessed with their look." You know? No, man. When you have everything stripped away from you, what do you have? You know?

SVETLANA KITTO: Yeah. It's a mode of expression. [00:01:52]

BILL T. JONES: Mode of expression, and kind of an armor, and a statement that "I am"—Odetta used to have, around her neck, something that says, "I am." She was quite—Maya Angelou, that whole circle of people around her, that generation, two generations before me, how they conducted themselves, what they thought was a proper way of being, what they thought was stylishness—and it was okay to be vivid. You can wear bright colors.

My mother didn't. She thought when you go into a shop and they start showing you red and purple, they're making fun of you. But she's a woman who, in her later years, was wearing a red—copper red—wig, with a blunt cut here, and sitting in her wheelchair, as if nothing was out of the ordinary. A couple of years later, people are dying their hair copper red, what have you. So, was she punk? No, she wasn't punk.

Arnie Zane had decided that he thought it was interesting—his hair was shoulder-length, and he put a white streak in it. He thought it was distinctive. And it looked good on him. Where did he get that idea? Interviewing for a job in Endicott, New York, which, as you know, is, I believe, the home of Xerox or IBM—Xerox? That day, he was in full gender-fuck mood—mode. As you know, David Bowie, Elton John, until they all come out as straight guys. Prince. They're fluid in their style, right? But then, "Ah, we're straight." They are. Okay, Elton John, no, but everybody else was, right?

But Arnie goes in that day with—he had found a pair of vintage Courreges white boots, go-go boots.

SVETLANA KITTO: Nice. [00:03:51]

BILL T. JONES: And a dress that was lizard-skin pattern, that he wore out, over a pair of jeans. In Amsterdam, when he got to Amsterdam the first time, there was this thing of the counterculture, but what people were doing was sewing sequins up the side. Ziggy Stardust, all of that. Lizard-skin dress over a pair of tight jeans, with sequins, Courreges boots, long hair with a white strip. Open, and the hairy chest is showing through. You're going to get a job that way? I mean—

[They laugh.]

BILL T. JONES: I don't think—we're sitting out there in the waiting room, waiting for the interview. The guy came out and looked at him. Didn't even—"Thank you for your application." We knew what we were doing. It was an attitude.

SVETLANA KITTO: Yeah, like the way that—I mean, it's sort of like the parlance of punk. Now—it's sort of like what you're saying about people calling you "camp." It's like, when you were doing what you were doing, that hadn't been conceived of, so now looking back, anything that smacks of gayness is called camp, but there's obviously lots of different iterations of—

BILL T. JONES: Well, who was wearing an earring at that time? What man would wear an earring in 1975? He had to be queer. And before that, it was Hawaiian shirts. Now, the butch football players would be seen with two diamond earrings in each ear.

SVETLANA KITTO: I know, right?

BILL T. JONES: Right.

SVETLANA KITTO: That's wild stuff.

BILL T. JONES: And outrageous things, because everybody wants to be fly. There's codes.

SVETLANA KITTO: Yeah, there's codes.

BILL T. JONES: When we were with Robert Longo—this is before—was it before Arnie died? I think we were doing a piece called *Killing Angels* up in Buffalo, at—was it Hallwalls or Albright-Knox Gallery? Which is where Robert went to school. He and Cindy actually founded Hallwalls, which was an artist space. But we were there, doing a high-profile performance art extravaganza. [00:06:04]

We had a group of—it was striking, because there were the East Village straight guys in leather—Stuart Argabright, from head to toe, in leather. Then there was Damian [ph]—I think Damian [ph]—and Sean [ph], who had leather. But those are gay leather. So it was both—they were hip in their own spheres, and we were in Buffalo. That's what New York was in the '80s.

SVETLANA KITTO: So just all-around, like, radical bad-assery is what we would look back now and call punk, I think.

BILL T. JONES: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SVETLANA KITTO: Even though it's not with the—

BILL T. JONES: Well, punk was already over by, like, 1981, right?

SVETLANA KITTO: Right, exactly, yeah.

BILL T. JONES: When Karole Armitage, punk ballerina—already is a kind of oxymoron, right?

SVETLANA KITTO: Yeah.

BILL T. JONES: As some Dutch people told me at that time, they were not impressed with the phenomena, and they said, "You've got to go to Liverpool, where people are eating—they're so poor, they're eating chips on bread. And they have nothing, so people are wearing clothes that are bedraggled, ripped, and they are pierced and all because of their economic hardship. That's punk," they said. Everything else is style.

And no harm. Style is a privilege, actually. I learned a lot about style when I really sat with Leni Riefenstahl, of all people. *Last of the Nuba*. It is her's, right? Do you know the book? Is *Last of the Nuba* hers or is it—because she made very important, beautiful books, photo books, of Africa. But the Nuba—as you know, there was an ethnic group, which I don't know if they exist anymore, because they were being endangered then. Beautiful photos of this sort of idyllic tribe of African peoples. The men spend hours every day adorning themselves. The most beautiful painting and care. Then they do wrestling competitions and display. That's what it is. [00:08:26]

So that sense of "my body, my display." We probably only see that kind of fastidiousness now in drag queens. But what were they doing? They were expressing something else. I think I got inspiration from that. I'm not envious of—I was not trans, had no desire to be trans. There was a moment when I was feeling such intense love for him that I said to my brother, my older straight brother, "I love him. I would love to have a child for him." He said, "Oh, my God, that's so"—it was kind of perverse. I said, "Well, no, I love him. Does that mean I wish I had a vagina and ovaries? No." But it was expression of that kind of love that a man and a woman can share. Now, with the help of a surrogate, men can share it, and gay women, with the help of a donor, can share it as well.

SVETLANA KITTO: Or just a cup of sperm. [Laughs.]

BILL T. JONES: Just a cup of sperm, yeah. And hopefully good taste in choosing the donor, and a clear agreement about who is the parent here.

SVETLANA KITTO: Who's the boss.

BILL T. JONES: Who's the boss, yeah.

SVETLANA KITTO: Anyway, we've got—

BILL T. JONES: *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. When we launched it, it was a *Newsweek* article that had *Uncle Tom's Cabin* next to the White Oak Project as two enterprises that were suddenly coming on the scene and going on elaborate tours. Which was an interesting comparison if you think of what they were. I think this was Mischa with probably—what was it, all Mark Morris evenings or something, in those first times out? And here we are, doing this thing. [00:10:24]

When *Uncle Tom's Cabin* went to Europe, we did it in Montpellier, and they requested—they loved it, but they didn't understand the old people in it. [Laughs.] They requested we not have the old people in it. Did you not understand that the four guest artists—there was Andre Smith, who had just graduated from North Carolina School of the Arts, was an actor who was going to be Uncle Tom. R. Justice Allen, who had just gotten out of Attica State Penitentiary, where he spent all of his 20s. He was 15 years there for having robbed and shot a man who died.

There was John and Sage Cowles, two millionaires from Minneapolis. Cowle Enterprise was the—John Cowles, C-O-W-L-E-S, controlled the *Star Tribune* and a number of papers in the Midwest. They, good liberals, wanted to show that they understand the discussion around identity politics at that time. And they were leaders in their community. John was on the board of the Guthrie. Sage was very respected. She was on Morris's board, whatever. But they made a real—people said what they did was they ran away with the circus for two years. [00:11:52]

The two of them—I met Sage on a Beardsfun [ph] panel. Or was it a McKnight panel? I'm not quite sure. They were looking at artists in that area, and I was one of those persons adjudicating. That's when I first saw Ralph Lemon's work, in a videotape: a quartet of four women, with a sort of Spanish, flamenco feeling. But I had all of my prejudices against women of Sage's class. Very—you've seen what Sage looked like. Beautifully, lovely, put-together body; elegant white hair; always wearing very beautifully cut, lovely colored clothes. She would always cut the labels out. She didn't want—labels were gauche. Shouldn't have labels.

On that panel, she was very forthcoming. I wouldn't say we knocked heads, but we immediately liked each other. I said, "You know, I've got something for you," and I was thinking of the part of Harriet Beecher Stowe. I thought, of course, if I offered her this role, she would blanch and walk away, but no, she—I said, "Have you read *Uncle Tom's Cabin*?" She did her homework. And LeRoi Jones's—not Amiri Baraka, but LeRoi Jones's *The*

Dutchman, and the character of Lula. You know it, of course?

SVETLANA KITTO: Yeah, I do.

BILL T. JONES: "I'll set up a part for you." She took it very seriously. She went to a friend who was an actress, for coaching about how to handle the text. She wanted in, and John was going to come with her. John, who was the newspaperman—when we got to Washington, I think they referred to him as the "nude-paper man," because [laughs] of—whatever. They wanted to do it, and they insisted that they would be treated like company members. Did they get per diem? I think they got a per diem, and they would stay wherever we stayed. They could stay anywhere they wanted to, right? But they're going to travel with the company, and I think we had to provide them tickets and everything. They were down for it. [00:14:14]

It was an amazing band of individuals. This is at the time when Jesse Helms is on the floor of the legislature, waving Robert Mapplethorpe's catalogue. Was it the Hirshhorn, or maybe it was Cincinnati? Hirshhorn was before Cincinnati, I think. "This filth that our dollars are paying for." Maybe they felt as this man felt, who was one of the many people who came from the community in Iowa City, who described himself as a Republican, but he wanted to do this show, because he wants to tell Jesse Helms to go to hell.

It was an amazing time. As I tell it in my book, we would send ahead two teachers or so to teach a rather complicated set of repetitive figures that everybody—non-dancers—had to learn. Counting and patterns and all, to this very fast music. Then we would come in, and we would, quote, integrate my company with that community.

So the first rehearsal, when I got there, there was a man—oh, he's late. He's a fireman. He comes in, regular Joe, big guy. "Yes, I've been fighting a fire over in Johnson, a 40-acre fire." He comes in, in his clothes, [laughs] to make it to this rehearsal. And a librarian, who was very round, very studious-looking, very warm, and very powerful woman. You know, literally worked in a school, and she was there to do it. She was going to do the nudity and everything. And this man, this long, lean Republican, and his girlfriend. [00:16:00]

When we went to Lawrence, Kansas—was it Lawrence, Kansas after that, the next engagement? Which was a place wherein board members quit, because they heard that an un-Christian, anti-American work was being presented on their stage. It was dividing people. These same people, some of them actually drove I don't know how many hundred miles. They did that production in Iowa City, and they wanted to be part of it in Lawrence, Kansas as well, because of what the work meant, you know, what it was saying.

So *Uncle Tom's Cabin* gets to Europe.

SVETLANA KITTO: Was that the first time you had used non-dancers?

BILL T. JONES: No, not at all. I mean, Arnie—we were using—in Binghamton—

SVETLANA KITTO: Oh, yeah, you would bring people in that—yeah, yeah, right.

BILL T. JONES: Oh, yeah. The Dance Asylum, who were you working with? The kids, what have you. Those long heads I told you about, that I made out of papier-mâché. There's photographs taken by my friend, Barry Butterfield, that shows local kids wearing these things. Some of the local girls, little girls, were doing gymnastics in school. I put them—I did a trio with two of them. That's how I got my first Creative Artists Public Service Grant. They didn't know me from Adam, but when the tape came, and they see this guy working in Binghamton, and he looks like he looks, and dancing with these two little white girls, doing flips and all, all wearing spangles and all—

SVETLANA KITTO: [Laughs.] Yeah.

BILL T. JONES: You know. So I was going to try and get to the point of what I learned about America when we got to Europe. France was okay, except for the presenter didn't understand John and Sage in it. "Why have these old white people in it?"

SVETLANA KITTO: France. [Laughs.]

BILL T. JONES: Yeah. Yeah. Or, as a journalist said to me—

SVETLANA KITTO: It's so stereotypical, right? [Laughs.]

BILL T. JONES: Is it? I don't know. I don't know. I know that, for people who have been objectifying women's bodies for—they just did not understand—[00:18:02]

SVETLANA KITTO: —why you would want to show that.

BILL T. JONES: Yes. Or, this journalist, who was the journalist for *Le Nouvel Observateur*, which is kindly compared to the *New Yorker*, he said to me—Raphael de Gubernatis—"They're naked. Black men have big penises. They should be naked. But white men should not do that."

SVETLANA KITTO: [Laughs.] Oh, God.

BILL T. JONES: These are the sophisticated Europeans. You know?

SVETLANA KITTO: Wow. Yeah.

BILL T. JONES: And in Italy, when we got there, they could get me a stage full of naked people, our 52 handsome nudes, but we paid them. They didn't understand—"What do you mean, community engagement? Making a political statement?" So they had to be paid, so it became a gig. You know? Some beautiful people, but it was certainly a different [laughs] thing.

That's what made—"You're an American. These are American questions." And it was that time when identity politics was finally—not finally; I'm sure people have been talking a long time about these questions. But in academia, language was developing around what it was, who's onstage, what's being questioned. And of course, yours truly, Bill T. Jones, was, for better or for worse, in that conversation.

SVETLANA KITTO: Learned about America.

BILL T. JONES: Learned about America. That that's what's a beautiful thing about America. There was something naive about it, but very sincere and very serious. You know? People didn't—it took them a long time to understand feminism. Still struggling with it, I think. And didn't women get the right to vote in the 1920s in—well, no, even later in France, women, I think, got the right to vote.

I'm trying to get rid of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, all this stuff, and move onto—when *Uncle Tom's Cabin* finished, there was a period where I did some pure dance works. I had been invited to become artist-in-residence at the Lyon Opéra Ballet by Yorgos Loukos. I made a piece called *Love Defined* to the music of Daniel Johnston, the Austin star. You know who he is? [00:20:26]

SVETLANA KITTO: I don't, actually.

BILL T. JONES: He is—I wouldn't say he's autistic, but he's—he's on medication, and when he's off his medication, he was living in the basement of his parents' or his grandparents' house, making little tapes with a toy piano and his nieces and nephews. Music that's been covered by every cool rocker. They're very touching, crazy songs. Does a very moving "King Kong," which was the centerpiece of the piece we did at the Lyon.

That was the kind of pure dance, downtown dance period, even though I was working in France, but it had been *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that a lot of people in downtown did not understand what that had been about. Last thing they knew, I was grieving over Arnie, and then suddenly you're making this piece where you're doing Martin Luther King backwards, and talking about race, and all of these things. And it's heart on its sleeve, and it's angry and all. "Hey, hey, what happened to you, man? What's going on? What happened to you?" You know.

SVETLANA KITTO: [Laughs.] Yeah, what did happen to you? [Laughs.] No, I'm just kidding.

BILL T. JONES: Well, that's what we've been talking about, right?

SVETLANA KITTO: [Laughs.] Exactly, yeah.

BILL T. JONES: I think that's what the interview is supposed to be saying: What was going on? When it was all over, and the smoke settled—had I won the MacArthur yet? I don't know. I think I had, maybe. I found out about the MacArthur when I was in Lyon, and I—[00:22:02]

SVETLANA KITTO: It was '94, I think, that you—

BILL T. JONES: '94. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, probably its last performance was somewhere in Oregon or someplace like that, in '92. The first survival workshop for *Still/Here* was in Austin, I believe. Austin, Texas, probably around the same time that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was finishing, '91 or '92.

I say sometimes that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had really tried to talk about the vision and coming together between people. Therefore, I wanted to make a piece that was not going to be able to offend anyone around race. I was going to make a piece about an unimpeachable subject that should unite us all: mortality, or the fact that we're born, and we grow and then we die. You know what happened with that, right? But it started off being, "Let's clear the slate"—

SVETLANA KITTO: [Laughs.]

BILL T. JONES: —"and go to a higher level," which is about the body. "Oh, he's making a piece about AIDS." Well, actually, no. Sunny Dupree—who was an upper-class, rich, very glamorous woman who lived in Boston—I knew her when I was there. She might have been involved with the Boston Lyric Opera, and I directed *Lost in the Stars*, and I was staying at the home of a McKnight heir, Sini Boynton [ph]. She and I were very close at that time. [00:23:44]

But I met Sunny at a cocktail party or something around the time or after the premiere of *Lost in the Stars*, and I found out that she had been petitioning—was it the Clinton administration at that time?—about breast cancer. She was a survivor. She said to me, point-blank, "You should do a piece about breast cancer." I said, "I'm a gay man." She said, "That's why you should be doing it!" So I thought, "There's something that she's saying. I don't know if she knows what she's even saying, and I'm not sure." But I said, "I think she's talking about what unites us around disease and fear of the body." That's when I said, "I need to find out more." So we asked presenters this, to find me people in the community who were, or had been, dealing with a life-threatening illness.

Two days ago, this came up again. A guy said, "You mean terminal ill people?" I said, "Well, can we find another word rather than terminal?" That's why they were called survival workshops, because it was—

SVETLANA KITTO: Living with.

BILL T. JONES: Living with.

SVETLANA KITTO: Living with. Yeah.

BILL T. JONES: But I never liked that, "living with AIDS," actually, in particular when it came out of the mouth of people who themselves were not infected. I said that I want to go to people who are experts, who knew what it was like to have this diagnosis hanging over you, and how you get up in the morning, how you embrace your loved ones, how you tell your children it's going to be alright, how you make plans or not. That's what I wanted these people to come—and they found an interesting array.

What was it? In the first one in Austin, I remember an old guy came in, who was—he said, "Yeah, I'm over at a retirement home, and they told me that if I came over here, some pretty dancing girls were going to be here today." Old white guy. You know, he was joking: "Ha, ha, ha, ha."

SVETLANA KITTO: [Laughs.]

BILL T. JONES: And we did—on my wall, for the tape, are drawings on paper, and those are six out of probably 100 or so works done by participants in the survival workshops. The thing that they were asked to do was to draw their life as a diagram. They don't have to be artists, but do the best you can do. Then once it was drawn, then they would start at what they consider their birth, and then—much like this oral history, but maybe not as detailed [laughs]—they would, with a group of other participants—[00:26:22]

SVETLANA KITTO: The story. Yeah.

BILL T. JONES: —walk through it, and tell us: What's this curve? What's this crink? What is it?

Then we did other exercises, such as, "Tell me what you love. Write it on the piece of paper and tell me what you fear." They were each required as well to make a gesture that expressed who they were. They were very basic people. The gestures were very basic. But I collected a huge amount of them, brought them back, because I wanted to make sure that it was going to be a work that was driven by dance. So my expert dancers would take those gestures and put legs to them and what have you.

It was very much a big experience for communities. I remember us being hosted by a hospital in at least two places. The conversation suddenly opened up. We were in Iowa, and a young mortuary couple, they were willing to sit down and talk to me. The woman said to me, "The problem started when birth and death moved out of the home." She started talking about, "We have a problem in contemporary America, if not in the contemporary world: How we deal with things like birth and death. Why is it so frightening to us?" That was a very important thing for me to hear. [00:28:03]

It was a piece—well, I don't need to tell you—started a whole other controversy, when Arlene Croce in the *New Yorker* wrote—what was it called?—"Discussing the Undiscussable." "It's unfair to the beleaguered critic, because how can I be expected to review somebody who I feel sorry for?" This was—

SVETLANA KITTO: It's very tone-deaf.

BILL T. JONES: Yeah, victim art.

SVETLANA KITTO: Right, victim art.

BILL T. JONES: Now, this is the same woman who had, maybe 10 years before—when did she write that article in which she said, "An artist like Bill T. Jones is leading a generation into the fever swamps"? Little did she know. [Laughs.] I named the piece I made for Ailey *Fever Swamp*. When she came back with the victim art article, she said, "I wrote a critique of him, and he answered—he, like a lot of these self-involved artists, are saying, 'Don't talk back.' We critics are not allowed to talk back." What do you mean, don't talk back? "He even named a piece after something I said." Well, yeah.

SVETLANA KITTO: [Laughs.]

BILL T. JONES: And you know what? You can have it both ways, honey. You see right there? Bill is pointing over his shoulder at the Kennedy Center Honors, and then there's a National Medal of Honor there. Was this a sentimental gesture by the Obama administration, or had I really changed the dance world?

Yeah, he led a generation into the fever swamps, and that's why most concerts—many you see right now are about questions of identity, especially about social placement, all those things that she was decrying were utilitarian. Art is not utilitarian. Well, we have, now, a generation of people, that is the language. Okay, this is me blowing my own horn, but let's just get it for the record that I know who I am. You understand what I'm saying? I know. She thought it was a put-down, and I was hurt when she said it, but now I understand what she was saying. "He is leading a generation into the fever swamps." [00:30:27]

Meredith Monk had her mother onstage in the '70s, with—I think it was *Education of the Girlchild*, one of those pieces. There are other pieces where people have been very referencing themselves and all, in, quote, an art piece. There was nothing maybe as fulsome as these pieces—*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Still/Here*—because of the way they engaged the questions that the culture was having.

So, *Still/Here* happens. I survive. Almost killed me. I was so angry and depressed. I zinged back again in the direction of pure art. I did a whole series of works inspired by the text of Dylan Thomas. I was in Seoul, Korea, in their National Museum, and looking at beautiful celadon pots, and thinking that the only thing that lasts is form. "Ah, let's go back to form." So, thinking about music, early Romantic music, with this—how you can take four musicians and make them sound like an orchestra, or the way the form, the extreme discipline of the form of a quartet, meets deep, deep feeling, the Romantic feeling. Trying to capture something that we see in nature and what have you. That was a whole series of works that we did with the Orion String Quartet and the Lincoln Center Chamber Music Society. [00:32:14]

I did my first solo show. Not just a solo, but what I called a breathing show, which was about taking a breath after all these big, public works, and wanting to focus on my body, which knew it was getting towards the end of its dancing life. A lot of it was dancing to music that I liked, which was Schubert Lieder. Actually, what's his name? It doesn't matter. A great interpreter of Schubert, was the music I was using in dancing with that.

Those works, and that focus on my dancing—I was ignoring the company, so I wanted to come back. Oh, we didn't talk about—around the time that Arnie died, one of the most enduring works. It threatens to be my version of a Revelations, not about race, but about this era that you came here today to talk about: *D-Man in the Waters*.

SVETLANA KITTO: Oh, right, of course.

BILL T. JONES: Right. "In a dream you saw a way to survive, and you were filled with joy" is a quote from Jenny Holzer. I was—it was supposedly based on a dream—I think it was a dream, more like a daydream, I had somewhere around the time after Arnie died, or maybe when he was getting really sick, and Demian Acquavella, who was one of the company members, was also getting ill. Arnie had already died, because Arnie never saw *D-Man*, but Demian was in it when he was getting ill. And everyone, Arnie and Demian, were looking for alternative medicines, trying everything. Egg yolks, frozen, Vitamin C therapy, Vitamin B therapy. There was even a thing about upping your immune system by photo fixing fluid, because somebody had done a test that said that people exposed to this acetate, their immune system would respond. [00:34:38]

That's what it was like. It was a guessing game. The era of ACT UP. So I said that I had a dream—I think it was a fantasy—and I saw a huge lake of water. And in this lake of water, people I knew, people I didn't know—some were swimming and frolicking in the waves, others were drowning. There was a huge waterfall at the end of this lake that nobody could see, so everybody was moving inexorably toward this cliff and falling off. But they were swimming bravely in the water. This was the image that informed this work, *D-Man in the Waters*, to the music of Mendelssohn's *Octet in E-Flat Major*.

SVETLANA KITTO: You were saying that after—you were talking about—that was you circling back to before.

BILL T. JONES: I was circling back to 1987, actually. '88.

SVETLANA KITTO: We had been talking about you making pure art.

BILL T. JONES: Which was probably—yes. [Laughs.] Returning—

SVETLANA KITTO: Returning to form.

BILL T. JONES: Yes.

SVETLANA KITTO: And your own body.

BILL T. JONES: And my own body, after Arnie had—no longer had my partner anymore, but I had now a company, and I was trying to make it as a, quote, serious choreographer. Not as a confessionalist, not as an activist, but I wanted to do what Trisha was doing, what Merce was doing, to get their respect. You know? [Laughs.] [00:36:22]

Still/Here certainly was not that. The Dylan Thomas pieces were—I was told one day at Jacob's Pillow—I was doing conversation with their archivist, or a woman there. I said to her, "My impulse was to make something beautiful." Bob Yassoulman [ph], who used to be the agent of Paul Taylor, he said, "Well, I saw the piece last night and I think you've done it, Bill. It's very beautiful."

Then what happened? I had, until 1996, been in Europe, trying to be resident choreographer with the Lyon Opéra Ballet. I was doing a work there with a wonderful gospel singer named Liz McComb, from Cleveland. She was living in France, so I asked her to do a piece with—loved the music—she's very, very moving—called *I Want to Cross Over*. All musical spirituals, but it was going to be done with this company of French dancers. One day, when we started, I said, "Okay, everybody, you must have a prayer in your background. Can you do this material, and just do the prayer that you learned?" Somebody complained to the management that I was violating the separation of religion and whatever, [laughs] "Because he asked us to pray in the rehearsal." I realized that we had a cultural dissonance. The piece was called *I Want to Cross Over*. It was moderately successful. [00:38:15]

The next one, following that, was going to be a piece inspired by the Lumière brothers, and as you know, the Lumière brothers did their early work on cinema in the city of Lyon. I don't know who got there first. Was it Thomas Edison, or was it the Lumière brothers? That was a flop. Did not work. A lot of money was spent in it. Big set. Somewhere back there as well—I'm trumbling [ph] forward—I was invited to choreograph—well, no, direct—*Dream on Monkey Mountain* at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, which is an important regional theater. Also, there was a problem at that time. This city that had—when I tried to do *Uncle Tom's Cabin* there, and I said, "Okay, I need a very mixed demographic of people. I need black people." They said, "There's no black people in Minneapolis." Actually, they said St. Paul. It turns out, as you know, Larry Spink [ph] at St. Paul—there's a lot of black people.

But that said a lot about what people were not saying to each other in the Minneapolis area, which is a lovely community. Somebody, Cynthia Mayeda, who was for a long time here in New York, had been at the Brooklyn Museum, but before that had been head of the Dayton department store's giving program, which was very important in the late—what am I saying, the late '80s?—I think the mid- to late '80s, of giving grants and encouraging creation of new work in and around the Walker Art Center. She was talking with Garland Wright, who was the head of the Guthrie program, and trying to have an artist of color come in and make a work, and that's how that happened. [00:40:17]

The gigantic black memorabilia of a black man eating—have you seen those banks? There's a caricature of a black man, and he has a lever in a hand. You put a coin in, and his big red mouth opens, and he swallows it. Well, we had that onstage, but like one of the heads from Easter Island. It was that big. We cut Derek Walcott's work down by 45 minutes, which incensed him, as I understood. And I also said, "Can you find me"—this piece that is very much about colonialism, race, and so on—"Can you find me, in the community, a bunch of black kids?" Who, at the end of the show, when the show is supposedly over—and I think—what's his name, Makak?—he actually dies. I believe he dies. But the show doesn't end with—he ended it. But it ends with those kids dancing to hip-hop music. Hard to find the kids. Very difficult to get the—impossible, really. It was a gesture we made, but it was never satisfying. There was no connection with that community.

I wanted—rather than this colonial, stylized notion of the black in the West, show me what a black looks like today. That would be—now we know the fear around black bodies, because we had these spate of killings that started in Ferguson and—didn't start in Ferguson, but that's when—now nobody asks the question about black paranoia. We talked about black rage in the '60s and so on, and we had the civil rights struggle and so on. We had this tension between black nationalism and—what do you call?—Martin Luther King. But that had been settled, at least those of us who were middle-class, and had decided to work within the system. [00:42:29]

But then what happened when this spate of killings started? So, that piece was actually thinking about that: can you bring those people into your art houses? Can you bring the black experience—not one that you have created, like Sidney Poitier—but can you bring those kids, this unknown, terrifying, urban energy—"unknown, terrifying, urban energy," I say that with quotations—right into a work by Derek Walcott? I think he had just won the Nobel Prize at that time, I believe. This Saint Lucian poet was writing about all these things through a parable of Homeros, Homer, *Ulysses*, or the *Iliad*.

Then, following that work, I was invited to—I was spending a lot of time in Italy, and I remember I was invited to make a work for Bologna Cultural Capital—2000, was it? I made a work called *You Walk?*. The theme of that festival was people who were Romantic speakers, or Latin speakers—I don't know what you want to call them—felt that they were being eclipsed by Anglophone culture. [00:44:05]

They asked me what did I think: in the New World, which was a stronger influence, the French-speaking or the English-speaking? Which sent me in a whole series of explorations about the earliest appearance of the notion of black people, what the music was like in the Baroque era. We used Baroque music. We tried to take some of those—so on. It was a wonderful adventure, over-rich. I would say it was moderately successful.

I'm thinking now, because it begins to—what year are we at? We're probably at 2000. We're now sitting in 2018, and it seems that things have gone into—with middle age, things have gone into overdrive, maybe because of my ambitions. Several musicals on Broadway. Winning two Tony Awards.

SVETLANA KITTO: I don't know.

BILL T. JONES: [Laughs.]

[Audio break.]

BILL T. JONES: Let's sift around here.

SVETLANA KITTO: Ambitions.

BILL T. JONES: Ambitions.

SVETLANA KITTO: Overdrive.

BILL T. JONES: Overdrive. The company started somewhere around maybe—I don't know, somewhere in the early '90s—looking for a permanent home. We thought that we wanted it to be in Harlem, for all of the kind of social-political reasons, and its closer proximity to my home in Rockland County. This is before Harlem became the open city that it is now. It was still a place—I mean, I remember going there, where people would still think of—white people would say, "Is it safe to go to Harlem?" [Laughs.] People should have known better, like Joan Juliet Buck, who was the editor of French *Vogue*, I believe. I became friends with her in New Mexico, trying to encourage her to come to our open rehearsals at Aaron Davis Hall. Now I don't think anyone would ask that question anymore.

Or we hire a black consultant, who knows the Harlem community, to introduce me to the power brokers. Even though I was an artist-in-residence at Aaron Davis Hall for almost six years, it was only when we tried to get money to open a—to have our own home—that we had to go around and kiss the ring of people. I went to—I don't know what his name is, but our consultant, whose name I always—she had an agency. She took me to meet the head of the Chamber of Commerce in Harlem. It was one of the most rude interviews I've ever had. He said, quote, "Everybody wants a piece of Harlem. You come in here, you think you're a big shot, but we've seen it all before. Harlem is for Harlem."

Then there was a councilwoman, Councilman Inez Dickens—I think is at District 10, I'm not sure what it is. But we needed her approval, and she stood up at the council meeting and says, "This Bill T. Jones will never move to Harlem. He is an outsider." We had \$18 million promised from the Bloomberg administration, and the Harlem Empowerment Zone. Eighteen million dollars, but the plan we had for an art space, theater, studio would have been \$36 million. Thank God, we were saved, because that was when the financial bubble blew up. Imagine if we had been trying to raise—incidentally, that's around the same time that this new building was built. They stepped in it, and they just said they built the building. They had no endowment, nothing to do with it. [00:48:35]

So the long and the short of it was that we gave up on Harlem, and we heard from Denham Wolf Associates that there was a downtown arts organization that was in trouble, and they were looking for a way out. They were underwater, and would we want to have conversations about becoming a partner? We got money from a foundation to do a feasibility study. It was a retreat. I was not able to be there, but my companion, Bjorn Amelan, and our then-director, Jean Davidson, went and met with people from the old DTW. We talked about it,

and yes, it's possible this marriage could work going forward. We decided that we would give it a try, that we were going to blend the two boards. Eleven members from my board, eleven members from their board, would come together and make a new entity. We worked on the name: New York Live Arts.

Now, that's my version of it. I'm sure all the people who were there around the table might say it was more nuanced than that, because it was a lot of fighting. Everybody thought they wanted to do that, but blending two organizations, there's always one that's in the dominant position and one that's not, and we happened to be—ironically enough, because of whatever reason, we had a board. We were in a growth trajectory. We were here, and there was some disagreement about who would be artistic director, because there was already someone here at that time: Carla Peterson, who was in that position. She definitely didn't want to be associate artistic director or assistant artistic director, and I said I had to be artistic director. [00:50:22]

So I was executive artistic director. That's kind of pompous, isn't it? So she could stay artistic director. There was a lot of—we tried. We tried. But there was a lot of distrust, and I was coming in to take over the place. I thought—as I had told my board a couple of years before, when this first was floated, I said I would be honored to mingle my DNA with the organization that had literally been there when I did my earliest works, and it would be my responsibility to maintain some legacy of Dance Theater Workshop, but then we make a new entity, because I needed a home. That was my understanding, but the way it was heard in the field was quite different than that in many quarters.

Much better now, but it was ugly. I was a carpetbagger destroying, eviscerating this loved institution—that had almost gone down the drain anyways, you know? But nobody was there saving it. But here we come in, and—it's a lot of stuff. So I won't go further in that, but for the record, in the future—the choreographer is indicating towards your tape deck—

SVETLANA KITTO: [Laughs.]

BILL T. JONES: You folks maybe want to investigate this history closer and speak to more of the players, because it is still vague for me what did happen. [00:51:56]

I know that we are now seven years into it. We are stabilized. We're almost—I would say we've turned around the organization. We have a deficit that's pulled into focus. We have a strong presenting program, and we are a strong rental program. We tried being two organizations under one roof. Kim Cullen, who is our present executive director, she came in and she did the tough work of saying, "No, it's not two organizations; it's one organization. No, we don't have an executive artistic director and an artistic director; we have an artistic director who has an associate director, both of which come from Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company."

But we are still trying to be a place where artists are supported through various phases of their career. We still want to be an incubation space for new and under-exposed ideas. We still believe in the role of artists as activists. And here it's difficult for me to say this, but my people, [laughs]—the people who come up with this—say, "Well, no, your reputation, your brand, if you will, what you have stood for, in terms of art that's interested in formal rigor and all but also has a social justice angle, is what is driving the mission of the place."

Because when we merged, the criticism we received was, "Well, what does it stand—what's your mission? If you came in here"—this is someone who—Joan Shinagawa said to me in an account of a session where she was telling me what we had to think about, "Well, look, we in the field would understand if you said you were going to support young artists of color." I said, "Well, no, Dee Dee Duncan [ph] never had to do that." "No, you've got to, like, say, what is your brand, what are you doing? The field doesn't know what you stand for." [00:54:06]

So that confusion is maybe just now lifting. We still are trying to stay open. I am interested in more diversity. The diversity is—I get tired of the word sometimes. I think it's like bureaucratic-speak. But we know what we mean about it. Diversity in terms of our staff, in terms of the people that appear on the stage, and in terms of our audience. Very difficult to do, even in this post-Black Lives Matter era. Black people and white people do not often sit together in the same cultural spaces.

Most of my career, most of what we have talked about in this tape, the things that we're describing, I did with a white audience. On Broadway, when I was invited by Michael Mayer to come and choreograph Wedekind's masterpiece from 1890, *Spring Awakening*, I said, "Why don't you have black people?" He said, "You know, black kids don't think musicals are cool. They don't come to audition." Okay. Have you seen *Hamilton*? But that was then. This is now.

Steve Hendel, who was a businessman, and he and his wife invested in Broadway shows, fell in love with the music of Fela. He said that he wanted Broadway to have some of the best music, unknown music. He wanted to do a show, and he went looking for a choreographer-director who was not from the Broadway community. He went to my lawyer, which happened to be his lawyer, who said, "I know there's a guy maybe you might think"—and he came to see a very weird work we were doing at Pace, using death metal. You know what death metal

sounds like? *Rarr!* Everyone's, like, from hell. These guys—who happen to be all young guys from the South Bronx—they look like white guys in a garage band, but they're all Spanish. I didn't know that at first. [00:56:22]

Anyways, they made the music for a piece that was called *I Bow Down*. He came to see it, and he said, "Yeah, that's right! I dig it!" [Laughs.] He said, "Would you consider writing a prospectus?" So Jim Lewis, dramaturge, playwright, who had been working at the Guthrie when we did *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, became the playwright dramaturge. He and I came up with a treatment of 10 points or something of what the story would be. It took two years to get the rights cleared by the family and the various recording companies of Fela, but it was quite an adventure, and we had a successful run off-Broadway, at what is now the Baryshnikov Arts Center.

Then that next summer, we moved to Broadway, after cutting 20 minutes of the piece, because all the wise people know that it's too long. You know?

SVETLANA KITTO: [Laughs.]

BILL T. JONES: And I was green enough, I said, "Oh, yeah, it must be—they know what they're talking about." We took out what I thought made the story what it was, but it worked for a Broadway audience. But it didn't play long enough.

So, that's New York Live Arts. Both those pieces—I won Tonys for both those works, for choreography. *Fela!*, I feel, should have won for Best Musical. There was nothing that came close to it in terms of innovation, literal visceral excitement, or rethinking what a musical could be. But it was not conventional enough for many people. And that was the first year, oddly enough—I don't know if it was the first year, but that year they decided—usually, the Tony voters are made of critics as well, and we had raving, rave reviews about that show. But critics were not voting, and other people that would have—they took them away, and we lost Best Musical. And if you don't—Best Musical is the only thing that counts. [00:58:26]

But the consolation prize, we got Best Choreography. I almost feel that was a bit like my mother used to say, "If they go into a shop and they show you red and blue, they're making fun of you." So, you know, how black people are natural dancers. So you're not going to get the prize about it being the musical, which is about the storytelling and the poetics of language and all, but they will say, "Nobody was moving like the cast on that stage." Great. Black folks dancing and sweating, great. So they gave us Best Choreography.

I'm sort of floating right now, because our time is getting short. Big awards like the MacArthur. At the time, I was in Boston, working at the Majestic Theater under the auspices of Jeremy Alliger and the Boston Dance Umbrella. We were rehearsing, and they got me out of rehearsal. Somebody wanted to speak to me. She said, "I saw—I was there the other night when you did a performance, and you seemed concerned about the future. I shouldn't be doing this, but I want you to know, you're going to be getting a MacArthur Award." At that point, I thought, "People like me don't get MacArthur Awards." They would just—the work is too outside and so on. But I didn't know how times were changing. [01:00:06]

So that was amazing. It changed my work, my sense of—it goes two ways. Does that mean that you are now no longer a renegade? That you've been taken into the fold? Or does it mean that you now have reached another level of maturity?

SVETLANA KITTO: Like a professional renegade.

BILL T. JONES: A professional renegade. Is that an oxymoron?

SVETLANA KITTO: [Laughs.] Right, exactly.

BILL T. JONES: Was it the beginning of the end of my bonafides as a real experimentalist, to be given that award? Whatever it was, I took it. At that time, it was determined by your age. Now, everybody gets a half a million dollars. At that time, I got 200, 250, because I was only in my 40s or something like that. Okay, that was that.

SVETLANA KITTO: [Laughs.]

BILL T. JONES: The next one of that kind of weight, I suppose, was the Kennedy Center Honors. I was in Arizona, in Tempe, at Arizona State University. I think that's when we got the call. Somebody maybe had—"Bill shouldn't tell anybody, but we know he's going to get a Kennedy Center Honor, and it's going to be presented by Mr. Obama." Which was a very, very big experience. I didn't know what it meant. Now I do know what it meant. Mr. Obama was not business as usual. I know that some years earlier, I had been approached by somebody from the Bush White House about an award, and we refused to go. [01:02:05]

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BILL T. JONES: We were right, because they said, "It's only a manipulation by the right-wing. They want to take these, quote, bonafide left-wing people, and show the President with them, and use it as propaganda. Don't do it." So we didn't do it, which is fine. It wasn't a very serious award. But then when Mr. Obama gave it, it was something else. Within another year, the Presidential Medal of Arts was awarded by Mr. Obama.

Two stories: One from the Kennedy Center Awards, which was Oprah Winfrey, Jerry Mitchell—I think it's Jerry Mitchell, who wrote *Mame*—yeah, the great songwriter—Paul McCartney, Merle Haggard, myself. That was that year's crop. I remember the joy of having—there's lots of luncheons and so on like that—having a luncheon, wherein Paul McCartney and Jerry Herman—that's right, Jerry Herman—were talking, and there was music on, and some song came on, and these two men, who have probably written some of the most potent and popular music of the 20th century, are analyzing a song. "Oh, you hear that? I always liked this song, but you know, that third refrain, that's what I think the weakness is." "Yeah, you know, you're right. He should have done this." That was worth the prize.

Or having a lunch with Oprah Winfrey on one side of the table, a billionaire who was head of the Kennedy Center over here, Barbara Walters, Barbara Walters's niece or cousin, who is now the new girlfriend of Paul McCartney, who is over there, and goes on over here. This is the kind of—what it was like. I was so surprised—and I knew Oprah through my relationship with Maya Angelou. They were very close, as you well know. [00:02:15]

Oprah began telling, in graphic detail, about being in Connecticut, at the site of some horrible murder that had happened, where a home was invaded by two men who tied the father up in the basement and took the mother and daughters. The 13-year-old daughter is tied to a bed. The mother is put in the car with this guy who drives around to ATMs, robbing their bank accounts. The daughter is—the guy loses control and rapes the daughter viciously and kills her. Then they try to set the house on fire. The father survives. This is just talk at lunch, you know, [laughs] with Oprah Winfrey.

Hillary Clinton—the State Department dinner the night before. Walking through, like in a daze. Sidney Poitier introduces himself. Alec Baldwin is there. My sisters are with me. They're like, "Oh, there's"—screaming and running across the room to get their photo taken. At one point, I run into a lady, a woman, and she said, "Well, how does it feel?" I said, "I feel like I'm in a dream and I'm talking to Julia Roberts," and it was Julia Roberts.

[They laugh.]

BILL T. JONES: Okay. Fandom.

A couple years later, then the Presidential Medal of Arts. They have us waiting in one of the rooms at the White House. First of all, that was the White House of my imagination, because it is the White House, but people of every race were there. All the soldiers, Spanish and Asian American and black. [00:04:10]

Everyone is on point, very disciplined White House. So disciplined, in fact, that—I'm not sure, I may be confusing this with the Kennedy Center Award—but a person in my party, family member, we get to the event, go into the White House, and they're literally doing last-minute checks on everybody. They tell her, "You can't go in." Pull her out of our limousine. She's standing by the side of the street. No explanation. "We don't know—somebody said they were going to look into it, but in the meantime, sorry, ma'am, you've got to stay out here." We leave this person, one of my relatives, who has to go back to the hotel. To this day, no one has ever told us what it was. I have a suspicion. She had legal problems 30, 40 years ago. Now, imagine—compare that to the present White House. Compare that. When I think about it now, my gall rises. But it said a lot about what you have to—how you have to be if you're the first black president.

Moving ahead to the Presidential Medal of Arts, there was two lines, and this was something almost—very strange. Linda Ronstadt, myself, some other people in one line, and over here, the humanities. Sitting across from each other. No one introduces us. We're all waiting. So just staring at each other in two rows of chairs: the arts and the humanities. So I get up and I go across and actually shake hands with some of the other scholars and what have you. Then people got it, and they started talking. [00:05:57]

The President offers the award. We then have a photo session with him. Everything is organized. I walk in, and he says, "Ah, look at this guy! He's got so many awards, this doesn't mean anything to him." I said, "Oh, you should be careful. My detractors should never hear you—my critics wouldn't want to hear that." He said, "Look, we"—no, she said, "We don't talk about critics around here, because we're—you know, we don't talk about critics around here." And we laughed. So that was a kind of wonderful moment. My two times in the White House, and the Obama administration.

Which takes us to about, what, six years ago or something like that? I think it was. Pertinent things to say about the history, for a person like myself, who is still alive and still making his history every day. Janet Wong is the first associate director that the company has had, and as a result, New York Live Arts has, since Arnie Zane. Janet Wong, who I met in 1989, when she was still dancing at the Berlin Opera Ballet. I was brought there on an

evening that Michael Clark made a piece, Stephen Petronio made a piece, and I made a piece. I was looking for someone who had a modern dance sense of weight and stature, and she was always given those parts, although she had a really excellent ballet technique. [00:07:53]

We met there, and she contacted me and said that she wanted to work with a living choreographer. She was leaving the ballet company. [Laughs.] So I invited her to come and be a guest artist in the Joyce season. There was no openings, because I had two tall women already, Andrea Woods and Odile Reine-Adelaide. They were both there. So I forgot about her. Andrea Woods—a statuesque black dancer, very important to my development—told me that she wanted to leave, because she had injuries and she wanted to do her own work, "But you should consider that Chinese girl coming back, and asking her to be your rehearsal director."

I called that Chinese girl, and she said, "I've left dancing. I am now at the Fordham School, studying philosophy and women's studies. I'm out of dance." I said, "You don't want the job of being"—"No, no, no." Forty-five minutes later, she calls me back. She said she took a shower, she thought about it. "What would it entail?" I said that I am retiring—I didn't say "I'm retiring," but I said, "I'm growing older, and I need somebody to help me make the dancers that I need. I need somebody who has a scientific turn of mind, who can assimilate what she sees in my arm, my body, in terms of my use of isolation, in terms of undulation, what is released and what is line-driven, and can you do that? You'll be the teacher." She said, "I can." [00:09:51]

I said, "Well, another thing. Many of them are not that much younger than you are. Can you maintain discipline? Can you yell?" She said, "Yes, I can yell." This was in, I think, Greenbriar, Virginia or someplace like that. She took the job. She was our rehearsal director. She taught herself lighting. She had video skills. She taught herself video-making. And now she is the first artistic director—

SVETLANA KITTO: Associate.

BILL T. JONES: —associate that I've had since Arnie. She's really extended my creative life. She gave me the courage to do this New York Live Arts proposition. A board member said to our executive director, "Oh, I see Bill as a conceptual artist, and this place is his new practice." I wish I could say that was the case. It is partially true. But I'm still trying to make work for the company. I'm still trying to keep my hand in, in the commercial theater.

And I want to participate in what it takes to fundraise for this place, and compete in a city, right now, where you have the Art Shed coming up over here, with very ambitious programming. You have the new theater on the site of the old World Trade Center—is now just about to get his legs underneath him, going to be doing programming. You have the Whitney. You have the New Museum. There's a lot of people doing this incubation of ideas and presenting new performance and so on. What justifies this place now, other than a pure act of will? So that keeps me pretty busy.

SVETLANA KITTO: Yeah. Is there anything else you would like to say?

BILL T. JONES: Probably, but maybe I shouldn't.

[They laugh.]

SVETLANA KITTO: Alright, well, thank you so much.

BILL T. JONES: Thank you.

[END OF jones18_1of1_sd_track04.]

BILL T. JONES: Well, the question you're asking is: What does it mean to continue to honor the legacy of my deceased partner and co-founder, Arnie Zane? And I say that it is a guilty feeling. Of course, I am a person who says—following a performance some years ago at the Kennedy Center, someone in a Pulse Performance discussion asked me, "Mr. Jones, what has never changed in your life?" And I say doubt. It burns like fire. Well, I'm always in doubt. Always feeling inadequate.

When you are charged with the legacy of a dear one, who was a prolific creator—many photographs. He was a very fine photographer, he was a visual artist, and he was a choreographer in his own right, who at the end of his life was trying to move away from the identification with Bill. Not for a lack of love or respect, but he needed his own space, and then to have the rug pulled up. How can I protect that legacy? I feel that I've been so busy, since he died on that March afternoon in 1988—I've been so busy trying to keep this enterprise, which initially was the dance company, and now this bigger one, New York Live Arts, and try to keep my own sanity together, that I—and I don't have the resources.

Everyone is trying to keep those organizations, those entities, in play. Now, with Janet Wong's insistence, we're trying to make this a year about him. And I'm insisting that he be reintroduced as a visionary who was already

ahead of the curve on a lot of issues that we're interested in right now. He was gender fluid. He was. Never made any apologies for it. The only word we had at that time was that he was androgynous. He was decidedly ambitious. He jokes about—he said, you know, us coming from Binghamton and rolling around, doing what we were doing, those duets that made us famous, neither one of us having crisp ballet technique or Horton technique, we were making it up, and he was saying, "Who would have ever accused me"—speaking about himself—"of being commercial, or wanting anything like that?" He laughed. He said, "Well, you know, it all developed. Whatever." Because he was determined that he wanted to go to Broadway. He wanted to do something like that. [00:02:36]

SVETLANA KITTO: Well, that's good to know about him.

BILL T. JONES: Yes, it is good to know about him. And the fact that he was mixing media with great freedom. Take a photo of yourself in some pose. Make an odd dance work. Use that photo in the dance work. Photograph you in that dance work, with the photo. Now that photo is then transferred to another medium like video, or something like an antique technique, like magic lanterns. That was how his mind worked, and it seems to me very much in keeping with this time.

He said that he—in terms of the legacy, the questions around gender and sexuality, he was angry. He said he never respected the dance world. Now, his model, of course, was the ballet world. He said it offended him when he went to see ballet, and he saw men onstage behaving—homosexual men forced into a heterosexual norm and accepting it. He said he did not want to. There was a formulation that I claim is our own, and I think I might have told you this once in an earlier part of our interview. We said we never wanted—our company should look not as the world looks, but as the world we want it to look like. That was his idea about the force of art-making and personality. [00:04:04]

SVETLANA KITTO: And representation, too.

BILL T. JONES: And representation. Yeah. He also—the idea of form. He was fiercely engaged in form. He was much less interested in biography than I am.

SVETLANA KITTO: Yeah, that's what I thought.

BILL T. JONES: Yeah, yeah. But he said that he wanted to—this whole talk about Postmodernism, which is, I think, a term that Sally Banes was probably—sometimes was laid at her feet, something borrowed from the world of architecture, and maybe philosophy and music. But to say Postmodern dance, Arnie's feeling was that we—I'm not sure if this is my part. It wasn't concerned about originality, but it was context and syntax [ph]. What we know, recombined in other ways. He was rigorously exploring that.

And I have been saying of late, and I think I must say it with more confidence and clarity, that this celebration of Arnie Zane is to talk about him as not just in the dance terms—which, quite frankly, I'm angry at the dance world about Arnie. I think he was a much bigger artist than he was allowed to be. He came into this dance world because of his love for me. Yes, I was encouraging him to get into his body and stretch and do yoga and all, and he got a taste for moving. Contact improvisation freed him up incredibly. As he says in his oral history, the first time he did contact, it was like dropping acid. He said that he had experiences that years of therapy would have—it would have taken years of therapy to reveal, in dancing with a woman that intimately. [00:06:01]

And he was the one that wanted to—he wasn't so interested in contact being this constant improvisation of weight shifting. Hated the idea of performing contact, which we will be doing [laughs] two days from now in the production. But he wanted to freeze it. He wanted to use it as a choreographic tool, which offended many contact—

SVETLANA KITTO: Photography.

BILL T. JONES: —purists. He was making choreography out of lifestyle expression.

How will he be remembered? I purposely kept his name in it. As I said—and I just repeated it again. I haven't said it—I've been saying it for the last 20, 30 years since he's been gone. That this was a child that we had, because we refused to be eunuchs. The culture at that time would make two men like us colorful eunuchs. But no, we said we were not—we were fecund. The company is that, the work. And to this day, I feel the same thing. Every year that I keep the company going, every time a new dancer comes on—and there are dancers here now who were not born when Arnie died, who are now my dancers, my colleagues. So I relish that, and it gives me strength, but it's also terrifying. Yeah. Right.

SVETLANA KITTO: I wonder if it's almost—is there some part of, like—as prolific as you are—and fecund is a good word—if you stop, it's almost like: Does it stave off the terror? You know? If you stop, [laughs] and if you think about it for too long, it's overwhelming. [00:08:08]

BILL T. JONES: [Laughs.] Well, you know, I wish I would have the opportunity to do that, because there have been times—and it happens a lot when I whine, and I've done a lot of work, like the *Analogy* trilogy that took six years to make. When it was over, I said, as I had said before it, "Why make another work?" Somehow or other—"Oh, it's the business of the art." I have this thing called this dance company, that must be fed. Or, "This is my habit." I've been involved in this since age 19. Both are un-stabilizing ideas. What saves me is when I can connect to something that I really feel I want to communicate. I've been saying that Arnie was a kind of an architect of aspirations, in terms of media, in terms of dance, in terms of, literally, the stance of an artist, in terms of a businessperson. Consciously or unconsciously, I've been following this blueprint since he died.

But to your point, though, I—as people tell me, "Oh, Bill, if you were to stop dancing, you would be so bored after three months." I said, "You know, I sure as hell would love to try." I stopped. The *Analogy* is just now all there. We just did it in American Dance Festival, one part every night. We were in Seattle. It went wonderful. It was a wonderful week of them. We'll be doing it a few more places. I was looking for some way out. "Oh, after this, I'll stop." But suddenly, a major theater, the Armory, called and said, "We have a new director. We would love to have a work from you." "What do you have in mind? That huge space." And we're off. [00:10:04]

I approached the architectural firm of Diller and Scofidio, and they got excited about the idea. In conversation with John Luther Adams, wonderful post-Cage-ian symphonic composer. Nice guy. He gets it. And there is this question of the one and the many. Pip, the little black cabin boy, bobbing in the Pacific Ocean, having been abandoned by all of the ships in *Moby Dick*, who—Melville says the water lifted his body up, but pulled his mind down, and he saw the hand of God on the treadle of the universe, and it cracked his mind, so he became insane. But a man's sanity is heaven's sense, so he became a seer. I think about the way I think about art-making, the way I think about me in the art world, and dare I say the white art world. That's been one of the discussions I've been having with myself, particularly these last 10 years or so, in the era of Black Lives Matter. I've been the black one. The black one at The Kitchen, the black one at PS 122, the black one at DTW, so on.

So, "Oh, this is the time to make another work, and it should be big and conclusive, say everything that you want to say. It's going to start with a solo, and then it's going to go to the company as this cocoon of support. But then it should take a leap, and I will not be cynical. I will not be alienated. I'm going to show what it looks like to find community. We need 100 people, and it should be developed in different communities, and it should be full-fleshed and full of heart, and transcendental." Same—we're back again to *Uncle Tom's Cabin, Still/Here*. Any number—the same questions come back again. The one and the many, or the many becoming the one, what have you. [00:12:14]

So, no, I thought that by now I would have a reason to say, "Why don't they just fall back on the work of the company?" Start making plans for a legacy—what do you call it when you pass on here? The next person?

SVETLANA KITTO: An inheritance?

BILL T. JONES: Sorry?

SVETLANA KITTO: An inheritance?

BILL T. JONES: No, no, here. Succession. Yeah, start having conversations about—I'm a founder of New York Live Arts. Founders always need a succession plan. Now would be a great time to put one in charge. But I can see *Deep Blue Sea* is going to be involving me for a few more years, and there are projects for opera, there are projects for musicals. I keep working—and now there is the Arnie Zane piece. Can I ever lay his name down?

SVETLANA KITTO: Are you talking about re-staging *Freedom of Information*? Is that—

BILL T. JONES: No, no, I'm talking in general of things—

SVETLANA KITTO: Okay, just in general.

BILL T. JONES: The panoply of things that are in front of me right now. I thought this question of—you said, "If you were quiet, the terror." And I was saying: I'm not terrified. I just don't have the occasion to not do. But for some reason, I never give myself the occasion to not do. Is that—I'm fooling myself? Or is it true that I am—this is what—artists don't retire? And if you are in the performing arts, do you stay in the performing arts? You find some way to make body-based work.

Is that who you really are, Bill T. Jones? Are you fooling yourself thinking you could be a person who just reads good books and goes to movies, and thinks about things, and thinks—let's assume your pockets were lined, and you didn't have to. You're looking at 70 years old. Once upon a time, back in the 1950s and '60s, you're supposed to be retiring at age 65. What's retiring? So I don't know if I'm fighting back the terror by continuing to work. Or is it truly my nature? This is a question mark. Once again, I turn to the proverbial audience for this work, be it the year 2050. Well, what was he really doing? [00:14:34]

SVETLANA KITTO: [Laughs.] Probably both. Or many things.

BILL T. JONES: Probably both. Probably both. Many things. It's been a privilege to have known him. It's been a privilege to have lived outside the norm through him. I have found a new man, who I trust, who loves me. I married him. Arnie and I could never have imagined marrying.

And I have another kind of spouse, and that is Janet Wong, who has given her life to me now for 20 years. She's married, but I think this, in some ways, comes before her marriage. She may be eulogizing me someday. But that's the flow of things. It's a privilege. I'm surrounded by people of integrity.

SVETLANA KITTO: Yeah. And love. You're surrounded by love.

BILL T. JONES: Love. Let's not forget love. Love is a belief, isn't it, though? Isn't it?

SVETLANA KITTO: Yeah.

BILL T. JONES: You have to believe in love. I guess I do.

SVETLANA KITTO: Cool. Well, thank you so much.

BILL T. JONES: Yeah.

[END OF jones18_1of1_sd_track05.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]