

## A READING OF BILL T. JONES'S INTERPRETATION OF *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN*

CLAIRE PARFAIT  
*Université Paris 13*

(Resumen)

En su obra de 1990, llamada "Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin / The Promised Land", el coreógrafo afro-americano Bill T. Jones, con cierta provocación, toma la novela de Harriet Beecher Stowe como punto de partida para una exploración de las cuestiones de razas, religión, sexo, sexualidad en la América de hoy día. En esta coreografía post-moderna, en la que se mezclan mimo, teatro, música, y diversos tipos de baile, consta también el texto, con un papel muy importante.

La primera parte es una relectura, paródica y seria a la vez, de *La Cabaña del Tío Tom*. Luego, se apropia el coreógrafo el episodio de Eliza, que se desarrolla en el hielo, para transformarlo en interrogaciones sobre la identidad femenina, y cambiarlo en una metáfora de la marginalidad sexual. La tercera parte de su obra es una reflexión en torno a la fe y a la pertinencia de la religión en la época del SIDA.

Al yuxtaponer literatura, discursos políticos, textos bíblicos, canciones rap, Bill T. Jones hace caer las fronteras entre las épocas, lo público y lo privado, entre las formas y las jerarquías culturales. Antes que de citaciones, se trata aquí de reapropiación: desconstruye Bill T. Jones los textos y los ordena en una relación de diálogo a la manera de Bakhtin. Al público le incumbe el interpretar este diálogo. Igual que hace caer las fronteras entre modos de expresión, épocas y formas, intenta Bill T. Jones en la última parte de la coreografía, "The Promised Land", superar las divisiones entre razas, sexo y sexualidad. Porque él es coreógrafo, elige el cuerpo humano como representación de todo lo que tienen en común los hombres. Acaba la obra dirigiendo un ritual que se hace un llamamiento a la tolerancia: una como Tierra de Promisión.

---

"The smoke has never cleared from around 'Uncle Tom's cabin'", says a New York Times critic about a recent stage adaptation of the novel.<sup>1</sup> And indeed Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery best seller has been an object of controversy ever since it was published in 1852. Swaddled in almost a century and a half of commentary, analysis, and polemic, as well as numerous theater and movie versions, the book is now impossible to read with a virgin eye. Uncle Tom, the long-suffering, Christ-like martyr of the novel, has come to symbolize slave servility and racial treason in the eyes of African-Americans.

In his 1990 work, entitled "Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin / The Promised Land", African-American choreographer Bill T. Jones uses Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel as a starting point for exploring issues of race, gender, and faith in contemporary America. Needless to say, there is more than a little provocation in Jones's choice of a book which is taboo to most African-Americans.

---

1. Ben Brantley, "Stowe's 'Cabin'. Reshaped as a Multistory Literary Home", *The New York Times*, 12-12-1997.

The title of the work links Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel and the choreography in what Gérard Genette calls an explicit contract of "hypertextuality".<sup>2</sup> We shall see how Bill T. Jones handles the story, and in what ways his hypertext provides a commentary, a metatext, upon the original novel. As Bill T. Jones is a choreographer, there is necessarily a shift of medium, a re-representation in another mode, or rather in different modes: the work as a whole includes dance of course, but also music, mime, theater, song, and a great deal of text. The full meaning of this multimedia composition requires a look at the entire piece. Accordingly, I will briefly describe its various parts, then focus on the use of intertextuality in the work. My main interest here lies in the various texts quoted, in their systematic deconstruction and / or inversion, and in the way their co-presence in a single work forces them into a kind of Bakhtinian dialogue. I will conclude with "The Promised Land," and examine the way form echoes content: this postmodern choreography, with its use of different media, of quotations reaching across historical periods, and social and stylistic divisions,<sup>3</sup> goes beyond the category of pure dance. In the same way as he crosses over boundaries of genres, Bill T. Jones tries to transcend divisions of race and gender and suggest a true commonality for all human beings.

In the "Prologue" to the work, Bill T. Jones sets the scene in the context of slavery and the Civil War, by having an unseen speaker read excerpts from Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address. The speech is soon interrupted by several speakers, invisible to the audience, shouting chapter headings from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, as if the latter were militant slogans. Lincoln and Stowe are thus made to enter a dialogue. There may be several reasons for forcing Lincoln and Stowe into such close proximity: after all, the two were contemporaries, they met, both saw slavery as a sin and the Civil War as divine retribution. We could also argue that they epitomize the white liberal impulse. Or again, Lincoln, as a martyr to the anti-slavery cause, could be seen as the white counterpart to Uncle Tom.<sup>4</sup> Whatever the reason, in the Prologue to "Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin", Bill T. Jones clearly states that he will reappropriate the material he uses and divert it to his own purposes.

The Prologue is followed by a retelling of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The story is narrated by two speakers: Harriet Beecher Stowe, a white woman in nineteenth century clothes, carries an enormous book whose title - *Uncle Tom's Cabin* - is clearly visible to the audience. The second narrator is a black actor, wearing a suit; he will remain unnamed. Stowe starts an emphatic speech / sermon which is rather rudely interrupted by the black

---

2. The term is Gérard Genette's: a hypertext is derived from an earlier text, or subtext. The contract of hypertextuality is explicit when the title of a work unambiguously announces what the subtext is, as is the case here. Gérard GENETTE, *Palimpsestes*, Paris, Seuil, 1982, p 16 and p 516.

3. Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance*, Middletown, Connecticut, Wesleyan University Press, 1987, 1st pub. 1977. According to Banes, even if "high art" and popular traditions were merged before post-modernism, what makes the practice post-modern is the "acute historical self-consciousness" with which current post-modern artists use it. (p xxxii).

4. Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth*, University Park, Penn., Pennsylvania University State Press, 1993, revised edition: "And if the martyred John Brown was to become the white counterpart of Nat Turner, so was Lincoln to become the counterpart of Uncle Tom." p 47.

narrator: the author of Uncle Tom's Cabin is thus presented as both a comic and pedantic figure, who is disparaged from the start. The two narrators then introduce the various characters, and the story begins. It is told by the narrators and mimed by the dancers, in a kind of double representation, of hybridization of genres. The intense theatricality of the rendering is heightened by the emphatic delivery of the text, a summary which includes quotations from the novel. The narrators echo the gestures of some of the characters, in an endless circular repetition / amplification. The reading of chapter-headings from the book before the various scenes underlines the fact that a text is being performed.

The stage set is a naive representation of a log cabin, and the dancers' masks announce the stereotypes: pure little Eva, crazy Topsy, nasty Legree. Each stock character has his / her own musical line and set gestures. The archetype of the happy slave, singing and dancing whatever happens, is conjured up by some of the music, reminiscent of minstrel shows. A few anachronisms --a photographer coming in to capture a family tableau, for example-- add to the comic effect while providing a further critical commentary on the subtext, seen as full of clichés. The parodic intention is clear, even more so if one considers the length of this re-representation: twenty minutes out of a three and a half-hour work. The novel is therefore compacted in the extreme, although it retains most of the episodes of the novel, skipping only the long journey of Eliza, her husband George, and their son to freedom. The familiar story is accelerated, fast-forwarded to the end.

This transposition and transmodalisation of the subtext is not entirely parodic, however. A few scenes hint at a less distanced rendering of the novel: Lucy jumping off the boat when she learns her baby has been sold, Legree raping Emmeline, Tom being whipped. The use of pantomime in these scenes may be the only way to say the unspeakable, to show the tragedy of slavery. And then, there is Tom himself, the only dancer without a mask, the only participant in the mime show who is given a voice. Moreover, Bill T. Jones has Tom played by a *young* African-American. The restoration of youth to a character embedded in American popular imagery as an old white-haired feeble man removes him further from the stereotypicalization that characterized earlier re-writings of the story.

Bill T. Jones thus holds up to his audience a "true" Uncle Tom, closer to Harriet Beecher Stowe's hero, and one that most Americans have forgotten or have never known. The choreographer then comes to grips with what the character actually stands for in the novel: passive resistance<sup>5</sup> and Christian forgiveness. Bill T. Jones stages the standard ending, in which Tom is beaten to death by two of Legree's slaves, then has the characters do every move backwards, and rewinds the action to the point when Tom is about to be whipped. This is done in a series of very fast moves, it is unexpected, incongruous, and provokes laughter in the audience. It is highly symbolic of the artist's intent to reappropriate his subtext totally. Indeed, Jones rewrites the ending: all the slaves refuse to obey Legree's orders, Legree strikes them down, one after the other, but more slaves keep coming up, and Legree is beaten by sheer numbers, though none of the slaves raises a hand to him.

---

5. In Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, Tom's first beating at the hands of Legree occurs because he is unwilling to whip a fellow-slave; he is eventually beaten to death for refusing to betray the hiding-place of Cassy and Emmeline, two fugitive slaves.

This wished-for ending <sup>6</sup> links Uncle Tom's non-violent rebellion with Martin Luther King's tactics of civil disobedience. It also challenges the widely accepted image of an Uncle Tom who is submissive to the point of servility. By rewriting the end of the novel, Jones appears to be questioning the docile slave as a historical reality.<sup>7</sup> The Uncle Tom who appears in Jones's rewriting is both in keeping with Stowe's hero, since he is deeply religious and refuses violence, yet he does not let himself be killed by Legree: instead, he starts a rebellion that eventually destroys the oppressor without the use of physical violence. To use Martin Luther King's definition of his own tactics, what Tom does in this new ending "is not passive nonresistance to evil, it is active nonviolent resistance to evil."<sup>8</sup>

In the second part of the work, entitled "Eliza on the Ice," Bill T. Jones uses Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel again, and again with a twist, to challenge basic questions of gender and sexual orientation. The choreographer obviously agrees with Angela Davis, who saw Eliza as "white motherhood incarnate, but in blackface"<sup>9</sup> as a woman who fled when her maternal status was threatened, not because she hated slavery as such. In keeping with that interpretation, Bill T. Jones removes the child from the scene, and focuses on Eliza as a woman, who is between two shores, the familiar and the unfamiliar, in a position made even more precarious by the very material she is standing on, ice, which itself is between two states. Jones puts five Elizas on stage, and takes up the image of the dogs drawn from adaptations of the novel. The dogs themselves are both an ironic reference to the army or a football team during practice - they perform a series of absurd movements to the bark of instructors - and at the same time their clothes, muzzles, combat boots and jock straps evoke an urban gay subculture replete with sado-masochistic connotations.

The first four Elizas are women and stand for different aspects of female identity. The first Eliza is African-American: her dancing is an exploration of her identity as a black woman in America; her moves are a repetition of gestures which Jones has seen his mother, grandmother and other African-American women perform<sup>10</sup>; the dance draws upon the choreographer's personal memory and is at the same time held up as a mirror to the audience. The strength this first Eliza embodies is emphasized by the text she dances to: Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a woman?". In this speech, delivered in 1851 at a Women's Rights' Convention, Sojourner Truth, a former slave fighting for abolition and women's

---

6. "I then take the liberty of inserting a 'correct' ending - the one we would like to have seen..." Bill T. Jones in: Bill T. Jones, with Peggy Gillespie, *Last Night on Earth*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1995, p 211.

7. A number of scholars have worked in the same direction. John Blassingame, for example, argues that for slaves, the appearance of docility was only a necessity for survival: "The docility of the slave was a sham, a mask to hide his true feelings and personality traits." (John Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1979, revised edition, p 305). Lawrence Levine, in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977), traces stories of heroic slave resistance in African-American folk culture, to counter the traditional vision that slave culture had internalized submission.

8. Martin Luther King, quoted in *Black Protest*, 2nd edition, Joanne Grant, ed., New York, Fawcett Premier, 1968, p 281.

9. Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, New York, Vintage Books, 1983, p 27.

10. Bill T. Jones, *Last Night on Earth*, p 212.

rights, both claims equality between men and women, and testifies to a "racialized configuration of gender".<sup>11</sup> She uses herself as an example: she has worked like a man, been whipped, suffered, and yet she is a woman. By her repetition of "Ain't I a woman?". Truth also repositions gender in race. In many ways, through her strength and the exploration of her identity, Jones's first Eliza performs the answer to Truth's question.

The second and third Elizas are white. The second Eliza uses her personal experience to tell a story of betrayal, expressing through text and dance her anger at her parents who advised her to believe in God and turn the other cheek, her anger against the man who abused her. Her rage, reminiscent of the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, is cut short by the dogs that pursue her. These same dogs are tamed by the third Eliza, who orders them around, while keeping a watchful eye on them. The dogs use the fourth Eliza, who is Hispanic, as a sexual object, and the dancing hints at a collective rape by the dogs / men.

Jones thus clearly aims at a kind of universality, cutting across races and time periods, to address questions of female identity, in a fragmented yet all-encompassing way: what is the position of women in society, vis-à-vis men, traditions? What dangers are they exposed to? By using the scene of Eliza between two shores, Jones positions women in a kind of limbo, still wondering what their position is, faced with choices to be made.

The last Eliza is a man who struts across the stage as a drag queen, with a mini skirt and stiletto heels. This last Eliza embodies the choreographer's questioning of his own identity as a homosexual:

"What does it mean to be a homosexual person, who's neither male nor female, between male and female? Yes, we're males, but our sexuality there's no place for in the official lexicon of the culture. Once again this is a state of being suspended on the ice between two shores."<sup>12</sup>

The staging of cross-dressing challenges notions of clearly defined and immovable gender identity. If we accept Judith Butler's vision of gender as performative, Jones seems to be asking: "Is drag the imitation of gender, or does it dramatize the signifying gestures through which gender itself is established?"<sup>13</sup>

The third part of the work, "The Last Supper" takes up again the question of faith that had been raised in the staging of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, by Stowe's preaching and Tom's

11. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race", in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, volume 17, n°2, Winter 1992, pp 251-274. According to Higginbotham, race obscures both gender and class, and Truth in her speech shows that the nineteenth-century idealization of womanhood and motherhood did not apply to black women (p 257). Interestingly enough, Truth's speech in the choreography is delivered by Stowe who was both a participant in and a proponent of the idealization of women.

12. Bill T. Jones, in Claire Parfait, Personal Interview with Bill T. Jones, Lyons, France, January 24, 1997.

13. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, New York, Routledge, 1990, p viii. To put it another way, according to Jane Marcus: "The carnival of cross-dressing destabilizes identity, keeping bisexuality from being anchored to one pole." Jane Marcus, "Laughing at Leviticus", in *Silence and Power*, Mary Lynn Broe ed., Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1991, pp 221-250; quotation p 237.

prayers. Here again several media come into play, and the narration draws upon a personal as well as a collective fund. The subtext announced in the title is Leonardo Da Vinci's painting of the Last Supper which, in yet another transmodalisation, is turned into a tableau: the dancers are set in the postures of Jesus and the disciples around a large table. The shift between the painting and its stage representation is incongruous, and the pleasure of recognition, mixed with the shock of surprise, produces laughter in the audience. Here again, there is a hybridization of genres, a "carnivalizing" of elements of Western culture.<sup>14</sup>

In a leap across times from Da Vinci's painting, Jones then takes his audience to the Civil War, by having his dancers sing the Battle Hymn of the Republic. The choreographer addresses the question of faith through various angles: he mixes the personal - he has his own mother, Estella Jones, come on stage to pray and sing a gospel hymn - and the public, with the Battle Hymn for example. He quotes the Scriptures too: he uses Ezekiel's Book of Lamentations, he dances to a reading of the story of Job. He also interviews a religious man from the community in which the company is performing that night, and asks him very simple questions, such as: "What is evil? Is homosexuality evil? Is AIDS punishment from God? What is faith?"

With the retelling of "uncle Tom's Cabin, Jones had raised the question of Christianity as a slave religion.<sup>15</sup> By having his mother, a church-going woman, on stage, he wonders about the role of faith and the Church in the African-American community now. The interview with the minister demonstrates the choreographer's wish to ask whether religion is still relevant in the time of AIDS. Once again, history in a wide sense and Jones's personal story are intricately linked in this questioning of faith.<sup>16</sup>

The crossover between different times reaches our own period, not only through the conversation with the minister, but also with a rap song written and performed on stage by Justice Allen. Justice Allen was the black narrator of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" (Part I of the choreography), in which he also played Legree, then he appeared as Judas in "The Last Supper". His rap song is a look at the actor's own real life as a former heroin addict and ex convict sentenced for murder. Here again Jones addresses black identity and the question of faith in a fragmented, almost impressionistic way, suggestive of both disorientation and a wish to sum up the state of things, past and present.

The last part, "The Promised Land", reintroduces the figure of Martin Luther King alluded to in the first part of the work, and includes a staging of the second and final act of *The Dutchman* by Amiri Baraka, formerly known as Leroi Jones. In this play, written in 1964, a white woman in a subway car picks up, challenges and taunts a young black man she accuses of being an "Uncle Tom", of hiding his black consciousness because he is afraid of whites. She eventually kills him. The playwright calls on the black community to

---

14. What Jane Marcus says of James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* could apply to what Jones is doing here: "By making hybrids of the sacred texts of Western culture, both writers revitalize "high" culture, carnivalizing the dead bodies of the old texts, engorging them in a sacred / profane cannibalism." Jane Marcus, p 223.

15. This actually opened up a dialogue: often, after a performance, Bill T. Jones had believing African-Americans come up and tell him, for example: "Listen, Brother, what made you assume that we didn't adapt Christianity to us? (...) We went into Christianity and changed it to serve us." Personal Interview with Bill T. Jones.

16. Arnie Zane, Jones's partner and co-founder of the "Bill T. Jones / Arnie Zane Dance Company" died of AIDS in 1988. Jones himself is HIV positive.

reject the degrading and masochistic identity of Uncle Tom, imposed on them by whites, and which, he implies, too many blacks have internalized. The play hints at the radicalization of the black movements of the 1960s, away from King and towards Malcolm X, Nat Turner replacing Uncle Tom. *The Dutchman* is staged in a more realistic way than Uncle Tom's Cabin, yet the reading aloud of stage directions adds to the theatricality while distancing Jones's rendition from its subtext.

If we look at the choreography up to this point, what strikes one is the room taken up by the spoken word, as well as the diversity of the texts used. For the choreographer:

"Using political language in modern dance is subversive. It links dance to the large world. Dance has seemed to me like a little esoteric corner of the cultural world. (...)It doesn't resonate nearly as much as it could, or should."<sup>17</sup>

The various texts acquire a new dimension through the music that accompanies them, the dance and mime that illustrate them, but perhaps mainly by the fact they are juxtaposed in a single work. They belong to different genres: speeches, literature, with the novel and Leroi Jones's play, sacred texts (Ezekiel, the Book of Job), prayer, songs, conversation. Some, like the second Eliza's text, or Justice Allen's rap song, are personal, most belong to the collective fund, whether as history or religion, or popular art (gospel). Reality, through personal experience, and fiction, with the use of the novel, are set side by side. Both high art and popular art are present. In line with the breakdown in genres and cultural hierarchies, there is also a breakdown in time: from biblical times to now, in a non-chronological order, with present calling upon past and vice versa. The use of widely different narratives is echoed by the use of multi-cultural moves in the dance itself, which includes games, ballet, folk dancing, minstrel shows, abstract dance. This impressionistic mirror is held up to the widest possible audience, and yet the many different voices are all undeniably part of the same fractured identity.

The texts are linked through their themes: race, faith, gender. They are linked through their coexistence: Jones creates a Bakhtinian polyphonic narrative, in which the texts are made to have a dialogue and comment upon one another. In what way does *The Dutchman* answer Uncle Tom's Cabin, how can the rap song be read differently by its proximity with *The Book of Lamentations* in the same choreographic work? On a different level, how does text interact with dance? In a way, the texts, like the work itself, are "open", and the audience has to interpret their meaning.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to being linked by the very fact of their co-presence in a single work, which itself belongs to a different medium, the texts also share another characteristic: they are all systematically changed, diverted, either deconstructed or inverted or both, by the choreographer. Just as Bill T. Jones reversed the end of Uncle Tom's Cabin, he has Sojourner Truth's speech said first in the usual way, then deconstructed and said backwards: "Ain't I a woman?" becomes "Woman a ain't I?". Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" is handled in the same way: "ring freedom let, mountainside every from, Mississippi of molehill and hill every from ring freedom let"... The systematic

---

17. Bill T. Jones, quoted in: Elizabeth Zimmer, "Preparing The Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin, pp. 259-263 in *Breakthroughs: Avant-garde Artists in Europe and America 1950-1990*, New York, Rizzoli, 1991, p 261.

18. Umberto Eco, *L'Oeuvre Ouverte*, Paris, Seuil, 1965, pp 24-5.

deconstruction is both a way of showing the familiar in an unfamiliar light, and a call for a militant effort to set it right again, a call to action.<sup>19</sup>

Another type of transformation consists in turning a speech into a dialogue, emblematic of the larger dialogue between the different voices, the different texts. We saw that Lincoln's Second inaugural speech, with which the choreography starts, was interrupted, with ever-increasing violence, by voices shouting chapter-headings from Uncle Tom's Cabin, and thus became a kind of angry dialogue linking Lincoln and Stowe. Ezekiel's monologue in the Book of Lamentations is reshaped into an exchange, or rather an argument between two of the dancers; Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" is also transformed into an argument between two speakers, a kind of shouting match in a paradoxical, provocative thematic reversal of the contents of the speech.

All the narratives are therefore, diverted, either through transmodalisation or distanciation, or through deconstruction and / or inversion. More than quoting various texts, Bill T. Jones reappropriates them completely to make them serve his own ends. The choreographer has a dialogue with them, just as he turns them into dialogues to explore identity on the personal and collective levels.

In the same way as the texts are forced to reflect upon one another by their sheer proximity, the audience is forced into an involvement with the issues raised, compelled to question their own sense of identity, asked to interpret for themselves the meanings of the texts and of their dialogue. Interviewing the minister brings - physically - the community into the work. The desire to involve the community is again illustrated in the last scene of the work.

So far, this very fragmented mirror held up to the audience an image of divisions, categories, blacks versus whites, passive resistance versus rebellion, women versus men, and gay versus straight, believers against non believers, with a strong hint of disorientation and a pervasive undercurrent of violence. In the last scene of "The Promised Land", however, Bill T. Jones aims at reaching across the categories, by finding a symbol of true commonality. He chooses the body, which is after all the instrument a choreographer works with, and which, whether thin or fat, black or white, young or old, healthy or sick, male or female, gay or straight, obeys the same laws: we are born, we age and we die. The last scene of the work shows Bill T. Jones's company, to which about 40 local dancers have been added<sup>20</sup>, dancing naked on the stage. The audience is involved by the participation of people from the community in the dance. The curtain comes down on a vision of naked dancers, stripped as it were of cultural trappings, walking and singing on stage, in what is both like a ritual and an act of faith, a call for universal tolerance. The "Promised Land" in a literal sense. It is a refusal of ghettoization, an invitation to take risks and abandon the safety of marked group identity, whether racial or sexual. In other words, a political statement.

---

19. Bill T. Jones: "... that speech is probably one of the most hopeful bits of oratory you'd ever want to hear, and so when I take it apart and turn it round, you in your mind should be so attached to its meaning that you put it back again. You must struggle with this nonsense to make sense out of it again." Personal interview with BILL T. Jones.

20. In each city, before the performance, someone had been given the task "of finding the most demographically diverse group of people they could from their community. These people, like the religious person, would become part of the work." Bill T. Jones, *Last Night on Earth*, p 220.

As might be expected, the work was extremely controversial.<sup>21</sup> The choice of Uncle Tom's Cabin as a subtext was criticized, so was the naiveté of the solution offered in the last scene, which, incidentally, Bill T. Jones admits was "so 60s, it was such a platitude"<sup>22</sup>, but the only way he felt he could express his rejection of cynicism and alienation. Looking back on the work five years later, Bill T. Jones wrote: "It was the largest work I ever made and a work that came out of my desire to sum up everything I believed. It was impossible for it to succeed, but it did not fail."<sup>23</sup>

And indeed the very polemic around the work - quite in keeping with the polemical subtext of Uncle Tom's Cabin - fulfilled the choreographer's wish to a certain extent: "My questioning did exactly what I hoped it would do: it would engage the era I was living in."<sup>24</sup>

## REFERENCES

- BANES, Sally. *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance*. Middletown, Connecticut, Wesleyan University Press, 1987. 1st published 1977.
- BLASSINGAME, John. *The Slave Community*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1979. Revised Edition.
- BRANTLEY, Ben. "Stowe's 'Cabin', Reshaped as a Multistory Literary Home", *The New York Times*, 12-12-1997.
- BUTLER, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York, Routledge, 1990.
- DAVIS, Angela. *Women, Race and Class*. New York, Vintage Books, 1983.
- ECO, Umberto. *L'Oeuvre Ouverte*. Paris, Seuil, 1965.
- GENETTE, Gérard. *Palimpsestes*. Paris, Seuil, 1982.
- GRANT, Joanne, ed., *Black Protest*, 2nd Edition, New York, Fawcett Premier, 1968.
- HIGGINBOTHAM, Evelyn B., "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race", pp 251-274, in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Volume 17, N°2, Winter 1992.
- JONES, Bill T., with GILLESPIE, Peggie. *Last Night on Earth*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1995.
- LEVINE, Lawrence. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977.
- MARCUS, Jane, "Laughing at Leviticus", pp221-250, in *Silence and Power*, Mary Lynn Broe ed., Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1991.
- MOSES, Wilson Jeremiah. *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth*. University Park, Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania University State Press, 1993, revised edition.

---

21. It was, for example, denounced by the Vatican. *Last Night on Earth*, p 223.

22. Personal Interview with Bill T. Jones.

23. *Last Night on Earth*, p 223. The scope, complexity, and ambition of the work can be better understood by the fact it was to be a kind of testament: "I reasoned that if my time was limited, that if I was to follow Arnie soon, I would make a work that articulated all the questions that I have lived with, all the questions that have shaped me." Bill T. Jones, *Last Night on Earth*, p 197.

24. Personal Interview with Bill T. Jones.

PARFAIT, Claire. Personal Interview with Bill T. JONES, recorded in Lyons, France, January 24, 1997.

ZIMMER, Elizabeth. "Preparing The Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin". pp 259-263. in *Breakthroughs: Avant-garde Artists in Europe and America 1950-1990*. New York, Rizzoli, 1991.