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Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Pete Souza

Called to Washington to Honor the Honorees

by Lisa Bardarson

Pictured Above: Dancer and Choreographer, Bill T. Jones and President Obama, Official White House Photo

Have you ever had the kind of dream where you show up for a performance only to discover that you are at the wrong theater and need to get across town before the curtain rises in five minutes? The lead-up to my day at the White House watching the President and First Lady honor this year's National Medal of Arts and National Humanities Medal awardees was tinged with this kind of surreal anxiety. That's a normal human response to being handed the opportunity to report on one of the world's most powerful leaders bestowing one of the top honors of this nation, right?

To receive a press pass I was required to submit my full name, social security number, address, date of birth and to state the publication I write for. After a two-day wait where the Secret Service likely found out what I'd had for breakfast that day, I obtained my security clearances.

I was instructed to bring my press credential: something TD writers, at least until now, have never needed. This was solved with creative elbow grease by copying a TD page that included the TD logo and my name. With some lamination magic from the local FedEx store and a bit of skillful trimming, my credential was believable.

I arrived at the press security gate and strode smartly up to the guard stationed behind the 3" protective plexiglass. He asked me for my name and press credential. I slipped him my thINKingDANCE creation and driver's license and, juggling a mix of good posture with sheepish feelings, waited anxiously nearby while I imagined the additional security set off by my counterfeit badge.

Thankfully I passed muster. Very soon I was sitting amongst many journalists in the James Brady Press room listening to Deputy National Security Advisor, Tony Blinken, disseminate the news of the day. Russia, Ukraine, Israel and Palestine were the hot topics. Fascinated, I scribbled furiously, taking notes on subjects I knew little about. But was I even in the right room?

At long last, along with roughly 25 other members of the press, I was led into the East Room of the White House where family and friends of the awardees waited expectantly. The room buzzed with excitement and as I looked around, I thought I saw some recognizable faces. (Was that Nancy Pelosi?) With voice recorder, note pad and iPhone at the ready I waited in the SRO press area. Eventually, the National Medal of Arts and Humanities honorees filed in solemnly and were soon followed by the President and First Lady.

President Obama took his place on the podium and spoke eloquently about the importance of this award. He said, "The late, great Maya Angelou said, 'A bird doesn't sing because it has an answer, it sings because it has a song.' Each of the men and women that we honor today has a song." The recipients, when called, took their place alongside the president to receive their medal. The president whispered to each of them, putting them at ease. He seemed to take great care in making a connection and I found this remarkable. These are the words that were spoken when Jones received his award. "The 2013 National Medal of Arts to Bill T. Jones for his contributions as a dancer and choreographer. Renowned for provocative performances that blend an eclectic mix of modern and traditional dance, Mr. Jones creates works that challenge us to confront tough subjects and inspire us to greater heights."

Jones has been showered with awards including a MacArthur, several "Bessies" and choreographic fellowships from the National Endowment of the Arts. The main question I wondered about asking him was this: After receiving multiple awards honoring your exceptional career in dance, does this award resonate differently?

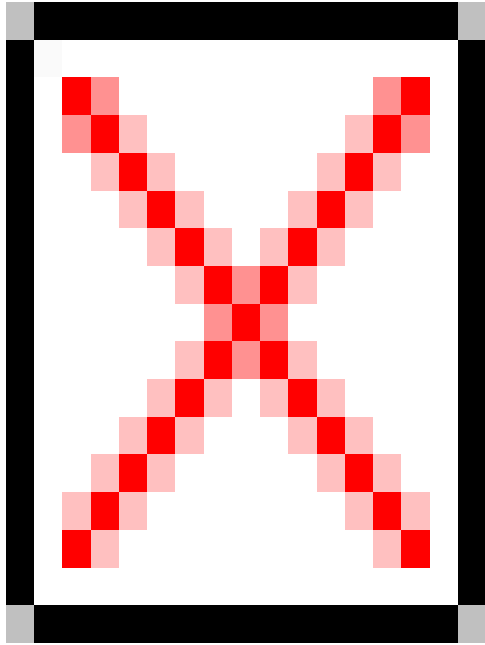
The answer to my question seemed to be contained in this one moment: when Jones bowed his head so that Obama could place the purple-ribboned medal around his neck, he did so with an unusual degree of grace and humility. Was this especially receptive gesture connected to the particular honor for this African-American dance giant of receiving the award directly from our first African-American president or was it simply the graceful and self-possessed carriage of a seasoned performer?

Other recipients of this prestigious award in the field of dance over the last ten years include Joan Myers Brown, Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, Rita Moreno, José Limon Dance Foundation, Cyd Charisse, Twyla Tharp, Suzanne Farrell and Tommy Tune.

At the end of the ceremony, Obama spoke these words, "We rely on the arts constantly. Like medicine, they help us live." They are powerful medicine, indeed, Mr. President.

This year's National Medal of Arts awardees are: Julia Alvarez, Brooklyn Academy of Music, Joan Harris, Bill T. Jones, John Kander, Jeffrey Katzenberg, Maxine Hong Kingston, Albert Maysles, Billie Tsien and Tod Williams, James Turrell and Linda Ronstadt.

National Humanities Medal awardees: M.H. Abrams, David Brion Davis, Darlene Clark Hine, Anne Firor Scott, William Theodore De Bary, Johnpaul Jones, Stanley Nelson, Diane Rehm, Krista Tippett and the American Antiquarian Society.



National Medal of Arts and the National Humanities Medal event,, July 28, The White House.

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