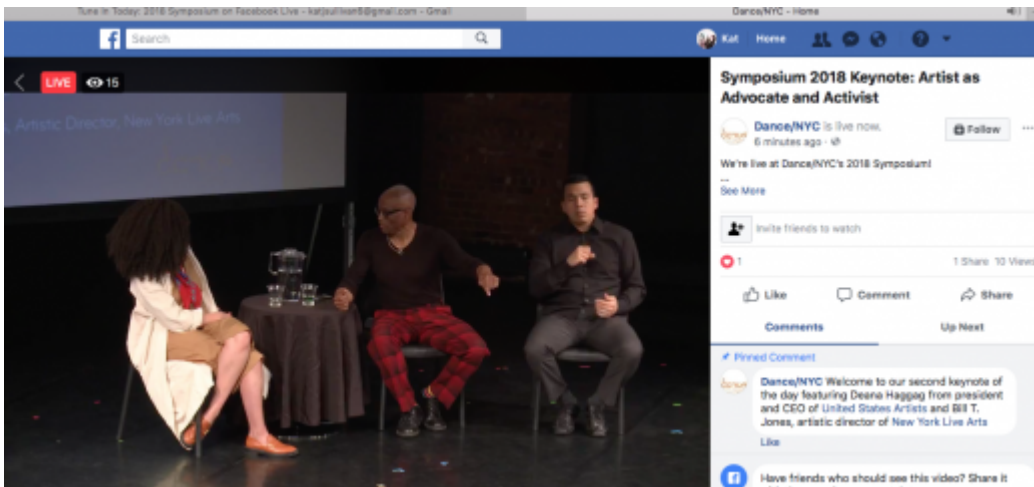


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When activism is involuntary: a conversation between Deanna Haggag and Bill T. Jones

by Kat Sullivan

On Sunday, February 25th, as Deanna Haggag sat down with Bill T. Jones to discuss “The role of the artist as advocate and activist in a changing United States” I sat down in my living room to watch the live broadcast on Facebook. Haggag, the President and CEO of [United States Artists](#), and Jones, highly acclaimed choreographer and Artistic Director of [New York Live Arts](#) and the [Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company](#), were two keynote speakers at the 2018 Dance/NYC Symposium. Their conversation was so poignant, rich, and fiery, I was deeply grateful for the respite of my own living room once the session was done. Ultimately, I was left with questions.

Activism, Advocacy, Disruption

“The artist is always an irritant; the artist is always a disrupter.” Although Jones asserted this statement within the first ten minutes of the conversation, the bulk of the beginning centered on Jones’ experiences feeling forced into the position of advocating for the black, gay, and HIV positive communities. Jones talks of two instances when he was involuntarily raised (or shamed) into the role of “poster child.” In [1979](#), after kissing his husband Arnie Zane following a performance, some audience members interpreted this as a political statement, and press exhorted him to not “rub it in our faces.” Another time, after revealing he was HIV-positive, he found himself often described as the face of the illness, despite the fact that it was “happening everywhere” at the time, certainly within other spheres of the dance community. This surprised me; I knew of Bill T. Jones as a dance giant, especially as a black, queer, HIV-positive figure. I defined him as such, I realize.

But I have to wonder, in a contemporary context, do we have a choice? In these political times, is it possible for an artist not to make a statement? To take a stance? To create work beyond the lenses of race, gender, sexuality, economic status, ability? I can’t help but wonder if any creation from a member of a marginalized group is de-facto activism; if the very act of creation by a marginalized person is (or will inevitably be read as) a statement. Can an artistic body of work stand on its own, independent of the creator? And, if not,

whom do we rely on for the distinction between art and artist? If the artist insists the work is apolitical, yet critics (and thereafter, history) remember it as a work of activism, which is it?

"We thought we were being ourselves, but suddenly we had become the symbol of something," Jones states.

Artist vs. Body

Jones, when prompted by Haggag to discuss what an artist "should" do, presented two contradictory demands on artists: while some say that artists should make work that transcends worldly concerns, others demand that artists should grapple head-on with political topics. "I came up with this formulation," Jones says: "Artists do not have to do a goddamn thing. As a matter of fact, artists should be the freest people in a society."

"Freedom" is a complex and complicated issue. "However," he continues, "an artist is a man, or a woman, with a location, and a class, and a political viewpoint. That person that the artist is; what do they need to do?" What does that person, separate from their artist identity and their art, represent and need to express?

His distinction: an artist has no responsibility to serve in any way. And, yet, an artist is also a citizen, and a citizen cannot deny that, as a person functioning in a context (within society), they may be obligated to express what offends them.

Haggag responds: "What happens when your personhood represents a body that people cannot understand, and that by extension ends up advocating on behalf of a system that has oppressed it to begin with? How does an artist transcend when not all of our bodies transcend this issue?" In a culture where whiteness, heterosexuality, able-bodiedness are the norm, the "blank slate" to which every other "variant" becomes the title, is it possible for someone who doesn't fit into the normative image to create art that doesn't contend with race, sexuality, physical ability? And even if it were a reality to accomplish this, is it possible for it not to be viewed, categorized, discussed, and historicized in that way?

I don't know. My whiteness, heterosexuality, and able-bodiedness allow me to operate at the "baseline;" it is never assumed I am making work about being white, heterosexual, or able-bodied (and, indeed, I never have). Which takes historical precedence: artist intent or audience interpretation?

"Who are my people? The world is my people!" Jones declares, then clarifies: "That was sarcasm."

The Role of the Critic

Consumer advocate, "contextualizer," historian. Jones describes the critic with sympathy as one relegated to the esoteric job of "looking," of watching the work, and changing it through an alchemical process into a well informed, educated, appraised response. "But what happens," Haggag interrupts, "when the critic doesn't know what they're looking at?"

This is something we at *thiNKingDANCE* have discussed at length. Should I, a white woman with a Western dance background, review an African dance piece (the many styles of which I, candidly, know little)? Where do beginner's mind and fresh eyes slip into ignorance, or the application of irrelevant values? Does the best-case scenario do it justice, or add anything to the conversation? What does more harm: writing an uninformed response or not saying anything at all?

"Who's going to tell you whether your art is good or not?" Jones addresses the audience later in the conversation. "And do you trust them?" He describes a conversation he had with an unnamed person about colonized peoples in Africa and the Middle East. "Well, look at New York!" Jones said. "Why are there no black critics at the New York Times?" The unnamed person chided, "Just because they're black doesn't make them good critics!" Jones goes on to say that he wanted "more people who look like me to be looking at my work and other people's work. Women: do you want someone who is critiquing your work to have some understanding of what it means to be a woman? Is it necessary to be a good critic?" My own thoughts: do I need to have similar lived experiences to the artist in order to

accurately (and, ideally, eloquently) review their work?

Jones says the open-minded part of him says no, that anyone might review anything, but the other part of him that is lonely and angry, that wants justice and equity, says yes, of course. Haggag aptly points out that there are some artists who defy contextualization to such a point that there may not be a group, a "tribe," that would be able to look at and respond to the work properly; and, yet, visibility matters. "The New York Times has to look like New York City," she says. "It has to look at New York City."

Back on my futon, I am combing through my experiences as an artist and educator. I spent a year teaching a general education dance course at Temple University in which I gave basic summarizations and analyses of different dance genres (ballet, hip hop, various African dances, and contemporary usually among them). I am remembering how difficult it was to untangle the assumption that ballet is the foundation, ballet is the "Latin, the root, of all dance styles" (a myth I was taught growing up), and balletic aesthetics can be applied to any kind of dance as a means of interpreting. I am remembering how I tried to address this, attempting to place non-balletic dance forms as equal in value and beauty without calling them the same. I'm not sure I was the right one to look at these. I have so many questions and even more to learn.

Perhaps it is only those who share lived experience with the artist who are able to critique the work beyond the boxes its artist is placed in; Haggag further asserts that "inscrutability" in art (that is, having an aesthetic that is mysterious, "avant garde," murky) is reserved for the privileged. Perhaps only those of us that are privileged are able to create something that stands alone from the artist or the artist's body, or the artist's experience in that body, or the audience's assumptions of the artist's experience in that body, to be unrecognizable. Something beyond ourselves.

For the record, Jones disagrees. Inscrutability, he feels, is reserved for the "free."

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<https://www.facebook.com/DanceNYCorg/videos/10156175022723044/>

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