

# THE NEW YORK AMSTERDAM NEWS

December 5-December 11, 2013

## Bill T. Jones, Alvin Ailey: Together again after 30 years

By CHARMAINE PATRICIA WARREN  
*Special to the AmNews*

The year 1989 was when Alvin Ailey died, and it was also the year that Bill T. Jones choreographed the now classic work "D-Man in the Waters." Jones asked, "Would this work explain my life if I died tomorrow? I don't think so, however, it is an important aspect of my life's work."

It had been 30 years since Ailey invited Jones to create a work ("Fever Swamp," 1983) for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (AAADT), and though he admits he "would have preferred to make a new work, or something closer to what my company has been doing for the last 10 years, it was an invitation ... which is something I have wanted ... and Robert [Battle, artistic director] was brand new and I wanted to support him."

Battle, who was a high school senior in 1989, is clear. "Bill is a courageous artist, and it's important that we celebrate people who have made such an impact on the field," he said. The connection was rekindled. Battle added, "Bill was in rehearsal talking about Mr. Ailey and [suggested that the dancers] think about 'Wade in the Water' [from Ailey's 'Revelations'] at a particular moment ... doing some arm gesture ... and said, 'Mr. Ailey is all over this work.'"

The process for bringing a work to a company unfamiliar with a cultivated style takes time, and admittedly, there isn't always a lot of time considering the vast AAADT repertory. This season, for example, there are four premieres. Jones' task is thus twofold: bring a work to the company and bring the dancers



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's Belen Pereyra in Ronald K. Brown's "Four Corners"



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Bill T. Jones's "D-Man in the Waters (Part 1)" (Paul Kolnik photos)

"into" the work.

Janet Wong, associate artistic director of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company (BTJ/AZ), generally begins the rehearsal process. Jones confirmed, "She takes the lead ... [and] you can't beat her for accuracy." But when it's Jones' turn, he needs to know how the dancers discern concepts, such as weight-sharing, counter-balance, "where the work came from [and] what it means to [him] and [his] company." These are the triggers—the personal connectors that Jones set out to develop.

Jones explained, "At the second rehearsal, I was so moved that I had a 'Kumbaya' moment. I called [the dancers] to me ... I played Papa ... with my white hair, I'm able to do that now ... I said, 'Look, I want you all to give me a big hug.' They

surrounded me, and I said, 'I really love you and I'm proud of you ... just do good work.' The good work comes from tenacity and trust, because they must learn the work, understand the work and present the work within record time.

"Ailey is a very busy place," said Jones with a chuckle. "We don't have workshop time ... bless them, because to get the style and to get the spirit of it, there aren't a lot of opportunities, [but] they are smart. Sometimes I come in and I have to tear up what they have been taught ... just to get at something that's been important to my company—the individual on stage [and] how this work relates to them. I try to get them to take chances ... get him [Michael McBride, who dances a key role] to give me something

spontaneous, but naturally to reach into himself and recreate the impulse for it. That's a very costly thing, but that's what the whole person-to-person transmission of being a dancer is about."

McBride agrees. "If you don't have everybody's back, there is no way that we can get through it," he said. "It's really exciting to work with a choreographer who pushes us ... he saw that we were struggling a bit, so he worked with us individually ... altering the whole thing for the dancers."

At 24 years old, "D-Man" was named "Outstanding Revival" by the 2013 New York Dance and Performance Awards, and the emotional charge is still as strong as it was in 1989, when Jones created the work as a response to the AIDS crisis. Dedicated to company member Demian Acquavella, who died of AIDS, "D-Man" celebrates life, the resiliency of life and the human spirit. McBride gets the significance in dancing the work.

"I wasn't around during the AIDS crisis, and I can't imagine what that was like, but I do know the feeling of loss," said McBride. "When I found out I was cast, it was on the three-year anniversary of my sister's passing. It's really emotional, and I struggle to find ways to release my built-up energy, and it so happened that we were working on this piece. It means a lot to me, [and] I approach the ballet with that feeling of fight."

Watching AAADT rehearse, Battle offered, "When I think about 'D-Man' and that relevance but see the playfulness and poignancy even in that walk—I call it the pimp walk

... Bill talked about doing this walk—while people are dying all around you, but you still have to keep going."

Jones recalled, "There is a moment that happens when I do it with my own company ... when they own it ... working their way through it and they are exhausted, and then the image that I wanted becomes clear. Yes, we're doing modern dance movement, but we are actually talking about a community of people struggling to get through a very difficult obstacle course; to survive ... and the audience should be able to see that ... it's a living metaphor for something else." Thirty years later, Jones channels Ailey. "I said to Robert, this is really our patrimony, this is the dream that Alvin had for a lot of people ... these are my grandchildren, if not great grandchildren. I wanted to embrace them and say, 'Yes, you've got my piece, but you know you are the next incarnation of what we need ... that patrimony of a culture, and I'm proud of it,'" said Jones.

In addition to Jones' "D-Man in the Waters (Part 1)," this season's varied premieres include "LIFT" by Aszure Barton, "Four Corners" by Ronald K. Brown and "Chroma" by British choreographer Wayne McGregor.

"I think people sometimes don't appreciate [Mr. Ailey's] versatility," said Battle. "Some of the reflection of what I am trying to do is expressing his spirit of versatility and his genius."

"D-Man" premieres on Wednesday, Dec. 11 and continues throughout AAADT's five-week season, which runs Dec. 4 through Jan. 5 at City Center. For more information, visit [www.alvinailey.org](http://www.alvinailey.org).