

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Bill T. Jones

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Jones, Bill T.
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Bill T. Jones,
<b>Dates:</b>	October 8, 2014
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2014
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 uncompressed MOV digital video files (2:58:52).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Dancer and choreographer Bill T. Jones (1952 - ) cofounded the American Dance Asylum and the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company. He also served as executive artistic director of New York Live Arts. Jones was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 8, 2014, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2014_190
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Dancer and choreographer Bill T. Jones was born on February 15, 1952 in Bunnell, Florida. He was the tenth of twelve children born to Estella Jones and Augustus Jones, both migrant farmers. At the age of twelve, Jones' family moved to Wayland County in upstate New York. After graduating from Wayland High School, Jones enrolled at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Binghamton where he studied dance and participated in track and field.

In 1971, Jones met Arnie Zane, a photographer, who helped him discover his destiny as a dancer. Jones and Zane joined with one of their professors, Lois Welk, to form the American Dance Asylum (ADA). Their work with the ADA eventually led to Jones' solo debut with the Dance Theatre Workshop's Choreographers' Showcase in 1977. During the next few years, Jones and Zane performed internationally. In 1982, Jones and Zane formed the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company. Although the dance troupe met with great success, Zane took ill in 1984; and, in 1988, he died of AIDS-related lymphoma. Jones continued to work with the troupe and created personal works that allowed him to express his grief. One such work, "Absence," made its debut in 1989. In 1990, the troupe premiered another work inspired by Zane, "Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin."

In addition to creating more than 140 works for his own company, Jones has been commissioned to create dances for several modern and ballet companies, including Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Boston Ballet, Lyon Opera Ballet, and Berlin Opera Ballet, among others. Jones directed and performed in a collaborative work with Toni Morrison and Max Roach, "Degga" (1995), at Alice Tully Hall, which was commissioned by the Lincoln Center's Serious Fun Festival. His collaboration with Jessye Norman, "How! Do! We! Do!" (1999), premiered at New York's City Center. In 2010, Jones was named executive artistic director of New York Live Arts, a company formed by a merger of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company and Dance Theater Workshop.

Jones' work has been recognized with the 2010 Jacob's Pillow Dance Award; the 2005 Wexner Prize; the 2005

Samuel H. Scripps American Dance Festival Award for Lifetime Achievement; the 2003 Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize; and the 1993 Dance Magazine Award. Jones has also received Honorary Doctorate Degrees from Yale University, the Art Institute of Chicago, Bard College, Columbia College, Skidmore College, the Juilliard School, and Swarthmore College. He is a recipient of the State University of New York at Binghamton Distinguished Alumni Award.

Bill T. Jones was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on October 8, 2014.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Bill T. Jones was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on October 8, 2014, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 6 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Dancer and choreographer Bill T. Jones (1952 - ) cofounded the American Dance Asylum and the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company. He also served as executive artistic director of New York Live Arts.

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## Restrictions

### Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

### Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

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## Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

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## Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

### Persons:

Jones, Bill T.

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Feldman, Isaac (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Jones, Bill T.--Interviews

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## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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## Occupations:

Dancer

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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## Administrative Information

### Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

### Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Bill T. Jones, October 8, 2014. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

### Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

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## Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Bill T. Jones, Section A2014\_190\_001\_001, TRT: 1:31:48 ?

Bill T. Jones was born on February 15, 1952 in Bunnell, Florida to Estella Edwards Jones and Augustus Jones, Sr. His father was one of eight children born to Flossie Jones and Ike Jones in Columbus, Georgia, and worked as a pine sap harvester on a turpentine plantation. Jones' mother was also born in Georgia. She was educated through the sixth grade, and had four children from a previous marriage when she met Jones' father. They married shortly after meeting, and then moved to Bunnell in search of steady work. Jones' parents later started a contracting firm that employed migrant laborers. In 1955, they moved to Upstate New York, where workers were needed for the potato harvest. Jones grew up there, in the predominantly German and Italian town of Wayland, New York. He was the third youngest of his parents' eleven children, and spent most of his youth in Wayland. The town's small African American community was made up of former migrant laborers, who settled there to work permanently on white-owned farms.

Video Oral History Interview with Bill T. Jones, Section A2014\_190\_001\_002, TRT: 2:32:29 ?

Bill T. Jones was nurtured by his teachers at the Wayland Central School in Wayland, New York. He was mentored by the drama teacher, Mary Lee Shappee, who chose him to direct the school's production of 'The Crucible.' Jones was also a talented member of the track team, and performed locally with his sisters in a singing group called Candy and the Sweets. When Jones was still young, a close family friend accidentally burned down his family's Victorian home. Over the years, they slowly rebuilt, but often lacked the resources and knowledge to recreate the original house. After graduating from high school, Jones enrolled in the theater program at the State University of New York Binghamton (SUNY Binghamton). Although he initially joined the track team there, Jones began spending more time in the dance studio after his niece introduced him to African dance. Jones studied dance under Percival Borde, and continued to study theater as well. Jones also met his partner, Arnie Zane, during this time.

Video Oral History Interview with Bill T. Jones, Section A2014\_190\_001\_003, TRT: 3:30:48 ?

Bill T. Jones met choreographer Lois Welk after visiting Amsterdam, the Netherlands with Arnie Zane. Welk became Jones' mentor, and he lived with her while studying dance under Paul Taylor in the San Francisco Bay Area. Then, Jones, Welk and Zane returned to Binghamton, New York to establish the American Dance Asylum (ADA), where they worked with dancers like Jill Becker, Donna Joseph and Lynda Berry. The company taught countercultural dance classes, and developed choreography for untrained dancers. In 1977, Jones auditioned for a dance festival at New York City's Clark Center for the Performing Arts, where he performed a solo from the ADA piece 'Everybody Works/All Beasts Count.' He was then contacted by Louise Roberts, who invited him to debut at the Delacorte Theater in New York City. Jones' performance was well received, and he was offered further opportunities to perform. Although Jones attempted to bring attention to ADA as well, his newfound celebrity strained his relationship with Welk.

Video Oral History Interview with Bill T. Jones, Section A2014\_190\_001\_004, TRT: 4:39:25 ?

Bill T. Jones was the creative and romantic partner of Arnie Zane, who was a Jewish photographer from New York City. Together, they choreographed a trilogy of dances inspired by video film, which included 'Monkey Run Road,' 'Blauvelt Mountain,' and 'Valley Cottage.' Jones also worked on solo shows. In 1981, he performed an improvised solo based on a series of oppositional statements about love, anger and race that shocked audiences at the American Dance Festival. Jones was also invited to choreograph a dance for Alvin Ailey's

company, which he titled 'Fever Swamp.' In 1982, Jones and Zane formed the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company. After Zane died of AIDS in 1988, Jones began exploring the nature of sin and survivorship in 'Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land' and 'Still/Here.' He also formed a romantic relationship with Arthur Aviles, a talented dancer with whom he and Zane were close, and later entered into a partnership with dancer Bjorn Amelan.

Video Oral History Interview with Bill T. Jones, Section A2014\_190\_001\_005, TRT: 5:32:25 ?

Bill T. Jones' company performed 'Still/Here' for the first time in 1994. The multimedia dance performance was based on the stories of people who survived life threatening illnesses. Although dance critic Arlene Croce objected to the performance, Jones also received positive reviews and was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship later that year. Also in 1994, Jones also directed Derek Walcott's play 'Dream on Monkey Mountain.' In 1995, he collaborated with author Toni Morrison and jazz musician Max Roach on a multimedia performance that incorporated all three of their art forms. Later, Jones was contacted by Tom Hulce to choreograph the musical production 'Spring Awakening.' At the same time, he agreed to direct and choreograph 'Fela!', a musical about the life of musician Fela Kuti. The productions debuted in 2007 and 2008 respectively, and both received Tony Awards for Jones' choreography. In 2011, the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company merged with the Dance Theater Workshop under the name New York Live Arts.

Video Oral History Interview with Bill T. Jones, Section A2014\_190\_001\_006, TRT: 6:11:57 ?

Bill T. Jones' Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company merged with the Dance Theater Workshop to form New York Live Arts in 2011. That year, Jones was chosen to serve as the organization's artistic director. At the time of the interview, he was working on 'Story/Time,' a performance of short stories inspired by composer John Cage's concept of indeterminacy. Jones was also working on a performance about the experiences of his late partner's mother, Dora Zane, during World War II. Similarly, he was developing a piece based on oral history interviews with his nephew, who struggled with his sexuality and drug use. Jones talks about his plans for the future, which included another Broadway show and a choreographic piece about aging. He reflects upon his legacy, and concludes the interview by describing how he would like to be remembered.