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ARIEL NERESON
University of Pittsburgh

Embodying the undiscussable: Documentary methodology in Bill T. Jones's *Still/Here* and the culture wars

ABSTRACT

In 1994 Bill T. Jones premiered a new dance work, Still/Here, that placed onstage the images and gestures of terminally ill people who had participated in workshops he had led previously. Arlene Croce, then the dance critic for The New Yorker, reviewed the work even though she famously refused to attend the performance. In her review she chastised Jones for creating 'victim art' out of his own and others' experiences of illness. The publication of Croce's review raised several questions about the role of dance criticism, the clash of 'high' and 'low' cultures, voyeurism and spectatorship, and the limits of representation in dance. This article argues that Jones's work and Croce's response to it can be understood through the lens of documentary theatre methods and theories. Moreover, articulating the intersection of dance and documentary practices directly addresses Croce and Jones's conflict over the use of the 'real' in 'art'.

KEYWORDS

Bill T. Jones
Still/Here
documentary theatre
culture wars
Arlene Croce
illness

The 1994 premiere of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company's *Still/Here* ignited one of the defining debates of the culture wars in the 1990s. Arlene Croce's incendiary *New Yorker* review of the work, 'Discussing the undiscussable', prompted many vitriolic responses from artists and art critics alike, all struggling with new waves of identity politics and the clash of high and low art. Croce famously refused to see the work that she continued to review, claiming, 'one feels excluded by reason of its express intentions, which are unintelligible as theater' ([1994] 2000: 709). In this essay I will argue that both Jones's intentions and his process are intelligible as a very specific theatre, that of the documentary tradition. While documentary theatre has been developed as a 'broken tradition' by Derek Paget and theorized by many other theatre scholars, the notion of documentary dance has not merited much scholarly interest (2009: 225). This absence may be due to an understanding of documentary theatre as using a textual archive. Even given postmodern trends of text in dance, the language of dance remains predominantly gesture. Thus, any claim that Jones's work can be framed by the documentary impulse must also consider what documentary materials Jones gathers and how he constructs his archive. Ultimately, after an analysis of *Still/Here's* revision of and incorporation into the documentary tradition, Croce's review seems to be always already suspicious of documentary or verbatim traditions because of her modernist views. Moreover, her skepticism of Jones's process and intentions is intimately related to her preferences of the types of bodies and histories that should be embodied onstage in dance.

As the dance critic for *The New Yorker* from 1973 to 1998 Arlene Croce was famous for her precise turns of phrase, particularly in ballet reviews. Charged with reviewing the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company's new work, *Still/Here*, in 1994, she accepted the task and produced a 'review'. Croce did not, however, see the work she reviewed. Her reasons for doing so were manifold and will be discussed at length in the body of this essay, but it is worth pointing out early on that Croce had quite a bit of information about this work going into the performance of it, perhaps more than most dance works. Rather than creating *Still/Here* in the relatively isolated space of the rehearsal room, Bill T. Jones embarked on a lengthy process of visiting several cities across the United States and leading workshops with terminally ill people in order to generate material for his work. This process took quite a bit of time and was well publicized, even becoming the subject of a Bill Moyers special on PBS television. The visibility of this process, as well as the visibility of Jones in the dance world as a black, gay, HIV-positive man who recently lost his partner to AIDS gave Croce many reasons (valid or not) to decide to review a work she did not, in fact, witness. Reactions to the review's publication were swift and highly critical.

In Roger Copeland's response to Croce's article, he begins by explaining, 'the incursion of the "real" into the fictional is one of the great obsessions of 20th-century art in virtually every medium' (1995: 36). Copeland's assertion is certainly accurate, however, this incorporation of the real in dance is seldom described in terms of documentary. This, I believe, is a crucial void. The tools of documentary theorizing may be productively applied to dance in order to more rigorously analyse the use of the 'real'. Understanding *Still/Here* as participating in the documentary tradition requires examining both the process of the work (the gathering of the materials and the materials themselves) and also the construction of the material onstage. In his article on the work of Moisés Kaufman, Stephen Bottoms describes 'verbatim' theatre, wherein

text is lifted verbatim from various sources – court testimony, newspaper articles, interviews, etc. Bottoms finds the distinction between documentary and verbatim to be significant, claiming, ‘the distinction matters because, where the latter might be said to imply the foregrounding of documents, of texts, the term “verbatim theatre” tends to fetishize the notion that we are getting things “word for word”, straight from the mouths of those “involved”’ (2006: 59). This is certainly a danger of verbatim theatre, and Croce is similarly concerned about the potential for *Still/Here* to invite questionable spectatorial responses. Croce fears that ‘the experience [of viewing the work]... may also be intolerably voyeuristic’ ([1994] 2000: 708). However, because Croce did not actually experience the work as a spectator, she is unable to use the distinction between documentary and verbatim theatres (in figurative if not literal terminology) to support her claim that the work invites voyeurism.

Still/Here is more properly aligned with documentary than verbatim theatre, most prominently in its acknowledgement of its construction. Previous to the premiere of the dance work itself Jones travelled the country leading workshops and interviews with people living with terminal illnesses – in his own words, he ‘decided to do scientific research’ about the seriously unwell (1998a: 130). He later described his process as a ‘search for poetic facts’ (Jones 1998b: 14). Indeed it is the dual existence of scientific research and poetic fact that aligns Jones’s archive closely with many documentary theatre practitioners’ sense of the documentary process. Jones conducted verbal interviews with his subjects, but also movement interviews, where bodies ask and answer questions. He asked the workshop participants to create maps of their lives through movement, crafting their life story and emphasizing crucial events with specific, participant-generated gestures.¹ In this process, Jones not only participates in a documentary process by interviewing participants and later using these interviews as a soundscape for his choreography; he also revises what can be construed as a ‘document’ in the archive for his project. The gestures produced by participants become documentary material: they become archival. Interestingly, gestures become documents that are then housed and used in the archive of Jones’s own body. In this way, documents are revised to include gestures, and the archive is revised to include the body, thus crossing Diana Taylor’s boundary between the archive and the repertoire (2003).

In a public television programme about *Still/Here*, Jones tells Bill Moyers that in the process of these workshops, ‘people step truthfully’ (Jones 2007 [1997]). While Jones’s words echo Martha Graham’s adage that ‘movement never lies’, they also point to Jones’s perception that there is empirical veracity in the movement and gestures that the participants produce, further aligning his project with theories of documentary performance. The movement gestures created by the workshop participants form the basis for the movement vocabulary of *Still/Here*, though Jones reworks many of the gestures as larger, faster and more abstract (and more challenging technically for his virtuosic dancers). He reconstructs the ‘verbatim’ gestures of the participants repeatedly, on different bodies, and thus partakes of Carol Martin’s assertion that, particularly after post-structuralism, ‘representation creates multiple truths for its own survival; oral, textual, and performed stores invite repetition, revision, and reconfiguration’ (2006: 14).

In the work itself there is perhaps a formal distance between the participant-generated gestures and the movement vocabulary refashioned from them by Jones. However, the participants are visually and aurally present through the use of projections – video of the participants describing their

1. Much of this footage can be seen in the Bill Moyers PBS special, as well as Jones’s creation of his own life map, through movement.

battles with illness plays throughout the work on the back scrim as an audio track of each participant speaking their own name plays, with Jones speaking his name last. In this sense, Jones's work fulfills Carol Martin's 'tripartite structure of contemporary documentary theatre: technology, text, and body' (2006: 9). Technology provides the images and voices of the participants – as they tell their histories via media, dancers tell their stories via movement. Technology for the documentary artist, and importantly for a dance work that springs from a documentary impulse, serves two very important purposes. Martin claims that generally speaking, 'documentary theatre... often requires technology as an integral part of the means to embodied memory and as necessary for the verification of the factual accuracy of ... the performance' (2006: 10). Indeed, the audio-visual projections in *Still/Here* do function to legitimate the documentary nomenclature that can be ascribed to the work. They also, quite crucially, allow the participants some presence on stage in their own bodies. As the dancers perform, their own presence is continually placed in conversation with that of the participants, drawing focus away from the rippling sinews of these virtuosic bodies onstage. By projecting the participants, Jones lends authenticity to his work and also removes the participants from the position of the fetishized.

The consideration of technology is critically important in understanding the work, and Croce, having refused to view the work, remains ignorant of the effects of this choice. She seems to understand Jones as stealing from the workshop participants, putting them onstage in order to put himself 'beyond the reach of criticism' (Croce [1994] 2000: 709). This view directly results from her assumption that Jones is parading verbatim, via movement and text, these unwell avatars across the stage. Situating the work within the tradition of documentary allows us to see how technology, text and body all work to both legitimize the project by showing its materials and reveal how that material has been reconfigured and structured by the artist. In fact, the heavy reconstruction Jones applies to the documentary material (through the use of technology and the formalizing of gesture) puts him squarely in criticism's path, rather than placing him beyond it. Croce goes on, famously, to complain,

I can't review someone I feel sorry for or hopeless about ... those dancers I'm *forced* to feel sorry for because of the way they present themselves: as dissed blacks, abused women, or disfranchised homosexuals – as performers, in short, who make out of victimhood victim art.

([1994] 2000: 710, original emphasis)

Croce implies that Jones's 'materials', the archive he constructs with workshop participants, are somehow pathetic, drawing the spectator's pity rather than empathy or critical judgment. Again, this conclusion is a result of, first, not viewing the work, and then, as a result, not being able to understand the work as participating in a documentary tradition where acknowledgement of the artist's construction of the work may prevent such conclusions.

This is a particularly interesting moment in dance criticism because Croce, in theory, commits the crime of which she accuses Jones – putting oneself beyond criticism. Her inability to view 'victim art', in her opinion, is the fault of the victims who cannot avoid presenting themselves as such, rather than a fault in her own critical perception, an acknowledgement of the types of bodies she prefers to view. This very double standard is one of Jones's largest

issues with the review: 'Going back to the *New Yorker* article, what I hated about it was this ability to take the moral high ground as a guardian of culture, and never have to own up to your eyes, which are not universal eyes, but particular eyes' (2005: 60). This is specifically Stephen Bottoms's critique of the playwright David Hare, particularly his 2004 play *Stuff Happens*. Bottoms understands Hare to be using the legitimizing power of the term verbatim in order to hide his own craftsmanship and construction of the documentary material (2006: 60). In this way an understanding of the documentary tradition sheds new light on the debate ignited by Croce's review about victim art, postmodernity and Jones's work in particular. Moreover, this debate functions as an event which, in Amy Koritz's words, has significance for 'what it can tell us about the range of allowable representations of the body in motion and the policing of bodily form in a specific time and place' (1996: 91).

Jones's term 'poetic facts' bears more scrutiny, particularly as it relates to documentary theory's treatment of terms like 'truth', the 'real', 'fact' and 'fiction'. Poetic facts may be one of the most apt terms to describe the project of documentary art. Documentary is the ideal place to see the play of fact and fiction for, if created responsibly (in Bottoms's sense), the work will acknowledge its dual status as 'documentary' and 'theatre'. Documentary artists take verbatim testimony and shape it intentionally, presenting it with a specific structure to the spectator. Carol Martin describes one of documentary's key functions as staging the notion that 'what is real and what is true are not necessarily the same' (2006: 15). Our contemporary era seems ripe for this sort of thinking, when scrutiny of the news media, seemingly a 'reliable' source of verbatim information, is higher than ever. Documentary plays often present information that the public might not actively seek out (such as court transcripts) or have any access to (personal interviews), desiring to give voice to those perspectives silenced by either absence or misrepresentation. In *Still/Here* Jones gives 'voice' through embodiment to the perspectives of the unwell by presenting their gestures as powerful fundamental units of the formalized dance vocabulary generated by the workshops. In the first section of the work, his dancers face the audience and, smiling, encourage them to 'do the Mary', as they perform Mary's gesture. Jones understands his work as empowering his participants, using their experiences to craft a significant work of art – as he said in a lecture to professional dance therapists, 'the piece was not made for people who were sick but made for people who were well trying to learn from people who are sick' (1998b: 14). This claim is important because it implies that there is something of value to the perspective of the unwell, something that healthy people can learn about and from the sick. Jones's understanding of the workshop participants is one of active subjectivity and throughout the work the participants are referenced by name and gesture to give them ownership and presence. Interestingly, in the Bill Moyers interview, Moyers himself falls into a similar trap as does Croce, wherein 'victims' are passive, as he describes the workshop participants as 'the wounded, the inflicted, the afflicted' (Jones 2007 [1997]). To return to Carol Martin's terms, what is 'real', i.e. the participants' illnesses, is not necessarily what is 'true', or what is of value in their experiences. In fact, many participants use humour to imply this very point, such as the man wearing a sweatshirt to the workshop that reads, 'Being Terminally Ill is Such a Bitch'. Serious illness, while radically affecting his life, does not necessarily redefine his subjectivity as passive.

In her chapter on Jones's *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land* Ann Cooper Albright quotes Toni Morrison, with whom Jones later did

a collaborative work. Morrison distinguishes between truth and fact (much as Martin distinguishes between the real and the truth) and her claims, I think, can be applied to *Still/Here* and to documentary art in general: 'the crucial distinction for me is not the difference between fact and fiction, but the distinction between fact and truth. Because facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot' (Albright 1997: 151). Indeed, it is the presence of truth in the gestures derived from the participants' movement that conveys meaning for the spectator rather than the ability of the gestures to factually represent the experience of sickness. Jones faces criticism from both sides of the spectrum – Croce derides him for using material generated by sick people (perhaps too much of the 'real'), and others like Roger Copeland claim 'the evening retains little of the raw documentary impact of the interviews with the unwell' (1995: 36). *Still/Here* seems to provide neither the 'pure dance' Croce desires nor the verbatim facticity of unmediated interview footage (if such footage is ever unmediated). It exists, like much art in the documentary tradition, along a loosely structured spectrum of fact, fiction, truth and poetry. For Jones himself, 'the truth is that one of the strategies of the late twentieth century is to push the boundaries of art and life as far as you can. Mix them up' ([1997] 1998: 131).

Jones's project in *Still/Here* is to let the material experience of the workshop participants, and the limitations of their bodies, inform and interrupt the formal dance vocabulary of his company, where his dancers' bodies seem virtually limitless. In her review of the work, Croce departs from direct address of *Still/Here* to a meditation on the state of dance aesthetics and reception. Her language deliberately positions corporeality and the material nature of embodiment as oppositional to pure dance, to an elite form where dancers appear inhuman in their virtuosity and abstraction: 'People for whom art is too fine, too high, too educational, too complicated may find themselves turning with relief to the new tribe of victim artists parading their wounds' (Croce [1994] 2000: 719). The assumption behind this statement is that in art that deals with victims' experiences, the work itself is rough, simple, not aesthetically rigorous, and without lessons to teach the spectator. Moreover, the materiality of wounds troubles Croce, as the making visible of the normally invisible and the un-pretty upsets her modernist sensibilities.

Again, Croce's review is seriously flawed from her refusal to view the work. She claims, 'From the moment that Bill T. Jones declared himself HIV positive and began making AIDS-focused pieces for himself and the members of his company – from that moment it was obvious that the permissive thinking of the sixties was back, and in the most pernicious form' (Croce [1994] 2000: 715). *Still/Here* is not a documentary work about Jones's HIV status, rather, it is about the experience of the unwell and the materiality of living with sickness. Jones does not include footage of himself in the interview projections, preferring to place himself as reconstructionist rather than subject. Croce refers to the 1960s dance aesthetic of pedestrian movement and movement generated from corporeal experience – a significant departure from the 'pure dance' movement. Croce further divides modern and postmodern traditions, devaluing movement that could potentially be performed by bodies more limited than that of your average professional dancer: 'writing about conventional dancing is hard. It's easier to describe actions that can be "danced" by you and me and require no formal evaluation' ([1994] 2000: 712). She is disturbed by the interruption of movement produced by non-dancers into the landscape of formalized, 'conventional'

dancing. Her unwillingness to relinquish elitism combined with her dislike of identity politics seems to make her always already in opposition to the documentary tradition.

Carol Martin, in her chapter 'High critics/low arts', frames Croce's criticism in terms of the elite and the pedestrian, claiming that postmodern dance traditions and *Still/Here* specifically represent an 'important shift away from a suspicious relationship between high art and mass culture to a recirculation of mass culture by high art and of high art by mass culture' (1996: 332). This is certainly Jones's goal: to recirculate, via dance, narratives of sickness. This recirculation is also part of the larger project of documentary art. Often sound bites that, due to heavy circulation in mass media, become tiresome and almost meaningless, find revitalization in art – this recontextualization reveals alternate meanings. Moreover, documentary adds new voices to the collective, making visible, audible and embodied histories that might have remained suppressed or undiscovered. In both its aims and its process, *Still/Here* participates in the documentary tradition, posing a new challenge for dance critics unfamiliar with this aesthetic philosophy. Jones himself has never described the work as documentary, though his take on the controversy surrounding the work echoes much documentary art – it leaves the listener, the reader and the spectator with more questions:

It has been said that *Still/Here* (1994) was a significant volley in the 'cultural wars'. I prefer to think that it simply focused what was at stake. It helped provoke a nasty and necessary confrontation. Those of us in the world of culture and the world of politics are still dealing with the questions raised: What voices will participate in the discourse? What paradigm will reign?

(2008: 103)

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Ariel Nereson is a Ph.D. student at the University of Pittsburgh, where she focuses her research on inscriptions of identity politics onto dancing bodies, in both dance and theatre performances. She is also interested in intersections between cognitive science and dance. Ms Nereson is also a choreographer and dancer, holding a B.A. in Dance from St. Olaf College.

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