



The year was 1913; the city, Paris. The cause for commotion—indeed, a full-blown riot? Vaslav Nijinsky's choreography for Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes' production of "Le Sacre du Printemps," set to a raucous score by Igor Stravinsky. And though it's been more than 100 years since that infamous night, the legendary music, which critics then dubbed "Massacre du Printemps," continues to inspire choreographers.

And so it has for Bill T. Jones and Janet Wong. Together with Anne Bogart, the trio accepted the commission from Emil Kang, executive director for the arts at Chapel Hill's University of North Carolina. Their task: to make a dance theater work celebrating the centennial of "The Rite of Spring."

The result was the 2013 world premiere of "A Rite." The piece was also a first for its creators, in that it merged nine dancers from the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company and six actors from SITI Company, the theater troupe directed by Bogart. Wong, associate artistic director of the Jones/Zane troupe, also receives shared billing in the work's conception, direction and choreography, in collaboration with the performers.

Jones, 63, muscular, fit, and looking like he

stepped out of a GQ ad, clad in a stylish, skin-tight black ribbed shirt, black slacks and shoes, was relaxing at the Hotel Angeleno, happy to be in Los Angeles again. In addition to the troupes' two evenings of "A Rite" at the Center for the Art of Performance at UCLA tonight and tomorrow, Jones presented a streamlined version of his work, "Story/Time," at the Central Library.

A recent dance work produced by his company that was inspired by the modernist composer John Cage, the performance was held in conjunction with Jones' recently published book, *Story/Time: The Life of an Idea*. The evening also included a lively conversation with CAP UCLA's artistic director, Kristy Edmunds.

But back to the impetus for "A Rite."

"I love the music, like most people do," explained Jones, whose troupe was founded in 1982 with his partner, Arnie Zane, who died in 1988, "and I love the legend as much. But it was the music that was the one thing that we—Janet, Anne and I—could all agree on that was the most important."

Ah, the music! Stravinsky's lyrical opening notes of the haunting bassoon solo, his frenzy-inducing polyrhythms, and those crashing, often dissonant chords. How best, then, to tackle the score that not only ushered in modernism, but was also, in its way, a precursor to World War I? The answer was to deconstruct and upend it—to slice, dice and mash it up—beginning, not with the musical salve of the bassoon, but with the violent sounds of the final sections of the ballet.

Jones explained: "We were all reading Jonah Lehrer's [2007] book, *Proust Was a Neuroscientist*." He has a chapter about hearing and he uses "The Rite of Spring" to talk about that riot, breaking it down from the point of view, literally, of those tiny hair follicles in the ear. The way we hear music as the [follicles] get bent a certain way and when they get bent we say, 'Oh that's correct.' But when the music hits them in a way that does not conform to how they're supposed to be bent, then we hear dissonance and things begin to happen, literally.

"Our muscles clench, the blood pumps, we get angry," continued Jones. "So Lehrer was approaching it from a scientific and biological point of view, but it was interesting to me and, of course, we began to look at "The Rite" as a kind of an urtext for the 20th century."

Jones, the recipient of fistfuls of honors, including a MacArthur "Genius Grant" in 1994, several Bessies, the Kennedy Center Honors in 2010, several Tony Awards (in 2007 for "Spring Awakening," 2010 for "Fela!"), and who last year received the National Medal of Arts, has, to say the least, a curious mind.

"We deal with war in the piece obliquely, because there is a soldier who became very im-

portant. The idea I first offered was that we stay close to the music, because I'm a choreographer, but also there was this idea of a walking man. I, of course thought it was a man walking in Harlem, but he could have been walking in any city. Anne picked up on this, and it became about a soldier returning from the war—in this case, actor Will Bond."

Various sources were tapped for the libretto—musings on time and existence—including text from returning soldiers from World War I, theoretical physics of string theorist Brian Greene, and the words of musicologist, Dr. Severine Neff (actor Ellen Lauren), which begins the work. There is also verse from the Japanese poet Shuntarō Tanikawa.

A smash out of the box, "A Rite" has been hailed by critics, with the San Francisco *Chronicle's* Allan Ulrich calling it, "Intriguing, intelligent, insightful dance theater." But, one wonders, how did Jones et al. deal with the original notion of a climactic sacrifice, in which a virgin dances herself to death?

"There's a lot of sacrifice going on at any time in the world that has to do with the ambitions of people," opined Jones, a towering presence whose face is open, his voice distinct, his thoughts well articulated. "And we're dealing right now with religious belief. You might say the sacrificial virgin was a victim to the religious beliefs of the elders in this prehistoric community that Stravinsky and his dramaturge, Nicholas Roerich came up with.

It's a modern piece," Jones added, "and it will be very interesting to see it in L.A., as we haven't done it in close to a year. What people will think it means and how people will know how to engage it and how to feel it. In essence, how to think about it."

"The Rite of Spring" is, according to Wang, the Mt. Fuji of dance, and the number of different "Rites" hovers around 100. Among the choreographers who've tested their mettle against Stravinsky's iconic score was Leonide Massine, his 1920 staging sponsored by Coco Chanel, one that was said to have been preferred to the original by the composer. In 1959, Maurice Béjart replaced the Chosen One with the ritual mating of a young man and woman. Three years later, Kenneth MacMillan made a version for the Royal Ballet.

In 1975 Pina Bausch and dancers performed on a stage covered in soft black earth; in 1980, Paul Taylor made use of Stravinsky's two-piano score in a detective story/cum parody of the original Diaghilev/Nijinsky staging. Finally, in 1987, the Joffrey Ballet reintroduced the world to Nijinsky's footwork after Millicent Hodson) along with Kenneth Archer), spent 16 years on its reconstruction.

And the dances kept—and keep—coming: In 1988, Molissa Fenley's one-woman version proved to be an endurance test; in 2001,

France's Ballet Preljocaj crafted a raw incarnation accentuated with nudity; in 2003 Shen Wei threw his hat—along with his paintings—into the “Rite” ring and, adding to the allure of Stravinsky's staccato pulsings, Zingaro, a French theater group, choreographed “Rite” for a bevy of prancing horses in the 90s.

Even the doyenne of modern dance, Martha Graham, after dancing the Chosen One in Mas-sine's “Rite” in 1930, choreographed her own variation in 1984, at age 90. Transforming despair into psychological release, Graham was, however, less successful, the drama in surprisingly short supply.

Jones said he'd recently watched his dancers, including company newbie, Cain Coleman, Jr., learning motifs from the sacrificial virgin's dance. “There was a moment when I looked at Cain doing this stiff-legged walk and I thought of Martha. When you look at that virgin's dance, you would think a young Martha Graham must have gone crazy for it. The way she attacks it—what the Parisians thought was so ugly about it—Graham in her Jungian way, thought it was so primal, so much about the human experience. It was very female, but there was something everyone understood.”

As to the race issue in “A Rite” (Russian primitivism was the order of the day back in 1913), Jones said one cannot talk about modernism without talking about Africa. Or dare I say, the African-American experience. There's a little picture on the back of the piano and it revolves at one point during this section called ‘The Wild Party.’

“We're actually dancing to a very jazzy version of “The Rite of Spring”—there's the Lindy, the Charleston, Bop dancing,” Jones went on, “and you see a black man as if it were the Café Negre,” a kind of caricature of a black man. So, suddenly we're placed in the Jazz era. What do you mean the Jazz era? Some people say Stravinsky was responsible for the Jazz era. I don't think so. In a way, Black art is popular art. And while the original “Rite” may have elicited outrage, today it's difficult, if not impossible, to shock a 21st century audience, what with their short attention spans and worshipping the digital world.”

Explained Jones, whose troupe has performed in 200 cities in 40 countries on every major continent and is recognized as one of the most innovative and powerful forces in the dance-theater world: “More than that, we were trying to talk about our time now, and maybe, as Ellen [Lauren] says, ‘Nothing is difficult forever.’ “Well, it's true,” continued Jones. “John Cage and Christian Wolff, talking about their work made under Henry Cowell's instructions to get rid of “the glue of transitions”—this kind of theme and variations—he said, “No matter what we do, it's going to become lyrical.” When you see it, you find a way to make sense out of it, you being the audience.”

The indefatigable Jones, a workaholic not averse to an evening cocktail—or a movie starring Vin Diesel—works on several projects at once. While creating “Fela!,” which bowed on off-Broadway in 2008 before emerging on the Great White Way the following year, was also premiering his Abraham Lincoln opus, “Fondly Do We Hope...Fervently Do We Pray” in 2009. In addition to his being executive artistic director of New York Live Arts since 2011 (a merging of his troupe with Dance Theater Workshop, the organization has commissioned and produced some 81 premieres), he also has a variety of plans in the pipeline, including the June world premiere in New Jersey of the first part of “Analogy: A Trilogy, Part One, Dora Tramontane.” And while some of Jones’ works may be considered “commercial entertainments”—the Broadway productions, for example—Jones is first and foremost an artist.

“In my heart of hearts,” Jones admitted, “I’m a maker. But I still believe you’re only as good as the last work that you made. I know that [my] works are out there in the culture and there’s some part that has relaxed, but for me, this has been a big question in the last 10 years or so: Why make another work when you have those honors, when they are teaching your work in university? Why make another work?”

“You make it for yourself,” he stated adamantly. “I’m an artist and I don’t know how else to live in this world. When I make the work it’s helping me understand—literally—what life means to me. Art-making is participation in the world of ideas. Art does what religion traditionally did. It organizes a seemingly chaotic universe. Those are my old saws, but I believe them. And, quite frankly, I don’t know how else to understand the world—at least I don’t want to know any other way to understand the world.”

That same subject was also broached at L.A.’s Central Library. When asked about art versus entertainment and celebrity, Jones responded: “Art is a spiritual activity, a calling. But I [also] want to do a TED Talk. Art is as important as highways and hospitals. And,” he paused a moment before adding somewhat gleefully, “I am a very ambitious motherfucker. I want to win.”

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