
Move Through the Racialized And Gendered Social Hierarchies: An Analysis of Bill.

T. Jones and Arnie Zane's *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/the Promised Land*

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Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane's choreography of *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/the Promised Land* tackles the inequality history of racial and gender oppression and shapes an ideal commonality that transcends the difference. Premiered in 1992, a time when the study of dance focused not simply on cultural context, but more on understanding society through analyzing movement system, Jones's choreography adapts the novel by Harriet Beecher Stowe the *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which was often viewed as a constricting but potent cultural reference point. *Last Supper* expands the meaning of the original novel and investigates emotion as a route into history.

Ariel Nereson, a scholar, educator, and practitioner who focuses on bodies in motion working across dance and theater, interprets Jones and Zane's choreographic strategy as "counterfactual movement," often used in the context of historical study as a thought experiment to consider the "probable consequences of an admittedly false conditional."¹ That is, the dance explores alternative historical events from a common antecedent. The dance builds on the "factual" Eliza, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a sentimental, maternal, refined mulatto heroine who successfully escaped from her slave owner. Interpreting Eliza's racial appearance and temperament as "phenotypical proximate to white," Jones's counterfactual choreography presents five different

¹ Ariel Nereson, "Counterfactual Moving in Bill T. Jones's *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land*" (May 2015), 168.

segments of Eliza on five separate bodies, whose destinies are “shaped by choice and affinity rather than circumscribed racial identity,” nor gender identity.²

Randy Martin, a professor of Art and Policy at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts, socialist activist, and dancer, in *Critical Moves* illustrates how dance can re-active jammed prospects for progressive politics and social change. Especially in analyzing BTJ/AZ’s choreography of *Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin/the Promised Land*, Martin terms “overreading” as “the analytic procedure for enlisting a recognition of the movement in dance to evaluate the political horizons for mobilization in society.”³ In short, he proposes interpreting the movement in the dance as part of social context beyond the aesthetic concerns in order to mobilize audiences to break the barrier between performance and daily life.

Jacqueline Shea Murphy, who teaches courses in critical dance studies in UCR's Dance department, examines how Jones’s choreography broke the stereotypical view to identify individual’s “undeniable biological body” with symbolic movement and the performance “whose meaning is largely embodied in its relationship with an audience and its dependence on bodies, rather than in the plot climax or story it tells.”⁴ In the context of BTJ/AZ’s dance piece, the story may end with the climax of

² Nereson, “Counterfactual,” 180.

³ Randy Martin, “Overreading the Promised Land,” in *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 55.

⁴ Jacqueline Shea Murphy, “Unrest & Uncle Tom: Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane’s Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Promised Land,” in *Bodies of the Text: Dance as Theory, Literature as Dance*. Edited by Ellen W. Goellner and Jacqueline Shea Murphy (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 83.

the murder of Amiri Baraka in the act titled, *Dutchman*, but the dance continues, moving immediately into the final scene “the Promised Land,” which includes formations of lots of different shapes of stark, naked bodies. In another word, Jones and Zane’s work “represent[s] violence without further requiring it.”⁵

The emotional appeal in performance offers audiences to examine racialized and gendered social hierarchies in a diverse angle. Martin provides the critical methodology “overreading” to bring audiences closer to the performance, which reconstructs the possible narrative of dancing. Murphy shows how body, as a shared universal trait, call upon the common dream of equal utopia. As Nereson said, “Racialized and gendered social hierarchies become points that must be moved through rather than thought about.”⁶ “Moving through” not only means new language of physically movement that was embodied in the performance, it also entails a move on the heart of all audiences.

⁵ Murphy, “Unrest,” 100.

⁶ Nereson, “Counterfactual,” 181.

Bibliography

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