Choreographed psychodramas

New dances by masters Joodey Goode and Bill T. Jones

It's just a coincidence that Bill T. Jones and Joodey Goode, two major gay choreographers who deal with gay themes, have opened shows back to back (and at the same time as the national LGBTQ protest for Equal Rights in Washington, DC). Just a coincidence, but it feels portentous, like something's about to give. I have to say, I don't know which way things are going to break.

Not all dances are "about" something. There's a kind of pure-dance theater that is "just about the movement." But there is, at the other end of the spectrum, a kind of dance theater that's about life in the body: movement, physically, relationship, sexuality, love, hate, anger. It's made of stylized, heightened action, is sometimes closer to acting than to "dancing," and can be gritty, naturalistic, even journalistic. Both Jones and Goode work this end of the spectrum, using gay themes that obviously grow directly out of their lives. Both of them rose to prominence in the AIDS era -- i.e., when there was no cure in sight. Dances then often performed as if there were no tomorrows.

Goode's breakthrough piece, 29 Effeminate Gestures, could have been the anthem of ACT UP. It put gay anger on the map in a new way that made him famous nationally. The pieces he made about his friends dying of AIDS melted your heart and made you love him, and won him New York's Bessie Award, their highest honor for modern dance.

Goode does not have HIV, but Jones does; back in the 1980s, Jones and his partner, Amii Zane, who had AIDS and was dying, made dances about their relationship which were formally innovative and electrifying theatrical exploitations of personal material. I'm using the word exploitative retrospectively; at the time, it was a fighting word -- who were critics to tell dying people that they were exploiting themselves? When Arlene Croce, the great critic at The New Yorker, did rebuke Jones for such self-abuse, she was destroyed in one of the great critical contretemps of that era, from which the dust has not yet settled.

Goode and Jones are both still here, and they've both made spooky shows -- reverberating, echo-filled theater-pieces with some thrilling dance -- moves that seem quite secondary to the words that careen like cannonballs in a war inside the psyche. Both resemble those dreams from which you can't wake up, where the sounds in your head set up a cacophony of tension, and you can't decide what they mean or what to do.

Goode's Dead Boys is a melodrama he's written for UC's Department of Theater, Dance and Performance Studies (where he's been invited onto the faculty). It centers on a young gay artist, kind of a loser, who lives in a boardinghouse with some friends, but suffers nightmares about gay boys being choked, beaten, drowned; he comes to find out they're real. Most of the action is psychodrama, and it's expanded and made eloquent by the shimmering, sad music of Holcombe Walters, the folk/indie Portland composer who's collaborated with Goode; the piece is not through-composed like an opera, but previews of it put me in mind of an opera like Dialogues of the Carmelites. The show opened the weekend of Oct. 10, and continues this weekend in Zellerbach Playhouse. David K.H. Elliott's visionary lighting creates haunting effects.

The actors (aside from Prof. Laura Dolas, who is tremendous as the landlady) are students, but they are talented. It remains to be seen how well they can maintain an atmosphere which requires so much suspension of disbelief, but the material itself is haunting, and, in the sketches I've seen so far, I recognize much of my own experience as a queer trying to sort out my identity, my hopes and fears, and find ways of connecting to others. I had to leave for DC before the show opened, but it seems very promising, and honest in its conception.

Honest Abe

Jones' ambitious Fondly do we Hope, Fervently do we Pray arrived at YBCA hot from its premiere last month at Chicago's Ravinia Festival, which commissioned a piece about the bicentennial of Abraham Lincoln's birth. It owes a lot to Ken Burns' Civil War documentaries and our familiarity with them. Jones quotes Lincoln like a preacher quoting Scripture, and bends old hymn tunes to his purposes.

It's dangerous not to praise Bill T. Jones. (Look what happened to Croce.) He's in a position to flip liberal guilt like a jiu-jitsu artist, since he's both gay and African-American, and as a postmodern New Yorker, he's seen how his fellow artists in the visual media pay more attention to crafting their reputations than their pictures. The fascinating thing is that he really does play it close to the edge. He used to parody "I'm Chevy Chase, and you're not" by coming out onstage. He'd posture, strip down to a little white skirt or the Altogether, and harangue the audience, "I've got AIDS, and you don't," and he'd get away with it. Or he'd get his mother onstage to sing a gospel song (she's great) and dance to that. He worked your nerves.

He's still doing that. The center of the piece is a poetry slam echoing the Lincoln-Douglas debate. He's on both sides of every question, even suggesting that he's got sympathy with states' rights.

A piece with so much discord requires powerful containing forces to keep it from exploding, and the organizing forces were glorious. The playing field was defined by Bjorn Amelius' brilliant set; he'd intiald a white circle into a black floor and defined it vertically by a transparent curtain gauze, which surrounded the action like a fog. The dancers could open it at the center to allow dancers to spill out, or close it round them to create the mists of the past, or to accept projections of sad photos.
A smaller circle way down left allowed solos to appear like close-ups. In the second half (“after the end of slavery”), when the curtain was re-oriented to open at an angle (“until the end of racism,” perhaps), this circle was connected to the big one as by an umbilical cord, and the action proceeded back and forth on this conveyor.

The high point of the dance was the solo for the assassinated Lincoln (Paul Matteson), a haunting dance in slow motion that I doubt I’ll ever forget. On the whole, though, the floor patterns were more interesting than the steps. The dancers were uniformly wonderful.