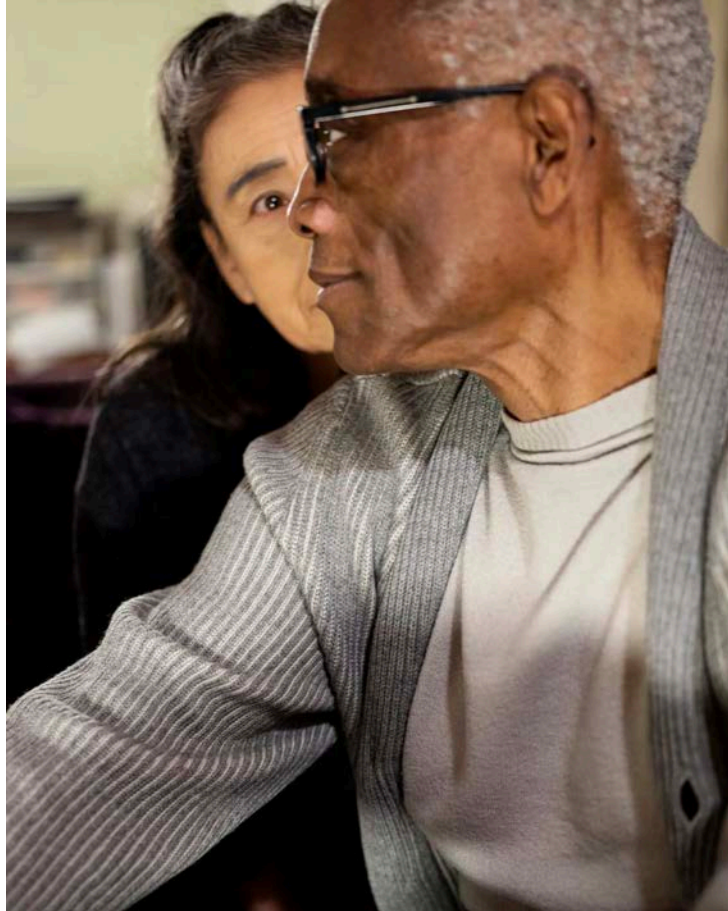


Bill T. Jones and Eiko Otake: Opposites Guided by ‘Too-Much-Ness’

These two canonical dance artists, both now 70, share a willingness to take on weighty issues.

By Wendy Perron

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Eiko Otake and Bill T. Jones are two celebrated dance artists with different styles, temperaments and cultural backgrounds. What they have in common is their willingness — hunger, really — to take on weighty issues. Otake has been illuminating the environmental damage caused by nuclear accidents. Jones is intimately connected to the struggle against racism.

Both artists turned 70 in mid-February, and both are making some of the most powerful works of their careers.

In “A Body in Fukushima,” Otake placed herself in irradiated areas around the nuclear plant in Fukushima that melted down in 2011. A book, with photographs by William Johnston, and a film version (both from 2021) immerse viewers in a desolate though poetic landscape. Her figure, exhausted or staggering, wrapped in an old kimono, is found among waste bags of radiated debris or abandoned temples.

In Jones’s epic “Deep Blue Sea” (choreographed with Janet Wong), performed at the vast Park Avenue Armory this fall, he was the poignant elder guiding dancers through communal interactions and tableaux. They dance at times to text, including Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, recited backward. The stunning visuals by Elizabeth Diller sometimes plunge Jones’s lone figure into complete darkness and other times seem to immerse the audience in a roiling sea. We are left to wonder, is the sea the unconscious? Is it the racist underbelly of society? Is community what saves us?

In the ’70s, Eiko & Koma — Otake’s performing duo with her husband, Takashi Koma Otake — were developing their slow-motion, otherworldly style while Jones and Arnie Zane, his partner in work and life, were igniting a wild brand of athleticism. They all performed on the same festival circuit in the ’80s, and over the years Otake and Jones developed a friendship. What draws them toward each other? They share a spirit of resistance but something else, too: a no-holds-barred approach that Otake calls “too-much-ness.” Though they can seem like opposites — the dramatically impulsive Jones versus the grounded but impish Otake — there is something similarly relentless about their choreographic investigations.



Otake in "A Body in Fukushima." William Johnston

Jones, whose fame reaches beyond the dance world, leads a more public life than Otake. When Zane died of AIDS-related causes in 1988, Jones mourned publicly through his choreography and appearances on television. He's the artistic director of both the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company and New York Live Arts, a forward-looking theater in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood. The Japanese-born Otake, who came to New York in 1976 with Koma, has been performing solo in nontraditional spaces — a train station, a cemetery — since 2014.

This month, Otake's "The Duet Project: Distance Is Malleable," a set of partnerings designed to pull her off balance, will be at the N.Y.U. Skirball Center, April 15 to 17. The Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company is touring "What Problem?" a portable version of "Deep Blue Sea." And Jones has choreographed two Broadway productions: "Black No More," which closed in February, and "Paradise Square," which opened on April 3.

Recently over a dinner at Otake's Manhattan apartment — she cooked a Japanese meal with seaweed soup and fried tofu — she and Jones had one of their probing, rambling conversations. (They have talked publicly before: in an email exchange posted on Otake's blog and in a Zoom conversation sponsored by New York Live Arts.) Jones tends to be oratorical even when speaking casually, while Otake takes time to arrive at her point. Occasionally Jones's husband and sometime collaborator, Bjorn Amelan, supplied a phrase or quote when Jones was hesitant. Below are edited excerpts from their conversation, which didn't shy away from big topics, including beauty, doubt and death.

You've known each other for a long time. When did the friendship click?

EIKO OTAKE We were at a benefit honoring Harvey Lichtenstein at Danspace [in 1997]. Koma and I were performing part of "Wind," which we did with our kids, and we were all sharing a dressing room. Bill, you had just done an amazing solo, and you came back to the dressing room and you couldn't calm yourself down. Your body was doing this [shaking wildly].

BILL T. JONES I assumed that's what our field was, that inside all the coolness and formalism of the avant-garde were people who were really exploding.

OTAKE But you were not only exploding inside, you were exploding onstage.

JONES I know, and it's totally inappropriate for a Black man to be so open in front of white people. That was transgressive. You have to understand, I was taught that they will kill you if they see weakness.



Jones, center, with his dancers in a scene from “Deep Blue Sea” at the Park Avenue Armory in September. Julieta Cervantes for The New York Times

Who taught you that?

JONES My mother. Every Black adult would tell you that. But in the white avant-garde, these stories do not get told. So I had let that audience know that I’m *here*. I know the solo had been on fire.

OTAKE For Koma, myself and our son Yuta, it was a very big moment. It’s like when I saw “Deep Blue Sea,” I told you, “It was as if I came to this country to see this piece.”

Bill, had you seen the work of Eiko & Koma?

JONES Yes, and they were doing something deep and elemental. It was free of “Was it ballet, was it modern, was it Merce [Cunningham]?”

OTAKE I always wanted Eiko & Koma to be singular, not accountable to any category.

JONES I’m going to ask my sister Eiko, Do you experience doubt as you grow older, and how do you deal with it?

OTAKE I do. When I came up with the idea of a monologue for the 20th anniversary of 9/11, everything was in doubt. How much to speak? Am I being too confessional or didactic? Looking at this immigrant body, could viewers find their own thoughts?

JONES My doubt is that maybe it doesn’t matter. I rehearse the end of my life. I think to myself, Are you earning your food? You have a wonderful husband. You have this theater. What is it all at the service of? And it makes me depressed, and I have sometimes had suicidal thoughts. So that’s what my doubt looks like. Just stop. It’s obscene, your ambition; it’s ridiculous.

OTAKE That’s the inner voice, or something else?

JONES It must be the inner voice. When the dark crowds in like that, I find myself looking for some idea, something to start building.

And each time you build a new piece, you are also building on your lifelong themes. You were talking about racism in your work way before Black Lives Matter.

JONES And trying to be lyrical in talking about it. Can you sing the song in a way that others can sing with you?

Eiko, I want to ask you a question about the idea of beauty. The other night when I was watching your film, “A Body in Fukushima,” there were certain frames when I’m thinking, OMG, look at the red against the blue, the way the perspective is. But this is a place where people have died, and there’s radiation everywhere. So the tragedy is there, but there is also — do I dare say? — beauty.



Jones: “I’m going to ask my sister Eiko, Do you experience doubt as you grow older, and how do you deal with it?” Jeanette Spicer for The New York Times

OTAKE What I was trying to do using my body was to compose something. I wanted to make a shape of a certain weight. Instead of only a few pictures, I wanted to make strings of pictures. So I made this two-hour film with 459 pictures. There is beauty even in destruction, and that might make people see an image longer.

JONES You were demanding something of us who would look. You will be gone; you will pass. And then there will be someone looking at this amazing film in 50 years and looking at this person draped across a piece of cement, and they won’t have the pleasure of having dinner with you or hearing your voice. But I want to ask you: When you perform, do you go into — is it a character?

OTAKE It is the place I want to be when I’m dancing.

JONES It was like looking into — do you know the word maw, m-a-w? A whale has a maw, you look into the maw of the world. At the center of the world there is a big, dark hole, and you were living in that for a moment.

To me it’s suffering that I see in her face. That’s what I think the dark hole is that you, Eiko, somehow channel or allow to come through you.

OTAKE Channeling does happen because it’s not everyday me.

JONES Is it dangerous to do what you do? When you left Fukushima, did you need care? That pain we’re talking about, can you turn it on and off?

OTAKE That I do carry. That's why I was completely out of control when the Russians attacked a nuclear plant in Ukraine and set a fire. I couldn't find out how close the fire was to the reactors. I had a migraine all night.

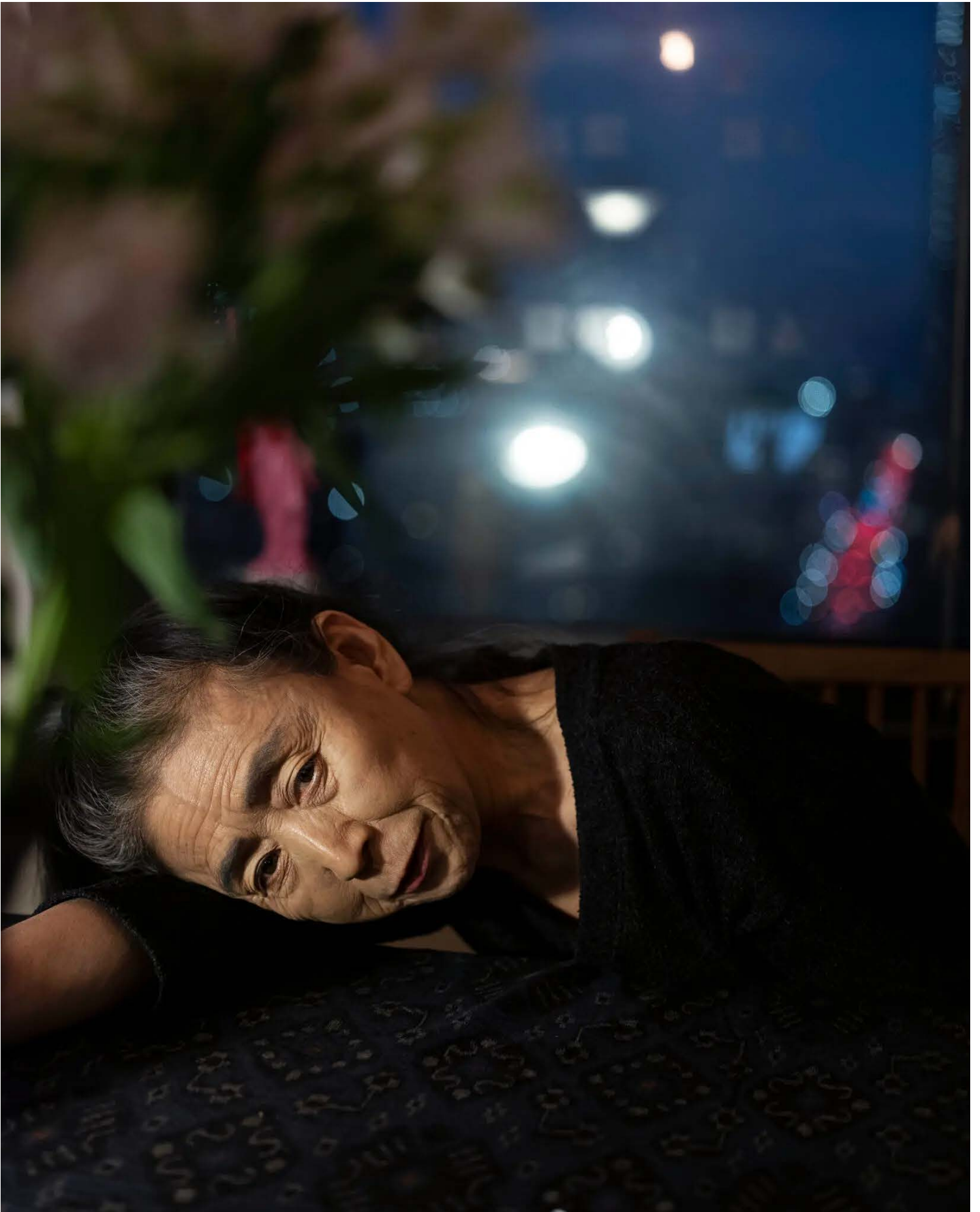
Now that you're both 70, does that make you envision the end of your life?

JONES I oftentimes in my head rehearse the end of my life. I ask myself, Are you ready to die yet?

OTAKE I practice dying onstage. In my "Duet Project," I work with young people; DonChristian Jones is 32. In this performance, I give him water. Then I say, "Working with you makes me know I want to die before you. This is the order. I don't want to break it."

JONES That would be a blessing, that the world was in order. I saw Arnie dying, and his parents were there. When I think of the terror Arnie must have had when looking at the ineffable, I think, would I have the strength to do that?

OTAKE We each prepare to die but also find reason to live.



Otake: "At 3 a.m., I'm working." Jeanette Spicer for The New York Times

What are you working on now?

JONES Everything I make is rooted in emotion and recall. My big brother Azel, who I went to Woodstock with and did acid with — he died recently. Back in upstate New York, he told me, “You could be breathing in the dust of Raphael or Leonard da Vinci.” He told me things I needed to know about the world. I’m making this new work asking questions like, What do you have to know globally to be well versed in how to live in this ever more challenging world?

OTAKE In my “Duet Project” at N.Y.U., I have a talking duet with Ishmael Houston-Jones, a crawling duet with Margaret Leng Tan, a running duet with DonChristian, and a dying duet with Iris McCloughan. I want to put my speaking self and dancing self together before it’s too late.

What allows you both to keep digging deep into your work as you age?

JONES If not now, when? If you’re going to be here, what are you doing? OK, I’m going to make one more piece and try to say things I haven’t been able to say.

OTAKE For me, I feel like I need to do certain things now. I raised two kids, I took care of my parents. Since my mom died in 2019, I have no other personal duties. At 3 a.m., I’m working.

Wendy Perron is the author of “The Grand Union: Accidental Anarchists of Downtown Dance, 1970-1976.”