

## DANCE THEATER MERGES WITH BILL T. JONES TROUPE

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In an unusual move that may alter the contemporary dance landscape in New York, the boards of Dance Theater Workshop and the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company voted unanimously Wednesday to merge their organizations, forming a combination producing and presenting entity to be called New York Live Arts.

The new nonprofit group, which will be housed in Dance Theater Workshop's building on West 19th Street in Chelsea, will be led by three people: Mr. Jones, who will carry the title of executive artistic director; Carla Peterson, currently Dance Theater Workshop's artistic director, who will keep that role; and Jean Davidson, the executive director of Mr. Jones's company, who will become the chief executive and executive director. Dance Theater Workshop's executive director, Andrea Sholler, will depart.

In interviews by phone the leaders of both groups expressed hope that the merger would lead to long-term financial stability, while providing a prominent platform for Mr. Jones's company and opportunities for other artists.

"This is an era that is beset with many problems" for arts groups, Mr. Jones said. "Arts organizations have to cooperate and work together, looking for the proverbial new model."

The merger requires court approval.

The new organization's leadership structure partly reflects the dynamics of the merger, in which Mr. Jones's company is coming in as the financially stronger entity. Dance Theater Workshop took on considerable debt to construct its building, which opened in 2002 and includes a 180-seat theater, administrative offices and rehearsal studios, and it has struggled since then. As part of the deal Mr. Jones's company, which has long sought a permanent home, has raised gifts and pledges to pay off the building's mortgage, which stands at \$3 million.

The merger is atypical in pairing a presenting organization with an artist-led dance company. The 45-year-old Dance Theater Workshop holds more than 110 performances annually and is known for having fostered the early careers of choreographers like Mark Morris, Stephen Petronio and Mr. Jones himself, as well as those of performers like Whoopi Goldberg and Bill Irwin.

Mr. Jones's company, founded in 1982, tours nationally and internationally performing his choreography, which has dealt with issues like racism and mortality. (Mr. Jones has also worked on Broadway in recent years, winning Tonys for choreographing "Spring Awakening" and "Fela!," a show he also directed.)

Exactly how those two groups with different missions will mesh remains a question, though some answers will be revealed when New York Live Arts announces its first season in the spring. The National Endowment for the Arts has already announced a \$90,000 grant for next year's presentation season. Ms. Davidson said Mr. Jones's company would continue to tour and would also perform during a two-week season at the 19th Street building every other year. (She said the company had not yet decided when his troupe would first perform.)

Mr. Jones, 58, is also starting to think about his legacy. In interviews he and Ms. Davidson said that one option being considered would be to turn his troupe into more of a repertory company, which would also perform works by other choreographers.

Ms. Peterson said that she expected future seasons to be consistent with those from Dance Theater Workshop's past, although now she will be doing the artistic programming with Mr. Jones.

"I've known Bill for a pretty long time," she said. "It's not that we necessarily run in the same circles, but we're not unknown to each other."

Ms. Peterson was particularly enthusiastic about developing a multiyear residency program for midcareer artists. Dance Theater Workshop currently offers shorter residencies for dance groups. The details of the new residency have yet to be worked out, Ms. Peterson said, but it will be more substantial and will include both rehearsal space and money for the artists.

Like many smaller organizations Dance Theater Workshop has a board that is a mix of patrons and artists, and there have not been consistent expectations about how much each trustee should contribute annually. The leaders of the new entity have agreed to populate the board with those who can make substantial financial contributions. Dance Theater Workshop and Mr. Jones's company each will initially bring 11 board members, each of whom will be expected to donate roughly \$18,000 annually. In the first two years, Ms. Davidson said, the goal is to expand the board to 24 and increase the expected donation level to \$25,000.

New York City's cultural commissioner, Kate Levin, said she thought that the merger would provide not only greater financial stability to the two organizations but also artistic opportunities, by combining Ms. Peterson's and Mr. Jones's visions.

"I think there are lots of very fruitful ways the organization can grow and exert more influence," she said.

Michael M. Kaiser, president of the Kennedy Center in Washington and an adviser to many performing arts groups, spoke to the board of Dance Theater Workshop when it was considering the merger. In an interview this week he said he thought that the union made sense, but that it was important for everyone to be on the same page, particularly about how to handle possible financial challenges:

"If there's a bad year or a bad couple of years, who gets the money and who doesn't get the money? Does the dance company get the money because they contracted dancers, or because, right now anyway, they're coming in a stronger financial partner? How do you protect the

presenting part so it's not just a complement to what they're doing?"

But he said he was optimistic. "It certainly hopefully can save the D.T.W. building," he said.

Perhaps the most striking part of the new organization's name, chosen with the help of a branding firm, is that it does not include the word "dance." While Ms. Peterson said there had not been any decision to avoid the word, she and Ms. Davidson added that they had talked about ways to expand the organization's commitment to "movement-based" or "body-based" art, by including things that could fall under the heading of visual art as well.

Ms. Peterson said, "We want to begin to think about this building as a kind of larger, animated center of art, where things definitely happen on the stage, but they happen in other ways also: in the lobby, in the studios, what's going on in terms of public programs."

Mr. Jones said he wanted to create an arts center on the model of the 92nd Street Y, which would allow him to continue his "participation in the world of ideas."

But, ultimately, the new name is part of a change that will strengthen the organization, Ms. Peterson said.

"I'm sad about letting it go," she said of Dance Theater Workshop, "but I also recognize what the opportunities are going forward."

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