

Let's Dance

By Jewelle Gomez—

I was watching the documentary *Can You Bring It*, about the dancer/choreographer Bill T. Jones as part of the Frameline Film Festival, and was reminded of how exhilarating dance performances can be, especially after a year of pandemic lockdown. The still-relevant piece Jones was re-mounting had originally been created as part of the exploration of grief during the AIDS epidemic, which took the lives of many in the dance world, including Jones' life/work partner Arnie Zane.

My own experience in dance is limited to the childhood tap in Boston. I remember the power of the sound of taps even as I understood I was better with my hands than my feet. I did include tap dancing in two of my most recent plays, providing the characters a firm sense of themselves and their power even in difficult historical times.

Because of the lockdown I realized I missed the physical exuberance of dance as well as theatre. I looked back longingly at companies that had influenced me through their physicality as well as the emotional/political contexts.

The Bay Area has such a wealth of dance artists it is impossible to squeeze them all into one discussion, but you got to start somewhere. ZACCHO Dance Theatre founded by Joanna Haigood is one of the amazing examples of companies that bring together heart, head, and body in extraordinary ways. The aerial dances and site-specific performances explore everything from the early, free, African American settlers of this country to German song cycles.



Two dancers who perform with ZACCHO regularly also do independent work. San Francisco native Robert Henry Johnson moves with sinewy grace and also has his own eponymous dance company as well as choreographing for others. I watched him directing an evening of poetry performance several years ago and was sure those poets would take flight if they could.

Amara Tabor Smith is a favorite of mine because we first met when she danced with Urban Bush Women's production of my play *Bones & Ash*, which was based on my vampire novel. Amara brings that same intelligence and strength I remember to her dancing with ZACCHO as well as to her teaching.

Another of my favorite companies is Sean Dorsey Dance. Sean is the country's first nationally recognized transgender choreographers and for good reason. His works explore the emotional and historical depths of what it means to be transgender in a phobic culture. The last piece I saw of his, *Boys In Trouble*, (way before the pandemic) captured the complexity of trans bodies, as well as the both frightening and humorous nature of masculinity. Sean has maintained an online dance season and plans to premiere new work in 2022!

Oakland-based AXIS Dance Company was created to redefine the relationship of the able-bodied and people with disabilities to dance. The first performance I saw, more than a decade ago, was filled with muscular and elegant choreography that made it impossible not to see the wholeness of each of the dancers and was a reminder that we are all temporarily able-bodied.

A hero for me has always been dancer/choreographer Krissy Keefer. Her company, The Dance Brigade, emerged from the feminist activist company The Wallflower Order and has a home at The Dance Mission Theatre where dance classes proliferate. Krissy's performances and choreography can be described as a fierce, sumptuous engagement with radical, social issues that won't let you sit in your seat. Her work reimagines the power of women's bodies and our influence on social problems. As Keith Hennessey (another revered Bay Area dancer/performer) said in an article: "In an alternative world, Keefer would already be awarded the MacArthur (genius) award."

Each of these veteran and genius performers faces down the challenges thrown at all of us with fluid, powerful movement that can delight and inspire. Buy tickets now to see them!

Can You Bring It: <https://www.d-mandocumentary.com/>

ZACCHO Dance Theatre: <http://www.zaccho.org/>

Sean Dorsey Dance: <https://seandorseydance.com>

AXIS Dance Company: <https://www.axisdance.org/>

The Dance Brigade: <https://dancemissiontheater.org/dance-brigade/>

Jewelle Gomez is a lesbian/feminist activist, novelist, poet, and playwright. She's written for "The Advocate," "Ms. Magazine," "Black Scholar," "The San Francisco Chronicle," "The New York Times," and "The Village Voice." Follow her on Instagram and Twitter @VampyreVamp

Published on July 29, 2021