

Doing Things Differently

Stories from innovation initiatives in the arts.



The Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts

Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company/Dance Theater Workshop



The Innovators

Founded in 1982, **Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company (BTJ)** is one of the country's leading single-choreographer dance companies, with a 25-week performance season, a busy national and international touring schedule, annual audiences of nearly 60,000, and an operating budget of \$3.4 million in fiscal year 2010. **Dance Theater Workshop (DTW)** was founded in 1965 to support the development and presentation of contemporary dance. DTW presents 100 performances annually by 45 different companies and artists at its facility on West 19th Street in New York City. Its annual budget is \$2.6 million.

Artists Anna Halprin and Anne Collod at Dance Theater Workshop. Photo by Yi Chun Wu.

The Innovation

BTJ and DTW are merging to create New York Live Arts (NYLA), a new choreographic institution based in DTW's space. An ambitious new model for a producing dance organization, NYLA will focus on the work of the Executive Artistic Director (Jones), as well as that of established, mid-career, emerging artists who are working on a project basis rather than pursuing a traditional "company" model. The new model will fulfill the missions of DTW and BTJ more strategically than either organization could have done alone. It will support a broad spectrum of artists, provide more substantial resources to artists than had been possible at DTW, and give choreographers the help they need to develop specific projects, including residencies, performance opportunities, touring, commissioning, licensing, and fiscal sponsorship.

Starting Conditions

According to Executive Directors Jean Davidson (BTJ) and Andrea Sholler (DTW), the idea of applying to the Innovation Lab was "floating around" in 2009 as both organizations were facing different, yet significant, challenges. BTJ had just been notified that it was not selected to be the cultural tenant for a site on 125th street in Harlem, a project that would have provided the Company with the rehearsal space it so desperately needed and would have allowed for the expansion of programs. Subsequently, BTJ forfeited \$13.5 million in public funding that had been earmarked for the 125th street project. Simultaneously, DTW was facing a complex financial crisis that was driven by a deficit budget, loans and debilitating debt service costs related to its building, and borrowing against the endowment. Thinking that there might be "something they could do for each other," the two leaders developed a proposal to the Lab to help their organizations explore the possibility of a strategic partnership. Although there were "inklings of possibilities," no one knew then exactly what such a partnership might mean.

Concurrently, DTW had been looking at a variety of different options to solve its immediate financial problems and long-term development issues including but not limited to, refinancing of its debt at a lower interest rate, mergers, strategic partnerships and the sale of the building. With the support of the Mertz Gilmore Foundation, DTW was able to hire a consultant to query DTW's funders and peers and test out a number of different scenarios. They agreed that finding a suitable merger partner would be the best avenue for the organization to pursue. In a serendipitous confluence of events, the findings were presented to DTW's Board on the same day that BTJ and DTW were accepted into the Innovation Lab. It would be an auspicious beginning.



Bill T. Jones and the company's Executive Director Jean Davidson.

The Lab

Transformative Moments

How did two organizations so obviously different on the surface – one driven by the artistic vision of a single iconic artist and the other a presenter dedicated to serving a broad artistic community – make such an unexpected leap? Not surprisingly, it was delicate and nuanced work that had to be taken one step at a time.

Working with Lab facilitator John McCann, the executive directors, artistic directors and two Board members from each organization met in August 2009 to discuss ideas for possible collaboration. It

was an important moment. DTW feared any partnership that might subsume its identity. Bill T. Jones – while he wanted the autonomy to do his own work – did not want the burden of "pulling along an organization to get it done." In this initial stage, McCann laid out a range of possibilities for creating a strategic alliance, from the simplest sharing of information to co-ownership of the building (with discrete organizations and programming), to collaborative programming, and even full-on merger. While Board members said that there was "nothing in the discussion that said they were going to merge," the two

organizations learned that they were aesthetically and spiritually similar – both placed the originating artist at the center of their missions, and both were deeply invested in the power of ideas as the basis for artistic work. With this tentative affirmation, they began to “dance” with the idea of a formal merger.

The second critical moment came when McCann suggested that before they went any further, the organizations should test their emerging ideas with artists who had a long affiliation with DTW. Approximately 15 artists, including Jones and DTW’s Artistic Director Carla Peterson, gathered in September 2009 at another Lab-facilitated meeting. At a time when the emotional opposition of core constituents could have silenced future conversations, the group found common ground. Peterson acknowledged that the mission of DTW had always been a moving target, depending on who was in charge, and she suggested that DTW’s actual practice was to keep its mission flexible and open to enrichment. At the same time, Jones made it clear that he did not want to run things, diminishing fears that DTW might be “lost in the aura” of his powerful personality. If the idea of a merger was not yet widely articulated, the group’s tentative affirmation was slowly turning to quiet commitment.

“At a time when the emotional opposition of core constituents could have silenced future conversations, the group found common ground.”

Despite aligning interests among the organizations’ artistic leaders, negotiations among other stakeholders proved more complex. As it came time for the Lab Intensive in October 2009, it was unclear to the two organizations how they could make effective use of an extensive retreat at what they perceived to be a delicate moment – and they were worried about creating divisions by “anointing” one particular group of stakeholders at the expense of others. The organizations asked if they could change the dates of the Intensive. Wishing to preserve the momentum of the project, EmcArts reiterated the need for teams from both organizations to participate in the Intensive retreat. Uncertain of where the conversations would lead, and feeling as if they were taking things out of sequence, the group made a concerted leap of faith and decided to attend the Intensive.

Whether the group leapt or was gently pushed, the Lab Intensive was a turning point for both DTW and BTJ. Knowing the progression of the discussion was less than perfect, the organizations agreed to an agenda for the Intensive that focused on governance and organizational structure for the new entity they hoped to create. It took sustained commitment by the Innovation Team at the Intensive – using an action-learning process that the facilitator and the participants designed as they went along – to create a broad framework and set of values against which later conversations about artistic direction could be structured. Once participants understood that McCann would not decide what they should do, they took charge and brought an earnest desire to use time wisely and produce breakthrough results.

Initially, DTW Board members hesitated, still wondering “whether there could really be a collaborative endeavor or whether it was Bill and his organization coming in to take over.” By the end of the Intensive, the group had bonded – not in an emotional sense, but in the intellectual realization that they were “capable of creating something really powerful for the field.” It was a validation of each organization’s core capabilities, assets and resources.

Three subsequent steps were important in moving the merger forward. Following the Intensive, McCann led a meeting of the attorneys on each Board to consider the proposed governance structure and expectations of Board members. In the end, the attorneys validated the structure and, with McCann’s encouragement, agreed to avoid rigid prescriptions that might jeopardize the process.

Soon after this meeting, Jones and Peterson began meeting to work on artistic plans. They determined quickly that their individual artistic objectives could be met by the merger and that there would be a significant and reinforcing role for both of them to play in the new organization. They further found that they shared common objectives with regard to developing future generations of dance-makers. Because Jones already has a body of work (and therefore a distinguished legacy), the idea of mentorship and targeted investments in artists became the primary animating motive in developing NYLA’s programmatic framework. Finally, with funds from the Lab, the organizations were able to hire fundraising counsel to develop a case statement and fundraising plan centered on the vision of the new institution.



The exterior of Dance Theater Workshop, located in New York City, and future home of New York Live Arts.

Shifts in Assumptions

Prior to their work together, participants questioned whether a producing and a presenting organization could find sufficient common ground to merge. They also were deeply skeptical that an organization driven by the artistic persona of a single artist could find a home within an organization dedicated to the advancement of many artists. Both organizations feared that their individual identities would be diminished by a merger. By constructing a process that gave the organizations complete control of the outcomes, the Innovation Lab helped participants discard these assumptions. Possibly the most important shift in assumptions was a realization by both organizations that merger was more about exploiting similarities, common interests and opportunities than it was about solving problems. That realization unleashed creative thinking throughout both organizations, changed the cultural conversation, and led to deeper engagement of all constituents. Instead of worrying about what each might lose, they began to see the merger as significantly additive.

New Pathways to Mission

How did these shifts in assumptions change the dynamic? As people listened to each other, they began to create a new value system that recognized and honored the core values of both organizations, yet remained flexible enough to address the many unknowns they were yet to encounter. As McCann recalls, the team knew that “if two plus two were to equal five, they needed to understand and embrace the core competencies of both organizations.”

New York Live Arts will indeed be different – with an ambitious mission to support dance artists and other creative artists through new and adaptive approaches to producing, presenting, education, and community engagement. The aims of NYLA are to foster research and development by creating a space for experimentation; to provide artists with access to strong strategic cross-disciplinary advice (artistic, financial and fundraising); and to bridge disciplines and markets, helping artists move into the broader market through NYLA’s vast national and international network of producers and presenters. The re-imagined organization acknowledges the increasing practice among choreographers to work on a project basis instead of forming companies that are incorporated as 501(c)(3) organizations.

Under the merger, BTJ will be acquired by DTW and the organization will be re-named to form the new entity. Adding to the value of DTW’s building, BTJ will commit a substantial investment of \$3 million, paying off DTW’s debt. Jones will become NYLA’s first Executive Artistic Director, and the company will rehearse there for 16 weeks annually and perform a season every two years. Jones will continue to create work for his company and will identify other choreographers to set work on the company as well.



Bill T. Jones' company in *Fondly Do We Hope...Fervently Do We Pray*. Photo credit: Paul Goode.



Obstacles and Enablers

The obstacles DTW and BTJ encountered in this process are not surprising: fear of losing control, resistance to change of any kind (especially from Board members and artists), an emotional connection to historic mission and identity, heavy reliance on familiar and conventional thinking, risk-avoidance, confusion about roles and responsibilities, and suspicion from external constituents, particularly New York City's "downtown" dance community. These obstacles were not overcome once and then put to rest; rather, they emerged repeatedly throughout the process and had to be re-addressed through the facilitation resources and reinforcing practices of the Lab, as well as the deliberate and sensitive management provided by executive and Board leaders. While the process moved inexorably forward, the path

was not always direct. It was characterized by nuance, patience, opportunities to revisit assumptions and expectations, and pauses to achieve consensus. That the work was done in the context of urgency kept people focused and determined.

Outside help was critical to the success BTJ and DTW had in the Lab. As facilitator, McCann pushed the meeting participants to address the "hard stuff" (such as deciding at the outset who would serve as the executive leader of New York Live Arts), serving as a witness to the discussions and then feeding back the content to enable participants to take the next step. In this way, the process became an investigation that produced shared knowledge and commitment. The result was a strategic approach to unveiling plans incrementally, creating milestones to measure progress, building engagement throughout the organizations

in every aspect of the merger plan, and allowing time for collaborative skills to develop. As critical as it was to have outside assistance, the organizations, too, brought a high degree of readiness to the table. What made them so ultimately compatible? At the most fundamental level, both organizations are artist-centered and have similar belief systems. They have complementary core competencies that, when combined, produce expanded capacity rather than duplication of services and activities. They also have open-minded executive leaders whose strong strategic thinking kept them focused on enabling their organizations to do what they do well and whose lack of ego allowed them to detach themselves personally from the process and kept them from "acting from a place of fear where ego becomes dangerous."

Image: Artist Rebecca Serrell at Dance Theater Workshop. Photo by Adelle Parrilla.

The Impact

Already there has been significant internal impact from the project as individuals from both organizations believe that together they can serve the entire dance community in powerful new ways. They continue to learn from the process. Both organizations have a more sophisticated understanding of their own (and each other's) core competencies, and realistic analysis of individual strengths and weaknesses has led to a reorganized structure that reflects NYLA's newfound ambition, strategic advantages, and artistic clarity. The human assets of the two organizations have been deployed effectively and creatively. Preliminary work on the governance structure has resulted in plans to increase required Board commitment and participation substantially. Artistic collaboration has created a focused program that is stronger than its individual parts, greater in reach than could have been achieved by each organization alone, and more results-oriented in serving artists along the career continuum. Working with the Nonprofit Finance Fund, the organizations developed a financial model for NYLA, including building in necessary replacement costs over the next 20 years. Now that the work with NFF is finished, the organizations are working on completing a financial pro forma that will guide its planning in the future. All constituents are working together to achieve a well-defined and common purpose, and there is renewed energy, confidence, and ambition for the future. The organizations signed a Memorandum of Understanding on June 15, 2010, further binding them to

work together to realize the vision that emerged during the Lab. With the Memorandum of Understanding signed, the merger has moved from a mere "intention" to a near fait accompli.

BTJ rapidly raised \$3 million in cash and pledges required to eliminate DTW's debt. The response from funders to the merger has been positive, and many appear ready to support the new organization once legal and financial requirements are met. According to published reports, the National Endowment for the Arts has announced a \$90,000 grant to support next year's presentation season.

There has been some initial skepticism within the dance community that has relied on DTW as an outlet for emerging work, but underlying fears that Jones – with his iconic persona – would take over DTW are disappearing.

In February 2011, the merger was completed and the new entity, New York Live Arts, was formed. In positioning the new organization, leaders have adopted the following tagline:

**New York Live Arts:
Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company and Dance Theater Workshop Reimagined**

If New York Live Arts is successful in achieving its aims, the American dance community will be enriched artistically, will have access to greater resources, and will increase visibility in the international community. The process already has produced substantial learning for the field about how to think strategically, how to find common interests amid apparent dissimilarities, and how to create leverage through partnerships.

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All artwork courtesy of Bill T. Jones Dance Company and Dance Theater Workshop.

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