

Imitation of Life: a Meditation on 'Victim Art'

Steven Dedalus Burch

"I have not seen Bill T. Jones's 'Still/Here' and have no plans to review it." So began Arlene Croce's article "Discussing the Undiscussable" in the December 1994 *New Yorker*. The acknowledged doyenne of dance criticism in New York City launched a full-scale attack on both the work of one of America's premiere postmodern choreographers and on a perceived trend that she felt was sweeping the art world: victim art, the subject of this paper.

As she argued in her article on Jones,

[he] presents people who are terminally ill and talk about it. I understand there is dancing going on during the talking, but of course no one goes to *Still/Here* for the dancing . . . People are asking whether Jones's type of theatre is not a new art form. Dying an art form? . . . If I understand . . . correctly, and I think I do . . . it is a kind of messianic traveling medicine show, designed to do some good for sufferers of fatal illnesses, both those in the cast and those thousands more who may be in the audience . . . to write about what one has not seen—becomes possible on strange occasions like *Still/Here*, from which one feels excluded by reason of its express intentions, which are unintelligible as theatre. I don't deny that [it] may be of value in some wholly other sphere of action, but it is as . . . dance theatre that I would approach it. And my approach has been cut off. By working dying people into his act, Jones is putting himself beyond the reach of criticism . . . among the distressingly many now representing themselves to the public not as artists but as victims and martyrs. (54)

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After decades of building up her reputation for reasoned, insightful criticism, both as dance critic for *The New Yorker* since 1974 and, more important, as founder (in 1965) and editor of *Ballet Review*, a “publication of exceptional intellectual standards” (Koepler 38), Croce’s impassioned diatribe stunned the New York art/dance/theatre world by her seeming to turn against it. At a time when threats from the religious and political right (in terms of federal patronage and censorship) were growing increasingly shrill, to have a long-time and articulate supporter turn dismissive and antagonistic was shocking.

In her next paragraph, Croce expounded further on her “victim” theme:

In theatre, one chooses what one will be. The cast members . . . the sick people whom Jones has signed up—have no choice other than to be sick . . . They are the prime exhibits of a director-choreographer who has crossed the line between theatre and reality—who thinks that victimhood in and of itself is sufficient to the creation of an art spectacle. (54)

Clearly feeling that Jones had crossed the line that separates art from non-art, Croce explained and defended her position: “[The] cultivation of victimhood by institutions devoted to the care of art is a menace to all art forms . . . I can’t review someone I feel sorry for . . .” Immediately after this defense, however, came this fairly revealing complaint:

In quite another category of undiscussability are those dancers I’m *forced* to feel sorry for because of the way they present themselves: as dissed blacks, abused women, or disenfranchised homosexuals—as performers, in short, who make out of victimhood victim art . . . There’s no doubt that the public likes to see victims, if only to patronize them with applause. (55)

The next section of Croce’s article dealt with a quick personal overview of the evolution of postmodern dance from the 1960s to a politicized, social utilitarian role and to its subsequent intimidation of all critics by being beyond criticism. For Croce, the ’60s were about redefining dance and in ways in which all the rules seemed to have been thrown out: “‘It’s art if I say it is,’ the Humpty-Dumpty war cry of the sixties, was a pathetic last-ditch attempt to confound the philistines, but now the philistines are likely to be the artists themselves” (58). But by the ’80s and ’90s, artists like Jones and photographer Robert Mapplethorpe “began making AIDS-focused pieces . . . parallel self-declared cases of pathology in art, [they] have effectively disarmed criticism. They’re not so much above art

as beyond it. The need for any further evaluation, formal or otherwise, has been discredited" (58).

Croce's article ignited a firestorm of criticism from both the political left and right. With additional, apparently injudicious comments about Jones' race and sexuality, Croce seemed to betray a personal animus of her own toward Jones that stirred up a passionate defense, and the common refrain of racist homophobia was leveled at Croce from Jones' vocal supporters. From her backers came the now common refrains about the evils of multiculturalism and political correctness, and for several weeks into the beginning of 1995, the arts pages of several periodicals (starting with *The New Yorker* itself, which solicited several opinions from both sides of the political spectrum) were filled with commentary and letters from an array of arts and criticism luminaries. Deborah Jowitz, dance critic of the *Village Voice*, argued, "It's ironic . . . that Croce, so firmly opposed to the politicization of art, chose to turn her own critical essay into a political statement by declining to see the work at hand" (67), while Hilton Kramer, editor of the *New Criterion*, applauded: "Arlene Croce's essay goes to the crux of the intellectual swindle that has consigned aesthetic standards in the arts to the sidelines" (12). Pulitzer-winning playwright Tony Kushner (*Angels in America*) leapt to Jones' defense by claiming, "Ms. Croce may have no truck with the 'righteous', but she's right at home with the Right" (11), as conservative critic Midge Decter fumed, "Honest critical response, and not in the field of art alone, has long since given way before the self-congratulatory camaraderie of jeering at ordinary decency" (12), and popular culture lecturer/author Camille Paglia aligned herself with Croce and her defenders by saying, "I totally agree with [her] that Victorian sentimentalization of disease and death has become a mawkish substitute for artistic vision" (13). Essayist Richard Goldstein found Croce's article especially hateful: "But she especially resents 'those dancers I'm forced to feel sorry for' . . . That this critic must be coerced into empathy may explain why her prose is threaded with racist and homophobic aperçus, mostly directed at Jones" (8). Theatre critic Robert Brustein attempted to find a middle ground: "But Ms. Croce's article is not about sides. It is an effort to rescue criticism from such simplistic thinking" (10). Three months later when Jones opened his dance piece in Chicago, *Tribune* critic Sid Smith summed up the controversy by calling it "East Coast baloney" (24). However, each of these respondents succeeded only in thrusting their own personal liberal/conservative agendas into the debate while ignoring the two issues of aesthetics that Croce actually broaches.

The first and lesser of these issues is, it seems, the effective role of the critic. Croce first mentioned this when she wrote: "When a victim artist finds his or her public, a perfect, mutually manipulative union is formed which no critic may put asunder" (55). She expanded on this: "It seemed to many that this kind

of dance had a built-in resistance to criticism—not to writing but to criticism . . . the practitioners of the new dance assumed that because they abjured formality of expression they were beyond criticism” (56). But the role of the critic becomes the role of Croce herself:

When I blasted an early work of [Jones'] with the phrase—'fever swamps,' he retaliated by using the phrase as the title of a piece . . . Jones' company became openly inflammatory . . . And it declared war on critics, the most vocal portion of the audience. Jones's message . . . was clear: No back talk! Anything you say not only will be held against you but may be converted into grist for further paranoid accusation. (58)

Finally, she wrote, “For me, Jones is undiscussable, as I've said, because he has taken sanctuary among the unwell. Victim art defies criticism not only because we feel sorry for the victim but because we are cowed by art . . . I do not remember a time when the critic has seemed more expendable than now” (60).

Throughout the article, the tone one hears repeatedly from Croce is her lamentation that she isn't taken seriously, that she seems to have no power to change what she likes or dislikes. She defines critics as “the most vocal audience,” though a non-critic might point out that critics are *vocal* only in their written reviews and those reviews are *vocal* only to those interested enough to read them. A non-critic might additionally point out that the actual attending audience who applauds and maybe even rises to their feet and cheers is, in fact, really the most vocal.

In a brief historical overview of the '60s and modern dance, after describing the breaking down of the formal rules of dance during that decade, Croce wrote: “There were critics who specialized in this art, or anti-art, but few of them went beyond description. They hardly ever wrote about conventional dancing, but then writing about conventional dancing is hard. It's easier to describe actions that can be 'danced' by you and me and require no formal evaluation” (56).

It's extremely difficult to read these comments and not hear a cry, be it petulant or deeply-felt, of resistance towards a perceived superfluity. The dance world has passed Ms. Croce by and she doesn't like what she sees. Throughout, she asserts the dominance of the “informed critic,” but no one appears to be listening. Worse, Bill T. Jones actually had the audacity to “diss” her in appropriating her phrase “fever swamps.” One imagines formal dance (which used to be respectful to critics) or even Croce herself as the James Cagney figure

in Raoul Walsh's film, *The Roaring Twenties*, stretched out dying on the steps of the cathedral (the altar of art?), ignored by the crowd, with only Gladys George to bemoan "He used to be somebody."

A critic does not form art, but formulates it, according to a set of criteria that may be the result of conventional thought or personal theory. A good critic adheres to that set of standards and it is by those standards that artists and audience may read and judge both the work and the criticism. Why something works or not, where the piece or form should move and how—answers to these questions are what we ask from critics. But as we read these critics and analyze their analyses, so may we dismiss them.

But it's the formal subject of this essay and primary subject of Croce's article, victim art, that needs to be examined. Personalities and politics aside, what is victim art and is it a legitimate form or not? As Croce has articulated it: "By working dying people into his act, Jones is putting himself beyond the reach of criticism . . . I can't review someone I feel sorry for" (54-55). In a major, though arguably wrong-headed rebuttal to Croce, novelist Joyce Carol Oates in the *New York Times* countered that "there is a long and honorable tradition of art that 'bears witness' to human suffering, but this is not 'victim art' . . . That a human being has been 'victimized' does not reduce his or her humanity but may in fact amplify it" (1). She goes further and asks "Why should authentic experience in art, render it 'beyond criticism'" (22)?

A good question, but not, I think, the question Croce is posing. Oates then continues on to give a litany of great art that has dealt with human suffering, from Dostoyevsky to Elie Weisel, Frederick Douglass and Anne Frank to Sylvia Plath, Egon Schiele, and Primo Levi, but none of this is remotely to the point of what I feel Croce is condemning, which is: the crossing of the line from representation to presentation on the stage. Jones' videotaped people are not playing nor dancing dying. They are actually dying. Croce's real question is: isn't art supposed to be about imitation?

Since Oates brings up Aristotle as a kind of club to swing at the anti-art bias described and embraced by Plato in *The Republic*, it's worth examining what Aristotle actually says about art. In the *Poetics*, he describes art as imitation, mimesis, and dancing is specifically mentioned as "[imitating] character, emotion, and action, by rhythmical movement"(32). While Aristotle went on to try and define the different modes of imitation, it is specifically his contention that it is imitation of reality that produces art.

Objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and of dead bodies. The

cause of this . . . is, that to learn gives the liveliest pleasure . . . the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, 'Ah, that is he.' . . . Imitation, then, is one instinct of our nature. (33-34)

Aristotle later on spells out the limitations of imitation. "The poet being an imitator, like a painter or *any other artist* [my emphasis], must of necessity imitate one of three objects—things as they were or are, things as they are said or thought to be, or things as they ought to be" (52).

When Oates lists "heart-rendingly powerful works of drama—Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* . . . Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother* . . . [and] recent dramatic works that use 'real' material [like] Anna Deveare Smith's one-woman documentary-performances *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight: Los Angeles*" (Oates 23), she misses the essential distinction that Croce (and Aristotle) make: they are all interpretations of reality, performed by others. Clearly James and Edna O'Neill are not spiraling into emotional disintegration before our eyes, nor are we listening to an actual rioter from Crown Heights. We are watching actors in each case and our knowledge that they are representing painful moments keeps us at a socially acceptable distance. Because these actors are not victims. They are merely pretending to be victims.

But frequently one finds that the lines can be blurred or even crossed. One very prime example is the 1946 William Wyler production of Robert Sherwood's *The Best Years of Our Lives*, a film which won multiple academy awards, including best picture, actor, supporting actor, script, direction; went on to be a major money-maker for its producer, Samuel Goldwyn; and influenced the tone and content of Hollywood films for several years (helping to usher in the socially conscious films of the late '40s and early '50s).

Its story follows the return to civilian life of three veterans from WWII and the difficulties each experiences in his readjustment to that life. One of the characters is a sailor, Homer Parrish, who is a double-amputee, having lost both arms in action. Rather than cast an actor to play the amputations with trick photography (as was accomplished in *Forrest Gump*) and by strapping back the actor's arms under his shirt (think of Van Johnson's "lost" leg in 1945's *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*), Wyler cast non-actor Harold Russell, an actual double-amputee. It was a risk. The audience could have rejected it. Russell could not have been up to the demands of the role. It could have been sentimentalized and the audience yanked into an unconscionable manipulation of its sympathies. But it wasn't. Through a tough-minded script and sensitive direction ("Mr. Sherwood and Mr. Wyler have achieved some of the most beautiful and inspiring

demonstrations of human fortitude that we have had in films,” wrote Bosley Crowther in his *New York Times* review), Russell gave an unsentimental performance (“incredibly fine” proclaimed Crowther) that holds up magnificently today, nearly fifty years later.

In the most heart-rending scene Russell takes off his shirt and prosthetic arms in front of his fiancée, Wilma, played by Cathy O’Donnell. It is a non-nonsense moment and the crux of the scene is Homer showing Wilma exactly what she would be getting as his wife. When the scene was shot, Russell ad-libbed a now-famous line and Wyler, who would normally never let any actor tamper with the text, kept it in. Putting on his pajama top, Russell/Parrish says “I’m lucky I got elbows. Some of the other guys weren’t so lucky.” Reality and imitation become truly meaningless in that moment and what emerges is a shared truth between performer and audience that is transcendent.

Undoubtedly, some might have been put off by the casting of Russell and some undoubtedly were, but Wyler and Russell worked not for some falsely sentimental manipulation to “blackmail” the audience into pity. They gave a deeper truth and without the audience being able to distance itself from pity by watching only an actor imitating a physical condition.

But a film, and it’s flat, two-dimensionality, cannot touch an audience emotionally like the theatre. For instance, in the theatre when an African-American, say James Earl Jones performing in August Wilson’s *Fences*, relates a racist incident in which he was the victim, the audience knows Jones clearly is not the character he’s playing. He’s not playing James Earl Jones but the fictional character Troy Maxson. The audience cannot forget that Jones has probably suffered something similar. That awareness possibly will affect both actor and audience, as it might any member of a minority portraying a victim of racism or social injustice. So the question becomes: is this art illegitimate because it is not strictly and obviously imitative?

Lacking the current hot-button subject of AIDS, would Ms. Croce have felt victimized were she reviewing the 1982 Broadway production of *Private Lives*? That production starred the famously, even notoriously, twice-divorced couple Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor. They played a divorced couple unable to keep away from each other (except maybe as a joke or an anecdote). And, lest anyone think this is a recent phenomenon, the late nineteenth century provided critics and audience members with opportunity to see the great vanquished Sioux leader Sitting Bull playing “the great vanquished Sioux leader, Sitting Bull” in Buffalo Bill’s *Wild West Show*. Indeed, what Aristotle would have made of all this becomes a good measure of the questions raised.

Aristotle wrote of the pleasure that “comes from pity and fear through imitation” (43). Does it follow automatically that he would have rejected the pity

and fear that comes through artful projection of a personal reality? I do not think so. Two vehicles, both for the stage, break away from the concept of imitation and, to me, fulfill Aristotle's definition of pity.

In Mark Medoff's 1980 award-winning play, *Children of a Lesser God*, we are given the story of a love-affair between a deaf woman and a hearing man. To solve the audience's problem of "listening" to two individuals communicating by signing, Medoff has the young man translate verbally as both he and the woman sign. Difficult questions arise: when Phyllis Frelich on stage (or Marlee Matlin on film) portrays the hearing-disabled protagonist, is the audience reacting to the character's plight or the actresses? Has sympathy been engaged honestly through the craft of the writer or has it been manipulated because a deaf woman is looked upon as a victim? How does a hearing audience react to National Theatre for the Deaf? Can actors' artistry be appreciated without them being represented as victims and martyrs? In his *Village Voice* review of the Broadway production, critic Michael Feingold was clearly uneasy about the lack of distance between imitation and reality:

Something else gives it novelty, though in a troubling way: Three of the performers, including Frelich, are wholly or partially deaf. When Phyllis Frelich describes deafness . . . as a 'silence full of sounds' and 'a space no one else can enter,' she is conveying her own reality, and no fiction. When Bach is played and John Rubenstein attempts to describe to her why music excites him, the impossibility of her understanding him is a real one that no art can palliate or explain. This makes the evening something other than a work of art . . . it is . . . more disturbing morally than a presentation with ordinary actors would be, an authenticity of a different kind. Insofar as a deaf person can be an actor, Frelich . . . is a first-rate one, and the pure dignity of her conduct in the play cannot be diminished by the many moral and aesthetic qualms her presence in it raises.
(73)

Thorny questions, perhaps, and Feingold was almost alone in voicing them. Perhaps *Children's* success (both as a play and later as a film with Ms. Matlin receiving an Academy Award for Best Actress) would suggest that audiences have not shared Feingold's "moral and aesthetic qualms."

For the second example, in 1978, the Wooster Group in New York City presented a multimedia piece by Spalding Gray and Elizabeth LeCompte titled *Rumstick Road*. It was intended as a coda to their *Rhode Island Trilog*y and it

dealt with the suicide of Gray's mother. Gray was one of the actors and he played himself. Further blurring the lines was the use of taped phone conversations between Gray and his mother's therapist after her suicide. "The doctor was clearly of no help to the mother, and as we listen to him, we see that he is being harmful to the son. He ends on a sickening note by suggesting that Mr. Gray may have inherited his mother's mental illness . . ." (Gussow 48).

This fact was made apparent within the show and it clearly upset members of the audience. Writing in the *Village Voice* a scant two weeks after his *Children of a Lesser God* review, Michael Feingold complained,

I'd like to register a vehement protest about the morality of using private documents and tapes in this kind of public performance. I don't mean the legal rights involved, but the ethics of one's dealings with the audience . . . Gray obviously thinks he's found a terrific way to rivet an audience's attention . . . I feel cheapened by having been made to participate in the violation of a stranger's privacy . . . to make a point of including dishonorable transactions like this in it is to brutalize the audience, implicating them in the artist's pain instead of offering them a share in its transcendence. (84)

It was a violation of the privacy of both the dead and the therapist. But the dead had already violated the sanctity of the family unit and Gray, as his mother's victim, felt free to use whatever materials he had to explore the devastation to himself and his family. Responding to Feingold in the following week's *Village Voice*, Gray argued, ". . . at the time we made *Rumstick*, we saw theatre as a place to make the personal public. O'Neill quoted his family in *Long Day's Journey Into Night* . . . We live in a brutal time that demands immediate expression. By using private words and documents, *Rumstick* employs the 'painful and exploitative' mode common to modern autobiography" (29). Along with the tapes, Gray used slides of his family's house in Rhode Island, snippets from Nelson Riddle's theme music to the early '60s television series *Route 66*, choreographed movement, nudity, collectively improvised drama, and a projection of his mother's face onto the face of Libby Howe, the actress who portrayed her.

Audiences were stunned by the overall performance and, by the evening's end, many left the theatre with a troubling sense of why that stranger had committed suicide and destroyed her family. The alleged "real" elements of Gray's life were of greater importance than the imitative. This was especially true for Libby Howe's 'dance', in which as the mother, she engaged in several

minutes of psychotically bending from the waist in whiplash-like movements, an action that increased the terror for the audience. The total effect was to use a combination of devices to bring the audience into the world of both the suicide and her son.

As Aristotle wrote in his *Rhetoric* in "Of Pity":

by setting the evil before our eyes, as either being on the eve of taking place, or as having happened, men make it appear to be close at hand. Likewise things which have just taken place, or quickly about to do so, have on this very account a greater tendency to excite pity. Also the indications and actions of persons; for instance, the garments of those who have suffered, and other things of that sort. And the expressions of those under suffering, for instance, of those *already in the act of dying* [my emphasis]. And especially is it a circumstance to move pity, that while in these crises the persons have borne themselves virtuously. For all these circumstances produce pity in a higher degree from its appearing *near*. . . .(61-62)

So the questions come roaring down at us: Is there such a thing as 'victim art'? Or is it merely a catch-phrase, a kind of mantra among the politically petulant who, tired after a quarter of a century of having to rethink their casual prejudices, want to lay back, stretch out their legs, and wallow in the glory of their formerly unconscious bigotry? Are there hucksters within the art community ready and willing to exploit those who suffer and to use that suffering to extort audience and patronage support? Probably and probably not. I certainly do not believe it exists to the extent that Ms. Croce would have us think. Her complaint, upon examination, seems to stem more from a political stance, an impatience with the themes and voices of the formerly unheard, and of not wanting to hear about and deal with the sufferings from those formerly silent, "dissed blacks, abused women, disenfranchised homosexuals." Whether this is a cry of conscience on Croce's part or merely the tirade of one for whom the parade's passed by, the sorry spectacle of the politically inflamed makes ignoble the shared art of the practitioners and the audience alike.

Afterword

Since this paper was completed, yet more words have been written about this controversy. In "Virtual Criticism and the Dance of Death" (*The Drama Review*, summer 1996), Marcia B. Siegel analyzes and criticizes Arlene Croce's stance against multicultural art, and vigorously repudiates Croce's critical values.

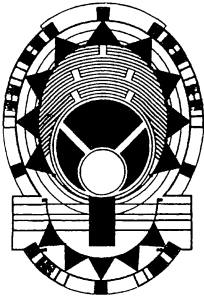
In the most recent *The Drama Review* (spring 1997), Joan Acocella rebuts Ms. Siegel point for point with fairly withering sarcasm. The debate obviously continues.

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