



SO, YOU THINK YOU CAN DANCE!
Conversations on Bill T. Jones, Tom Friedman, Dancing and Thinking
Sunday, November 29, 2009

Every week CUIP's president Jacqueline Salit and strategist/philosopher Fred Newman watch the political talk shows and discuss them. Here are excerpts from their dialogues compiled on Sunday, November 29, 2009 after watching selections from "The Charlie Rose Show," "Hardball with Chris Matthews" and "The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer."

Salit: Art and politics, political theater. We watched a Lehrer *NewsHour* piece on the dancer/choreographer Bill T. Jones and some of the history of his work and his company. He has a show currently on Broadway called *Fela!* I want to hear your thoughts about the interview and about the collaboration that you and he did a number of years ago called "Requiem for Communism." Bill describes himself as a political artist, an artist for whom idealism and the expression of a set of political ideals are central to who he is. When the interviewer asked 'Why are you interested in these kinds of themes and these kinds of stories,' Bill looked surprised and said, 'Well, as far as idealism is concerned, without it there's no reason to live.' He is interested in the challenge of how to create popular art that deals with important issues of the time, race and class being two of them. He's very committed to the idea that you can expand theater-going audiences with that kind of enterprise, with socially-conscious political art in a popular form. I know your work in the theater is about that in some respects. How do you think about creating theater that is popular and political?

Newman: I don't know that I work with that assumption. I think I work in the community, in the world. Theater is simply an element of that. I don't particularly consider myself someone who "works in the theater." Theatrical performance, poetry, music are most important, as I understand it, insofar as they are disconnected from the theater, but present in the world. And I think the theater, and whatever it is that I participate in the creation of, is in the world and not in the theater. So, I think that's a big difference between Bill and I.

Salit: Yes. Bill works in the theater.

Newman: Yes, and he's a great theater artist.

Salit: He talked about his interest in "tackling history through dance." Do you feel close to that?

Newman: Well, I don't want to overwork a theme here. But, I don't tackle history. History tackles me.

Salit: You let history tackle you. Actually, you encourage it to tackle you.

Newman: It's a little different.

Salit: So, you don't think of yourself as being "in the theater." Do you think of yourself as an artist?

Newman: Yes. Because I think of revolution as an art form. So, I do think of myself as an artist.

Salit: Part of Bill's vision as a political artist is that theater and dance can contribute to a certain social consciousness. How do you see that?

Newman: I think it's more the case that theater and dance and music of a certain kind, and Bill and I would agree on many of the features of it, are produced by history. History has certain moments when it produces certain kinds of art. For example, Bob Dylan didn't speak for the '60s, even though he was, in some ways, the voice of the sixties. He didn't speak for it, but he was certainly a product of it...

Salit: ...an expression of it.

Newman: Those are easily confused. Dylan tried to make plain that he wasn't a spokesperson for the sixties, for the politics of that decade. But, he was a product of the social, political and cultural turmoil of the decade.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: That's why I hesitated when you asked if I think of myself as an artist. I do, but the art that I'm creating is revolution. It's not just revolutionary. It's revolution.

Salit: What was it like working with Bill T. Jones on the piece "Requiem for Communism" that the two of you did together in 1993?

Newman: I wish I had known more about and felt closer to creating theater when I worked with him because I was very much an amateur, theatrically speaking. I was good, but still something of an amateur. It's silly to make comparisons, of course, but Bill was and indeed still is, an amateur at revolution. But, I thought there was a common ground of respect. I think he respected me and I'm certain that I respected him. And I think we still do.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: That gap, or difference, was a constant dynamic. So, what was it like to work with him? Well, we mainly worked with the dancer Amy Pivar and her collaborator Freda Rosen. In a way, they had a similar gap between them – between interest in art and interest in revolution. They mediated Bill's and my relationship in a way, which I think distorted it. I don't think Bill understood the concept of "Requiem for Communism," an

artistic expression of bidding political farewell to the old and birthing the new, but his dancing was utterly magnificent. I've seen him perform several times over the years, and his dancing for "Requiem" was as good as anything he ever did. Of course, he was cast to be V.I. Lenin and he had no idea who Lenin was. And I don't remember at any point him ever asking me about who Lenin was. Which is OK, but that's what I mean by the distance between us being greater than I would have liked. I would have liked to have talked to him about that.

Salit: I can see that.

Newman: But, he's a dance genius, so he did things in the way that geniuses do. He looked at a scene and choreographed it. I saw him teach an actor who performed in the piece, David Nackman, how to dance his part. Nackman wasn't a dancer. But after a half hour with Bill T. Jones, he became one. It was kind of mind-boggling. It was like boom, boom, boom and David was dancing. It was a pleasure. And in some ways, a treasure even more than a pleasure. It's a treasure to work with a genius in dance. And I think "Requiem for Communism" was a beautiful piece.

Salit: I saw it. It was. It was very layered – politically and aesthetically.

Newman: Well, there were complicated relationships in the production of it. Pivar was the dancer and she brought Bill to the project. But Bill really adored Freda. The dancers working with Pivar at the time, her troupe, were extraordinary. And Freda played a big role in helping them create that part of the performance. In some ways, it was their work that I most enjoyed. But I loved how mixed up and confused it was. I wasn't looking for and still don't look for coherency in creating theater.

Salit: I know that about you.

Newman: Ironically, given the subject matter, "Requiem for Communism" was an uneventful production. It really should have been more eventful, meaning it should have created more controversy in the dance world. But I was very happy to participate in it. As you said, Bill is a progressive artist who is trying to hold on to something. But you don't hold on to revolution. It holds on to you. Otherwise, it doesn't go anywhere. I think Bill is making a valiant struggle to hold onto a vision. I think he's one of the best dancers in the world. But, when you look at what he's doing, it looks almost outdated. I respect him for that because the "date" he holds on to is one that is very dear to me, namely the '60s. But, as I said, it's got to hold onto you.

Salit: We watched Charlie Rose interview Thomas Friedman, the columnist and author. Speaking of "Requiem for Communism," Friedman seemed fairly intent on making the case that China, because of what he calls a lack of creativity, is not going to own the 21st Century.

Newman: I don't think that was quite his point.

Salit: How would you characterize it?

Newman: I think he was saying that the United States was not going to automatically lose the 21st Century.

Salit: To China.

Newman: Right. He offered two standards: one, creativity and imagination. And the other, the capacity to realize that creativity by virtue of the structures in which the creativity is located. He gave the U.S. the big edge in the former, and China the edge, if not a big edge, in the latter. And he said that was because of the fact that China is a communist totalitarian state. It was kind of a classic backhanded compliment.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: I think Friedman is one of those intellectuals who comes up with fascinating ways of looking at things, but I never know how much anything he has to say about how to look at things, has to do with how to do things. It seems there's an infinite number of interesting and clever ways to see things.

Salit: There are.

Newman: But I don't know what any of it has to do with teaching people or helping people to understand how to do things.

Salit: I'm with you on that. Here's one example. The conclusion he reached about how America has gotten off track, is that American government isn't working. He points to California, calling it the first failed American state. And he ticks off things that are breaking down in the American political system: the extreme influence of money, gerrymandering where the legislators choose their voters before the voters choose their legislators, the influence of media and cable TV on public opinion, the role of the internet in spreading extremism, and the business community being, to use his term, "AWOL" in American public life. He believes that business is not playing a positive role in helping to resolve the country's major problems. And then he said that 'A great power that only achieves sub-optimal solutions,' which is his characterization of what we're doing, 'will not remain a great power.' Then Charlie says to him, 'How does this country fix this system?' A good question, I thought. Friedman says, 'Well some people say we need better leadership. I don't think this is the case, I think we need better citizens.'

Newman: From which it follows for me that he has no particular grasp of the notion of citizen leadership.

Salit: A good point, for starters.

Newman: Which is what, I take it, we mean by democracy.

Salit: Democracy. Exactly. Not a concern of Friedman's apparently. His argument is that the solutions to our problems are known. We just can't achieve them. And then he gives an example of the gasoline tax, the \$1 gasoline tax. You allocate it in such a way as to reduce the deficit, to pay for healthcare, to do this, to do that, all good, all good, all good. But we can't get there. Because a new gasoline tax is off the table.

Newman: Interesting plan. I have another one. Why don't we just eliminate the military? I think it will accomplish roughly the same thing.

Salit: Well, speaking of things that are off the table. That's not even on the planet.

Newman: Yes.

Salit: My reaction to him is somewhat conflicted, in this way. I think it's positive when intellectuals of Friedman's stature are saying things like *government isn't working* and pointing to various aspects of the political process that are dysfunctional. At the same time though, there are things to be said about what to do about that. There are people who are working on those issues. But, I feel that his argument is basically disingenuous. I don't know him. I don't know whether he's genuine or disingenuous. But, when I hear people talking about these issues, which on the one hand I'm glad to hear, I worry about how superficial the discussion is. If you're talking about aeronautical engineering, if you're talking about the Hadron Collider in Switzerland, you don't talk about the mechanics or how they operate in a superficial way, because it's a serious enterprise. To me, if you say *The government isn't working, the political process isn't working in America*, that seems to me to be fairly serious.

Newman: Yes and no. What's the term they use to describe the companies we bailed out?

Salit: Too Big to Fail.

Newman: Yes. Too Big to Fail. I presume the government falls into that category, too.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: Well, if that's true, then the system is not not working.

Salit: There's a logic to what you're saying, surely.

Newman: You see, what bothered me was Friedman's complaint about how the citizens aren't smart enough. But insofar as citizens aren't participating it's because they believe the system isn't working. So, presumably, if that's what Friedman himself thinks is happening, then that would make them pretty smart.

Salit: Another way people respond to the system not working is by becoming independent. And, there was a kind of interesting connection, an interesting relationship

between this part of what Friedman was talking about and the pollster Charlie Cook's discussion with Chris Matthews on *Hardball*. They were doing yet another analysis of the independent voter and Cook said 'Look, the independents really like Obama. They don't like the Democratic Party. Independents' support for Obama remains strong. What you're seeing now,' he says 'is the cleavage' and Matthews echoed this, 'between how independents feel about Obama – which is positive – and their feelings about the Democratic Party, which are at an all time low.' That's interesting to me, because that seems to be a statement connected to the idea that government isn't working. *We like this guy, we like the things that Obama has expressed and stands for, but we don't like this institution that he is connected to.*

Newman: But being connected to this institution is the only way that he could have been elected president.

Salit: Exactly.

Newman: They don't add that.

Salit: The people or the commentators?

Newman: The commentators don't add that.

Salit: True.

Newman: You have to articulate that entire thing to appreciate the full dilemma that the country is in right now.

Salit: What you just said hits the nail on the head as to what bothers me about Friedman. He doesn't fully articulate the dilemma that the country is in. It sounds like he's articulating it, and as you said, he has lots of creative formulations and metaphors and so forth that help you "understand." But he doesn't paint an accurate picture of the dilemma, he really doesn't.

Newman: Well, nobody wants to, because otherwise they'd have you on the show. But they don't want to have you on the show. And you're not going to be on the show until those "dumb citizens" force the issue. Then you'll get on the show. And that's fine with me.

Salit: That's fine with me, too. By the way, one other thing that Friedman said stayed with me. In discussing the relative strengths of the U.S. vs. China, he said China's problem is they're short on creativity but they're strong on implementation. Our problem is a huge amount of creativity, difficulty translating that into action. But in characterizing the American situation, he said something like 'Our problem is that John and Susie can't read, but Sammy, who has a nose ring, just invented a 100 new apps.' OK. But you almost want to say, *Can we go back to the fact that John and Susie can't read for a*

minute? I don't think we get to skip over that in this discussion of what's wrong with America.

Newman: Well, I agree with you completely. But there's something else he skipped over.

Salit: OK.

Newman: That whatever an app is, its function – in part – is to make it possible for people to navigate the world without learning how to read.

Salit: OK.

Newman: So, what do you do with that in this picture?

Salit: Well, maybe this is my version of what you were ascribing to Bill T. Jones earlier about being stuck in the past. Is it the case that people don't need to know how to read any more? Is the nature of communication and language and so forth changing in that way? People used to need to know how to milk a cow or ride a horse or plant a field to get along. And most people really don't need to know how to do those things anymore.

Newman: Right, that's my point.

Salit: Do you think reading is one of those things now?

Newman: No, I wouldn't say that. I think it's very difficult to say what we do need and what we don't need to further develop. But, I don't think you can just say we need "reading, writing and arithmetic" and get a pass on whether that's accurate or not. I think things are that much up in the air.

Salit: So that we don't know what is needed.

Newman: For example, education people talk about the importance of learning mathematics. So, let's agree that mathematics is important. But for whom? For how many people? How many people in this society need to know mathematics for the society to function effectively? That's not an uninteresting question. Does everybody need to know mathematics? Well, certainly they do to score the appropriate marks on tests so that politicians and policymakers can be happy that they have high enough scores. But how many people actually need to know math? They wouldn't even allow you to study that. It would be un-American to even allow that to be studied. But that's what you have to really look at – and much more – to have a sensible answer to the question, do we need to know math? Does that mean everybody needs to know math? Does that mean a lot of people need to know math? And, if so, what's your evidence of that? Very difficult question.

Salit: Maybe what every American school kid needs to know is how to speak Chinese, if the criteria is how you prepare a population for what the world is going to be like.

Newman: Don't forget that I studied Chinese for two quarters when I was at Stanford! But, I figure Friedman would probably say that the Chinese have a much better chance of teaching English to every single person in China, than we do of teaching Chinese to everybody in this country. And for all I know, that project is probably already underway there.

Salit: May well be. Thank you.