

Ishmael Houston-Jones

Discovering Gay Identity Through the Energy of Dance

'G'ayness is a fact of my existence, like being black," declares choreographer and dancer Ishmael Houston-Jones. Therefore, the existence of provocative social material in his performance work is hardly remarkable, since, he explains, "It all springs from my own biography."

At 34, Houston-Jones is gaining national and international recognition. He has performed in Germany, Holland and Canada, and has traveled as a visiting artist to Nicaragua. In the United States, he has received continuing fellowship support from the National Endowment for the Arts, and he was among the first round of artists to be honored with a New York Dance and Performance Award (a "Bessie") in 1984.

What audiences have come to expect from Houston-

Jones' engaged and energetic commitment is performance in which "the personal and the political meet." From his first original work in Philadelphia in 1976 and as part of the Two Men dance duo, he has imaginatively tackled various issues of gender role and gay identity. Two Men (with expanded forces) later performed in New York as part of the first Gay American Arts Festival. Recently, Houston-Jones returned to these themes with greater breadth and subtlety, creating the trenchant *Them*.

The choreographer's *Fissioning* (1983) juxtaposed homoerotic poetry with "patriotic" songs that ironically raised the specter of American racist involvement in Asia, while 1984's *Cowboys, Ladders & Dreams* (for which Houston-Jones and partner Fred Holland won their Bessie) explored the role of the black man in opening up the American West. With a zest for aesthetic risk, Houston-Jones is seeking "to ex-

pand the concept of what black or gay art is."

Houston-Jones' search for personal identity—his own place in the flow of history—has been evident throughout his work. In *Generation*, a meditation on family roots, we witnessed the artist's act of self-definition ("Call me Ishmael") and got to see him carry his own mother on stage and into the performance.

As a performer, Houston-Jones is strong and sensuous. His semi-improvisatory style calls upon a secure physical technique and a canny theatricality. In *Fissioning*, he dances naked, dressed only in black boots and a blindfold; the nudity is not sexual, but nonetheless shocks in its honesty and revelation. Yet in *Them* a sculptural trio of entanglement blossoms with male eroticism.

Now Houston-Jones is at work on *Adolf and Maria*, "tampering with historical characters" by suggesting a love affair between Hitler and German modern dance



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pioneer Mary Wigman. "What I'm really dealing with," he says, "is how artists can collaborate with the forces of evil. I myself am able to live and make my work largely due to government funding, and," he adds soberly, "it's something I worry about."

Adolph and Maria, which will be his first large group work, draws upon cabaret and minstrel conventions—"popular forms of theater that allowed for social protest." Art can be "popular in the accessible sense, but still have political bite," he believes. "Entertainment is a way of affecting people, too."

Houston-Jones acknowledges formative political and artistic influences from the era of student antiwar protests and gay liberation. Principles of guerilla street theater still serve for inspiration. "I've kept a lot of positive anger," he states simply. "I never made a decision to make socially conscious work. It's something that just evolved from my life." ■