

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT // PERFORMANCE

Rhodessa Jones is 'telling the truth and practicing revolution' at Brava

Lily Janiak

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Rhodessa Jones is seen at the African American Art & Culture Complex in S.F.

Photo: Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

Rhodessa Jones has two main ways of answering interview questions. One is to answer with a series of questions of her own. The other is to spool out a chain of stories and names from throughout her life, jumping across continents and social strata and decades, as if everything's happening right here and now. It's all connected, and it's all urgent.

That modus operandi makes sense for a theater artist, activist, author and teacher whose latest show title is itself a question: “When Did Your Hands Become a Weapon?” To hear Jones describe the premise of the piece, whose Brava Theater and Cultural Odyssey production runs Oct. 25-Nov. 4, is to follow along with a philosopher whose frame of reference keeps expanding.

The show, she says, asks, “What is domestic violence? What is homemade terrorism? What is it to be held prisoner in your own home? What is it to be stalked?” What are all these things “in a world culture where war is OK?” And how do we reckon with the damage they cause? “What is trauma in our lives? How does trauma manifest itself?”

“When Did Your Hands Become a Weapon?”: Created by Rhodessa Jones and the Medea Project. Oct. 25-Nov. 4. Free-\$25. Brava Theater, 2781 24th St., S.F. 415-641-7657. www.brava.org

Jones is creating the piece with her long-running Medea Project, which makes theater with, about and for incarcerated women and women with HIV. “When Did Your Hands Become a Weapon?” is part of the 40th anniversary season of the Medea Project’s parent organization, Cultural Odyssey, which Jones leads with Idris Ackamoor, the jazz musician, composer, producer and multidisciplinary theater artist.

Jones thinks of all her work as “telling the truth and practicing revolution.” Among many accomplishments in a decades-long career, she’s collaborated since 2007 with Dr. Edward Machtinger, director of the Women’s HIV Program and professor of medicine at UCSF, to help women living with the disease. Her method was even the subject of a peer-reviewed 2015 medical study, which attested to the psychological and social benefits of her work for women with the disease.

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HIV “is not the real life-threatening issue facing them,” Machtinger says. HIV “is a symptom of having had a lot of childhood and adult trauma.” Jones helps women come to terms with that trauma “by creating a sisterhood first and foremost that allowed women to feel safe and respected and able to share aspects of themselves that they had never been able to share before.” That lets them begin to address the trauma that “put them at risk in the first place.” Jones, Machtinger says, “is pioneering theater as medicine more than anybody I know.”

From 2006 to 2012, Jones and Ackamoor brought their work to South Africa, where they “were the first foreign artists allowed to go into the South African prisons,” Ackamoor says. In the past year alone, Jones has lectured at the University of Southern California, the University of Michigan, the University of Pittsburgh, Cornell and Dartmouth.

For this latest show, Jones cites a plethora of inspirations, but she dates the initial spark to the Medea Project’s three-month residency at Glide Memorial Church in 1998 for a project on domestic violence, resulting in the show “Requiem for a Dead Love.” Her group asked, “If you’ve been hit, how do you stop hitting? What is it like to be hit and try to navigate a world where you want to be different, but you know that to be hit has a lot of power behind it?”

For Jones, the tentacles of domestic violence reach wide and deep. In her eyes, women follow a “code of silence” at every layer of society, from gang members’ girlfriends to politicians’ wives. Her own childhood memories of domestic violence still replay vividly and weigh heavily. She grew up one of 12 children of East Coast migrant workers. (One of her siblings is the Tony-winning choreographer Bill T. Jones.) She remembers watching her eldest brother, Harris, who is now dead, force a girlfriend to “eat cigarettes” because she smoked against his wishes — abuse he made Jones complicit in by paying her a quarter each time she spied his brother’s girlfriend smoking and told him about it. She also remembers watching a sister threaten a gas company worker with a butcher knife when he came to turn off the heat at her upstate New York home in the dead of winter.

“That stayed with me my whole life,” Jones says. “Was that how I was traumatized, seeing that?”

“When Did Your Hands Become a Weapon?” will feature storytelling, dance and live music; Ackamoor will compose the show’s soundscape. Both words and movement come from prompts Jones gives at her weekly meetings with her Medea Project group (some of whom are ex-offenders) as well as to prisoners in San Francisco city jails. Prompts have included “Love don’t love nobody” and “Have you put yourself in harm’s way?”

Jones knows she has a “genius” for reaching prisoners accustomed to keeping their defenses up. She began working in city prisons in 1989 as an aerobics instructor. That wasn’t her area of expertise — she’s a dancer and performer — but it was the height of the Jane Fonda VHS tape era. She thought, “I don’t know what this has to do with saving women’s lives, but I’ll go in.” She wore her “best fantasy unitard and long, long braids.”

Jones soon scrapped the aerobics for games “that got really simple, like red light, green light; three-legged racing; Simon says.” The goal was “nudging the memory, helping them to remember when they

were girls, before things hurt, before life came. They loved that.”

“I learned early on that it had to be about us — not ‘What are you people going to do?’ but ‘What are we as women going to do, about our lives, about our children, about our situations?’ I think they appreciated that I didn’t separate them.”

Over the years, her pedagogy has sharpened. She now starts by asking women about their talents and personal philosophies, with questions like, “What is a parent?” She insists that the women fully articulate themselves in their own words — an “Oh, you know!” won’t suffice — and she makes sure to share her own truth. “You tell the truth about your existence, and it might save somebody else’s life, if they can tell you’re telling the truth about where you’ve been.”

That’s what Jones didn’t quite get when she first started working in prisons. “I wish that I had known earlier ways and means of getting to my own truth.” She still “did very well” working with incarcerated women even in those early days, “but I feel like there were people in jail that I lost. I had no patience.” She remembers wondering, of the prisoners, “Why can’t you get it together?”

What she really needed, she says, was “more technique around how to reach in and massage the soul of somebody.”

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