

# thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo courtesy of Jennifer Jones

## Blend In, Stand Out: The First African American Rockette Shares her Story

by Megan Mizanty

Imagine the 1988 Super Bowl. A sea of beveled legs and sequined bodices wait to perform in front of millions, and among the lineup stands a new Rockette: Jennifer Jones. The nineteen-year-old dancer didn't know it at the time, but her presence would be a domino effect of progress and reckoning in the entertainment industry, which she chronicles in her memoir *Becoming Spectacular: The Rhythm of Resilience from the First African American Rockette*.

After this famous performance, Jones reflects, "By that time, internal industry politics were still hidden to me...I didn't know how power was held or meted out." Instead, young Jones was focused on her technique-not the implications of her skin color. Like most early career dancers, her energy and enthusiasm was in loving dance, feeling alive onstage, and chasing the magical rush of performance.

*Becoming Spectacular* unfolds as a coming-of-age memoir, and Jones' writing style is unadorned, matter-of-fact, and sincere. Although the autobiography spins around her dance career, the writing-about-movement is accessible for readers outside the professional dance industry. Jones deftly balances between her career highlights, interweaving moments of formative personal memories along the way.

When you're a Rockette, perfection is normalized. Jennifer asserts, you're "only doing your job if you're attracting no attention." Jones, however, had no control over public reactions. The scrutiny was relentless, as well as the pressure to never error (this is closely outlined in the narrative, primarily coming from the reactions of backstage employees, producers, and more). With each microaggression and act of discrimination, her resolve solidified: "I didn't allow the negative opinions to discourage me...their attitudes only motivated me to push harder to prove my worth. This is one of the difficulties of being 'a first.' You are held to an almost impossible standard and have to work harder just to prove yourself." In these testimonials, it feels as though Jones is speaking directly to other young artists experiencing similar challenges.

How did Jones wade through these tribulations? She's part of an entrepreneurial family, no doubt where her work ethic and drive was cultivated. As a biracial woman, she was witness to the trials her parents endured in a 1960s interracial marriage. She relied on her friendship with other Rockettes, her trusted mentorship with Frank Hatchett of Broadway Dance Center, and, most importantly, herself. Following the divorce of her parents, Jones' turned inward: practice, pursue, persevere, perfect. Repeat. Jennifer would most likely not have become a Rockette if she heeded the advice of some judgemental producers and closed-minded industry professionals.

As her experiences dancing in New York stacked up, so did her maturity: she followed her gut, heeded her intuition (this gets her out of more than one dangerous situation on the city streets and alone in taxi cabs), and extracted herself from toxic relationships. Those messy "twentysomething" years are relatable for performers and non-performers alike.

Into her thirties, Jones's challenges off the stage evolve and deepen. Miscarriage. Postpartum depression. Divorce. After she has two children, her career takes on new meaning: she has two mouths to feed. As her marriage dissolves, her performance career needs to shift to support her family. This is heavy and resonant to read, as many dancers must change their priorities throughout life because of the caregiving demands. Jones' relentless peaks and valleys of her career feel relatable; so many artists can connect with the instability and joy clashing together. Living paycheck to paycheck. Worrying about health insurance. Starting 'back to nothing' after a contract ends. How can a Rockette *as well as* a Broadway performer, fresh off of *42nd Street* (which won a Tony for best revival), struggle to secure a stable job? Jones constantly reinvents herself to provide for her family and herself.

The memoir closes with Jones' hardest experience yet: cancer. All of her cultivated inner strength is put to work, and Jones shares about her chemo treatments, as well as horrific dismissal from medical professionals, with astonishing vulnerability and resolve.

A Rockette's imperative is to seamlessly blend in. Jones' prolific life has been a balancing act of being quietly extraordinary and standing out. The memoir, in its essence, serves the next generation of 'firsts'—whomever that first young artist may be. Jones offers a steady outpouring of advice and experiences to usher in a new era of resilient performers.

Jennifer Jones, [\*Becoming Spectacular: The Rhythm of Resilience from the first African American Rockette\*](#). Blackstone Publishing. February 2025.

Homepage Image Description: *Jennifer Jones, a middle-aged African American woman, smiles radiantly into the camera. Her arms are crossed, and she wears a white V-neck top.*

Article Page Image Description: *Jennifer Jones, a middle-aged African American woman stands, left hip jutting out. She wears a bright, bellowing yellow dress, and her curly gray hair frames her face.*

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