DURHAM — Jennifer Nugent and other dancers have to dive into their roles in Bill T. Jones’ 1989 “D-Man in the Waters.”

Instead of plunging into water, however, they land on the stage floor. ADF audiences will see them take the plunge then freestyle, backstroke and flutter-kick themselves across the stage when the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company performs today through Saturday at the Durham Performing Arts Center.

Jones will attend today’s opening.

This is the first of ADF director Charles Reinhart’s favorite dances from year’s past to be performed during this his last season — his 43rd — as festival director.

“I think it’s one of the greatest works ever choreographed,” Reinhart said earlier this spring. “It’s extraordinarily moving emotionally and extraordinarily exciting and interesting choreographically with an incredible message of despair and hope which is what life’s all about.”

This ADF-funded reconstruction marks the fourth time the company has performed the dance at the festival starting with the ADF premiere in 1989, then in 1991 and 1999. For the first time at ADF, the music for the dance — Felix Mendelssohn’s “Octet in E-Flat Major” — will be performed live by eight string players from The Durham Symphony.

Live music will also be performed for other dances on the program: Jones’ “Spent Time Out Yonder,” an excerpt from his

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Jennifer Nugent
Jones/Zane Dance Co.
2000 “You Walk?”, and “Continuous Replay,” Jones’ group dance based on Arnie Zane’s 1977 solo of the same name.

The 35-minute “D-Man requires great strength and fearlessness, Nugent said Tuesday. “It’s a pretty grueling piece stamina-wise. You don’t really stop,” Nugent said. “It gives a sense that there’s a never-ending sea of people.”

As they wait in the wings to begin the work, dancers must conquer their fear. “It’s a fearless moment. You just have to dive in. Get up. Fall back. Dive in again. You’re dead tired and still jump as high as you can,” the dancer said.

Dancers have learned to protect themselves as they appear to glide on their stomach across the stage. “For the belly slides, you definitely want to keep your shirt tucked in,” Nugent said.

Dancers only had eight to 10 days to learn the work. They had watched videos of the original cast as well as other casts. Jones told them about how he created the work during a time when friends and colleagues were dying from complications of AIDS. Jones’ partner in life and dance, Arnie Zane, had died from the disease in 1988. Jones named the dance after company member Demian Acquavella, whom he called D-Man, who helped design costumes for the dance but was too sick to perform in it.

During one performance of the world premiere, in March 1989 at the Joyce Theater in New York, Jones had carried Acquavella onstage, associate artistic director Janet Wong said Wednesday.

Jones told his current dancers of a dream he had that inspired the dance. In the dream, he saw a body of water and people in it trying to swim and survive — trying to get to the other shore, with some swimmers trying to help others, Wong said. The spirit of the dance embodies this urgency to survive but is also full of joy and hope, Wong added.

When Jones first saw the present company perform a run-through of the work during the company’s residency at Burt Col-