



# On Their TOES

JACQUES D'AMBOISE HAS BEEN TEACHING DANCE FREE OF CHARGE FOR HALF HIS LIFE. HE'S 80, SO DON'T EXPECT PLIES.

By Rebecca Milzoff

Jacques d'Amboise moved to New York in 1939, at age five. His mother—whom he describes as “a four-foot-nine French-Canadian peasant who didn’t finish elementary school”—said, “New York is where the arts are.” And so they stayed, even after Jacques’s father lost his job and they were evicted from their apartment, left on the street, and taken in by a convent in the West Village. Eventually Jacques’s father was hired as an elevator operator, “and immediately my mother found the nearest dance school” for Jacques and his sister. After a year his teacher told his mother, “Take your children to the School of American Ballet.”

So began the most storied career in modern ballet. D’Amboise joined the New

York City Ballet at 15, and George Balanchine choreographed for him more than any other dancer. Handsome, inquisitive, and animated, d’Amboise became the matinee idol of the ballet world, but a life spent tending the shrine of Balanchine didn’t interest him. Like his mother, he thought an arts education should be accessible to any child. So in 1976—before his dancing career had even ended—d’Amboise started the **National Dance Institute**, to teach dance free of charge in New York City’s public schools.

Today 6,000 kids in 42 of the city’s schools learn to dance thanks to NDI (which now has 11 branches throughout the country, plus one in Shanghai). The majority of them are low-income and identify as Hispanic or Latino, Asian, or

African-American. Like the teacher who noticed his talent early on, d’Amboise is ever on the lookout for future stars, and NDI offers especially promising and motivated kids from nine to 15 free advanced training through participation in the Celebration and SWAT (Scholarships for the Willing, Achieving and Talented) teams. From June 13 through 15, at NYU’s Skirball Center for the Performing Arts, 200 of those kids will dance their hearts out to a diverse selection of American roots music at the organization’s exuberant annual “Event of the Year.”

At 80, d’Amboise isn’t as spry as he once was (he has two artificial knees, and he detests exercise: “I’m lazy!”), but he still has the impish sparkle and intense focus that distinguished



**LEAP OF FAITH**  
Above: D’Amboise, star of the New York City Ballet, in 1963.  
Left: Rehearsing for a National Dance Institute gala.

him as a dancer. On a recent Saturday morning he hustled around NDI’s home, on West 147th Street, like a man half his age, darting in and out of rehearsals for an upcoming performance. To a former NDI student visiting with her daughter: “Are you still doing your pliés and tendus? It can be very meditative!” In a class of middle-schoolers he interrupts the teacher, stomping one black-sneakered foot; he feels the kids are losing energy in their feet. “Hey, guess what?” he shouts. “Lift your feet! I want to hear the sound of your feet.” The kids stomp with renewed vigor. “Beautiful!” d’Amboise exclaims.

He keeps much of his personal art collection in the NDI hallways—Rauschenbergs, Boteros, Fischls, Schnabels—because he remembers that when he was an SAB student the art outside the studios (from impresario Lincoln Kirstein’s own collection) inspired him to daydream.

The institute’s teaching method is pretty uniform, no matter a child’s ability. “You do a step 100 percent,” says d’Amboise, laying out his simple rules. “You can always get better. And you don’t hold back.” He adds, “It’s a performing art, so you must always be aware of the audience and your relationship to it.” As he well knows, a city kid who puts his mind to something can achieve the seemingly impossible—though the decision to do so may be the hardest idea to teach. “You jump in the air,” d’Amboise says. “You choose how you land.” «