

DANCE MAGAZINE RECOMMENDS

The Apollo Next Door

BY ALLAN ULRICH

Jacques d'Amboise: Portrait of a Great American Dancer

Produced by Allan Altman, Video Arts International DVD. \$34.95.

Seven Brides for Seven Brothers

Warner Brothers Two-DVD Special Edition. \$21.99.

Carousel (50th Anniversary Edition)

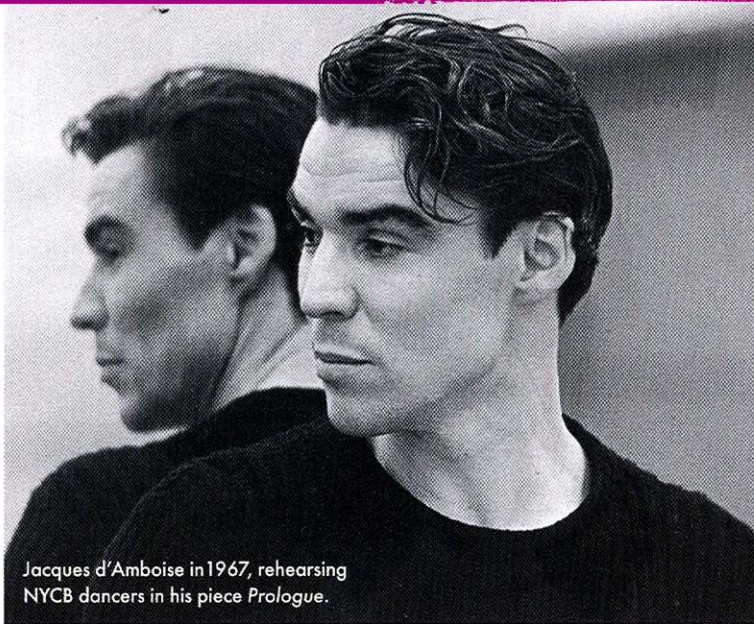
20th Century Fox; Two DVDs. \$26.98.

To understand Jacques d'Amboise's enduring appeal, go directly to the 50-minute interview with him in the incomparable VAI anthology. The enthusiasm with which the dancer recounts the genesis, zenith, and glorious postlude of his performing history is the same quality that attracted choreographers and thrilled audiences for almost four decades.

Those of us with long memories have never forgotten Massachusetts-born d'Amboise in his prime. My first experience was a New York City Ballet evening in 1958, in Balanchine's *Stars and Stripes*. What emerged from that performance wasn't the standard "Gosh, here's a red-blooded American guy-next-door type who has defied contemporary social norms by dancing ballet" impression (although it was all true).

What stayed with me was d'Amboise's matchless delight in moving on a stage. You felt he was put on earth for the sole purpose of giving himself and his audience pleasure through dancing. He could execute the most demanding Balanchine combination with a debonair freedom that banished all thought of exhibitionism. Born in 1934, d'Amboise was the first American male ballet superstar of the post-World War II era, and his career soared in that propitious period when television welcomed ballet dancers as genuine artist-entertainers, worthy of spending time in your living room.

The VAI release captures d'Amboise in the heady prime (1955–65) of his



Jacques d'Amboise in 1967, rehearsing NYCB dancers in his piece *Prologue*.

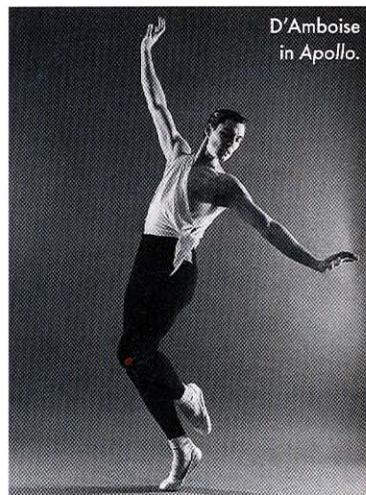
career in seven roles. From the *Bell Telephone Hour* archives come the Black Swan pas de deux with Lupe Serrano, the love duet from Todd Bolender's moody *Still Point*, a *Nutcracker* pas de deux, and an excerpt from *Stars and Stripes*, these with frequent partner Melissa Hayden. From 1954 comes a complete version of Lew Christensen's rarely seen 1930s classic *Filling Station* with d'Amboise ideally cast as the gas jockey, and appearances by Bolender, Janet Reed, Edward Bigelow, and Robert Barnett.

D'Amboise proves a buoyant classicist and a smooth partner in the 19th-century material and something more in the Balanchine. His sheer effervescence seems to exemplify what the choreographer so admired in the American spirit; he's also one of the few guys who actually looks good in Karinska's military costume for *Stars and Stripes*.

Yet, what makes this release a priceless addition to the library are the complete performances of Robbins' *Afternoon of a Faun* and Balanchine's *Apollo*. The best of NYCB in that seminal era has been preserved in these black-and-white kinescopes. Tanaquil Le Clercq, in all her radiant maturity, joins d'Amboise in the Robbins, shot, alas, through what looks like gauze. Still, the performers blaze their way through the murk. Both

dancers tread Robbins' narrow path between artistry and narcissism; the kiss d'Amboise plants on Le Clercq's cheek sends shivers through the viewer.

The *Apollo*, in which d'Amboise is complemented by Jillana (Calliope), Francia Russell (Polyhymnia), and Diana Adams (Terpsichore), is essential viewing. The performance offers the ballet before the choreographer eliminated both the birth episode and some of Stravinsky's most haunting music. D'Amboise's Apollo varies strikingly from the cool, Nordic impersonators that seem to prevail today. This young god startles



D'Amboise in *Apollo*.

with his groping for the balances, his unaffected boyishness, his sheer ebullience. Thus, when the summons to Olympus comes, the change in d'Amboise's expression and musculature, so dramatic in this performance, underlines the moral scheme of the ballet as do few other interpretations.

As d'Amboise relates, it was after a NYCB revival of *Filling Station* that the movies came calling. The dancer was only 19 when he traveled to Hollywood to make *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*. Released in 1954, the film, directed by Stanley Donen and choreographed by Michael Kidd, was allotted a skimpy budget (check out the painted flats) and almost thrown away by the studio, but this frontier musical comedy proved an uncommon hit with the public.

The 50th anniversary reissue offers a fascinating documentary featuring d'Amboise, Kidd, and others. Fresh from Broadway, the undersung Kidd was determined that his choreography would emerge from character, and so it does. Highlights include the barn-building scene, where Kidd blurs the distinction between acrobatics and choreography with dazzling results, and the "Lonesome Polecat" number.

When it came time in 1956 to film Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Carousel*, 20th Century Fox enlisted Rod Alexander to create choreography that was inferior to Agnes de Mille's original. Her contribution remains only in Louise's dream ballet, where d'Amboise dances with both compassion and flair.

Any complete survey of d'Amboise on film should conclude with Emile Ardolino's 1983 documentary, *He Makes Me Feel Like Dancin'*. This stirring account of the artist's work with the National Dance Institute, which he founded in 1976 to instill in school children the pleasure that dancing affords, is probably the greatest Act III of any dancer's career. Unfortunately, the Oscar-winning film is not yet available on DVD. One can only hope.

Allan Ulrich is a Dance Magazine Senior Advising Editor.