



lifetime achievement award

# JACQUES D'AMBOISE

*From scrappy youth to Balanchine prodigy  
to founder of the National Dance Institute*

PHOTOS BY MATTHEW MURPHY

**IN THE DANCE WORLD,** Jacques d'Amboise is a living legend. He was a tough street kid who rose to the rank of New York City Ballet principal as George Balanchine's protégé, choreographed several ballets for the company and wrote and directed for film and television. He has authored several books on dance and remains a leader in dance outreach and education.

During his performance career, d'Amboise originated more Balanchine roles than any other dancer. Among them are some of Mr. B's most iconic and classically American ballets: *Who Cares?*, *Jewels*, *Stars and Stripes* and *Raymonda Variations*. D'Amboise was perhaps most celebrated for the title role of *Apollo* (though he did not help create the part), captivating audiences with his energy, handsome features and unmistakably cool and commanding presence. Ironically, Balanchine summarized the theme of this ballet as: "A wild, untamed youth learns nobility through art."

D'Amboise's foray into teaching began in the late '60s, while he was still dancing professionally. His first class gathered on Saturdays at the School of American Ballet and was made up of a group of young boys, including d'Amboise's two sons.

At age 50, nearly 35 years after joining NYCB, d'Amboise left the company to fully invest himself in dance education. In 1976, he established the

National Dance Institute with the goal of providing children, regardless of financial status or background, the opportunity to experience the arts. Today, NDI's free programming annually reaches over 40,000 New York City public school students and provides additional after-school programming, teacher training (with a codified method of pedagogy) and national residencies. NDI currently operates 12 schools and will open another in Shanghai in September.

"What keeps him going is his incredible thirst to continue learning," says NDI artistic director Ellen Weinstein, who first met d'Amboise while studying at SUNY Purchase, where he was dean of the dance department. "It's genuine and real. And you feel it. You're inspired. And that's the lesson for the kids—to believe in something 100 percent and share that with others."

D'Amboise's sense of humanity and agelessness has allowed many to find inspiration through his work. "He believes that every moment is the most important moment," says Weinstein. "And he sees the possibilities of excellence in everyone he meets."

His latest endeavor, the memoir *I Was a Dancer,*

recounts his incredible life in a manner every bit as lively as the man himself.

With a Kennedy Center Honor, a National Medal of Arts, a MacArthur fellowship and multiple honorary degrees and doctorates to his name already, *DT* honors the contributions of d'Amboise with another accolade—the 2011 *Dance Teacher* Lifetime Achievement Award.

—Kristin Schwab



D'Amboise in Balanchine's *Stars and Stripes*

Photo by Martha Swepe, ©New York Public Library for the Performing Arts



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Jacques d'Amboise  
hugging Ellen Weinstein  
and surrounded by NDI  
teachers



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# Q&A

Jacques d'Amboise talks with *Dance Teacher* contributing editor Kate Lydon about teaching dance in public schools, his boundless energy and what Mr. B thought about NDI.

### Why do you think it's important for everyone to have the opportunity to learn to dance?

You go to school to learn. How can you consider yourself learned if you don't know anything about music, dance, theater and poetry or science and mathematics? The best way to learn about anything is to do it. Does that mean, if you take math and do science experiments in a lab, that you have to grow up to be a scientist or a physicist? No! You take math because it's important in your learning. Why aren't music, dance, poetry and theater part of the learning process in our school systems? And treated equally to other subjects? My belief is that you are not a learned person without knowing these aspects that describe what makes us human.

### Do you have tricks for getting uninterested students involved and listening?

All learning is best done in the form of play. When there's an individual attempting to acquire the mastery of a skill and the teacher can turn the learning into a form of play that has to do with challenges, it works. The student has to achieve a higher level of excellence to play the game.

I'll give you an example: The mother says to her 10-year-old daughter, "Hey, it's your turn to put out the garbage." The little girl says, "Ah, Mom, I'm so tired! I've been playing all day. I don't want to put out the garbage." A child will play until she drops, if it's a game, so mother says, "What if you put out the garbage walking backwards and singing 'The Star Spangled Banner.' I bet you can do it, but if you can't do it, then your brother gets to try after you." Well the brother, who has been smirking about his sister having to put out the garbage, now wants to do it, and the

girl can't wait to get up, walk backwards and sing as she takes the garbage out. Everything is learned by meeting challenges that are joyful. When doing something to pass a test with fear as the reason, you cram, you pass it, maybe, and you forget it as soon as you can. You hate the subject. But what if learning was joyful and exciting and passing tests was only part of this big game of discovering pathways toward excellence? That's what NDI strives to do.

### What about working with kids who are having lots of trouble with the material?

Work to make sure that person is brought out of being the loser or the failure. He or she will be your most important success. Other students will look back and think: My teacher was strict, but he/she never gave up. Maybe one day I'll be the loser and my teacher won't give up on me.

### You have always had this infectious energy. How important is that to you?

In science, the arts, on and offstage: If you make the formula for life, the first fluid you put into the beaker is energy. Without energy nothing happens.

### What did Mr. Balanchine think about NDI?

Balanchine used to come to all the NDI performances. We would finish doing a big show and I would go to the cast party. Seven o'clock the next morning my phone would ring. "It's Balanchine," he would say. "Last night. Wonderful. Very important. Children learn about music and dance. The real thing. A performance with audience looking and they either applaud or boo." The last show he came to, when he was dying, he had written me a song. Oh, it's so beautiful. It's in my book. I had commissioned it and given him a \$500 check, and he tore it up. And by the way, that song describes him. He was like light.

*Kate Lydon teaches for American Ballet Theatre's Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School and is editor in chief of Dance Spirit.*



Above: D'Amboise and Weinstein inspire a group of public school children in a National Dance Institute class.



# ALWAYS A DANCER

A former ballerina gets to know her childhood idol.

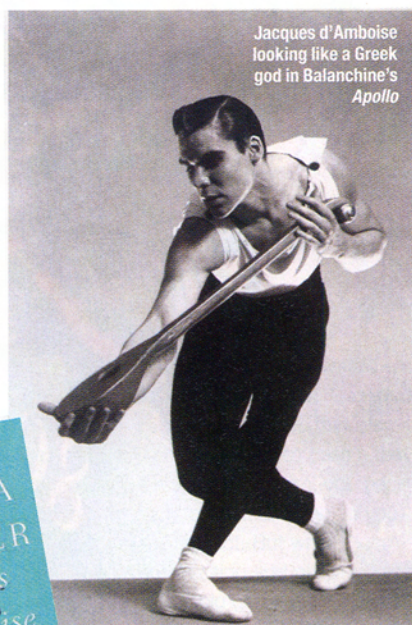
BY YONA ZELDIS  
MCDONOUGH

Back before that velvet-lined, aristocratic name, Jacques d'Amboise—born Joseph Jacques Ahearn—was a rough-and-tumble Irish-American kid growing up in Washington Heights. But his mother, a pint-sized French-Canadian force of nature, had loftier visions. She changed the family name to d'Amboise—her maiden name—and bartered her chestnut-stuffed chicken in exchange for her children's music lessons. Ballet classes were part of her plan, and she brought 7-year-old Jacques to a local ballet mistress. He showed aptitude, and within a year he was hopping on the subway to take his place at the barre of the School of American Ballet, the feeder school for the fledgling New York City Ballet.

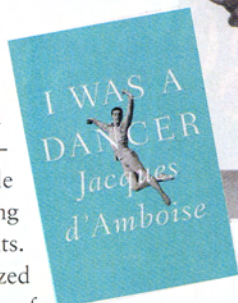
D'Amboise was a quick study. At 9, he caught Balanchine's eye and was given the part of Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; his mother made his costume. He was a company member by 15, and by 17, he had dropped out of high school to become a principal.

For the next 30 years, he held audiences in thrall with his explosive, athletic style. Yet d'Amboise was a gentleman, possessing a courtly, even reverent attitude toward his partners; he gave a little piece of his heart to each of them.

My first exposure to d'Amboise came in the 1970s. I was part of the army of ballet girls, all bony shoulders, tight buns and heavy bags, who paraded along Broadway, Seventh and Eighth Avenues, where so many of the city's studios were located. My studio was on West 56th Street, and after class, my friends and I would head to City Center



Jacques d'Amboise looking like a Greek god in Balanchine's *Apollo*



“A veritable cornucopia of balletic genius spilled out before us... d'Amboise stirred me.”

or Lincoln Center, where cheap student-rush tickets were available.

A veritable cornucopia of balletic genius spilled out before us. Although I usually reserved my worship for the female dancers, something about d'Amboise stirred me. I found him scintillating in *Jewels* and buoyant in *Stars and Stripes*. When I learned he had made movies in the 1950s, I hunted for showings at revival houses and watched him ignite the screen as Ephraim in *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* and as the Starlight Carnival Barker in *Carousel*.

But it wasn't until decades later that I actually met d'Amboise. Although retired from professional dancing, he was in the midst of a spectacular second act, as founder and chief ambassador for the National Dance Institute.

I was nervous about meeting my girlhood idol. But as soon as I walked through the door of his townhouse on 71st Street in Manhattan, I was instantly at ease. Jacques—as he insisted I call him—was all smiles, urging me to sit down, offering to take my coat, fetch

me water, wine or a steaming bowl of his homemade soup. I was there to interview him for a magazine, and I discovered that the fire he exuded onstage and on-screen was every bit as bright in person. He introduced me to two of his four children—Charlotte and Christopher, both dancers themselves—and to his wife, Carolyn George. They had been partners on Balanchine's stage, fallen in love and married. But when the children came—four in all—she retired and became a photographer; it was Carolyn who took the photos to accompany the piece I wrote.

Fast forward to 2010, when I was assigned to interview him on the occasion of the publication of his memoir, *I Was a Dancer*. To my amazement, he remembered our earlier meeting, and we easily fell to talking if not like old friends, then certainly like very friendly acquaintances. He shared not only details from the book, but also things he had left out, like his wife's death two years earlier. He spoke movingly about his years with Balanchine, Lincoln Kirstein and Jerome Robbins; he waxed poetic, literally; he recited lines of Persian poetry—when discussing his wife, or the ballerinas with whom he had danced.

As the conversation wound down, d'Amboise began telling me about a snippet of ballet history that linked ballet movements to those drawn from fencing, and he grew animated as he described their connection. And then, compelled by his excitement, this 76-year-old man rose from the table, where his café au lait sat cooling, and began to demonstrate—that is, to dance. Although dressed unassumingly in a zip-front sweater, slacks and sneakers, everything about him was elegant, confident and poised.

It struck me then that the title *I Was a Dancer* was not accurate. What that moment revealed to me, and to the other astonished, delighted witnesses to his impromptu performance, was that this man *is* a dancer—and as long as he draws breath, he will remain one.

*Yona Zeldis McDonough is the author of three novels, including The Four Temperaments.*