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JACQUES D'AMBOISE, PREEMINENT DANCER AND FOUNDER, NATIONAL DANCE INSTITUTE



By LISA K. WINKLER

“I don't have to do anything but enjoy,” National Dance Institute (NDI) founder and ballet dancer Jacques d'Amboise says.

But d'Amboise has done plenty.

NDI, now in its 33rd year, reaches thousands of children around the world through free in-school dance programs. Teacher training workshops serve educators and artists, and scholarships allow advanced students to continue their studies. And for d'Amboise, still spry at 75, this isn't enough. He plans to harness modern technology—Internet, ipods, iphones, and the like—to expand global communication with children, creating dance steps and sounds. “NDI can be the forefront of children using music, dance, and poetry to transform lives,” d'Amboise said in an interview with *Education Update*.

Despite two knee replacements, he demonstrated a dance step on the sidewalk, describing a pilot program that uses interactive video to ask, “What's the Next Step?” Viewers would see a dance step and then add their own.

d'Amboise founded NDI to “pay back. Everything had been given to me; I never paid for a lesson.” First, he wanted his own children (two boys, two girls) to be exposed to dance and offered classes in their schools. The program expanded into a non-profit organization to bring dance to schoolchildren who may never otherwise encounter it. For d'Amboise, who never finished high school, education through the arts can be transformative.

His French-Canadian mother, who worked in a Maine shoe factory, insisted her four children learn dance, speak French, recite poetry, and read literature. “We read. I had to read what my brothers read; they had to read what my sister read. Just like you pass clothes on, we all had to read each others' books,” he said.

NDI teachers invite students to enter a “contract” before they begin. d'Amboise said they

tell students, “You're going to learn how to dance, and it's going to be hard, but we'll be the best teachers you'll ever have.” He explained the contract's rules: no chewing gum—it interferes with breathing; no bad language, and no hitting or pushing. Dance is the world of good manners, not street stuff. “We care about the people we dance with.”

And d'Amboise should know. Growing up in the Depression, his father, an Irish Bostonian, moved the family to New York and held many jobs. One day, waiting outside his sister's dance class to avoid street gangs, he was invited in. Within a year, the teacher told his mother to take him, then 8, to see George Balanchine, which launched his career. From his first performance as Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (his mother sewed his costume), for which he earned \$10, he went on to join the New York City Ballet at 15, made his European debut at London's Convent Garden, and, as Balanchine's protégé, had more works choreographed for him than for any other dancer.

d'Amboise has choreographed dances for ballet, written and directed for theater, film and television, performed on Broadway, appeared in films, including, *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* and *Carousel*, received countless awards and honorary degrees, and served as a visiting professor at several universities. He is now writing his memoir—diaries from 1962 line a bookshelf in his office and piles of photographs sit on his desk, waiting to be organized.

Each year, NDI selects a curricular theme that inspires the lessons in its partner schools, culminating with performances in June. This year's theme is “John Lennon: His Life and Legacy”. Schoolchildren have been incorporating Lennon's music and poetry into dance. Yoko Ono, Lennon's widow, in a video produced for the event, says, “Imagine all people dancing in peace.” For d'Amboise, whose dancing has taken him all over the world, there's no better legacy.#

National Dance Institute (NDI) Gala



*"God only knows
four words:
come dance
with me!"*

—JACQUES D'AMBOISE



Yoko shared the following words upon being honored at the National Dance Institute Gala:

I think I am given this honor as an encouragement to continue spreading our love of dance to all corners of the world. Dance is a way of life. Every step you take gives us the pride that we made that step and adding a sense of fun to life. Imagine people, regardless of their race, religion and age, forgetting their differences and dancing all together. Imagine children of the world, East and West, North and South all learning to dance through life. And imagine all the people dancing in peace.

Yes, it makes me smile just thinking about it.

Let's keep dancing.

I love you.#

National Dance Institute transforms the lives of over 35,000 New York City public school children and their families each year.



Dr. Margaret Cuomo Maier, Chairperson, NDI

