

Apollo and the Master

Jacques d'Amboise recalls his decades with City Ballet — and Balanchine — as a tale of personal transformation.

BY ALASTAIR MACAULAY

SINCE Jacques d'Amboise was among the most distinguished American male dancers of his day — his prime was probably 1952-74 — it is startling to read, in his memoirs, of his part in a stabbing. He had been a student at the School of American Ballet for several years when in the summer of 1949, heading home through Washington Heights in Manhat-

I WAS A DANCER

A Memoir.

By Jacques d'Amboise.

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tan, he found himself in a clash with a local bully, who produced a switchblade. "Without even thinking, I did a grand battement — a big kick — knocking his hand and sending the knife flying," d'Amboise writes in "I Was a Dancer." "The force of my kick spun me around on the ball of my foot 360 degrees. I arrived with both feet under me in plié, leaped in the air, and jumped so high my feet kicked down on top of his shoulders, smashing him to the ground." Then d'Amboise, infected by "the virus of the bully," pinned down his opponent, "stabbed him in the buttocks, tearing through his jeans, piercing the skin and drawing blood."

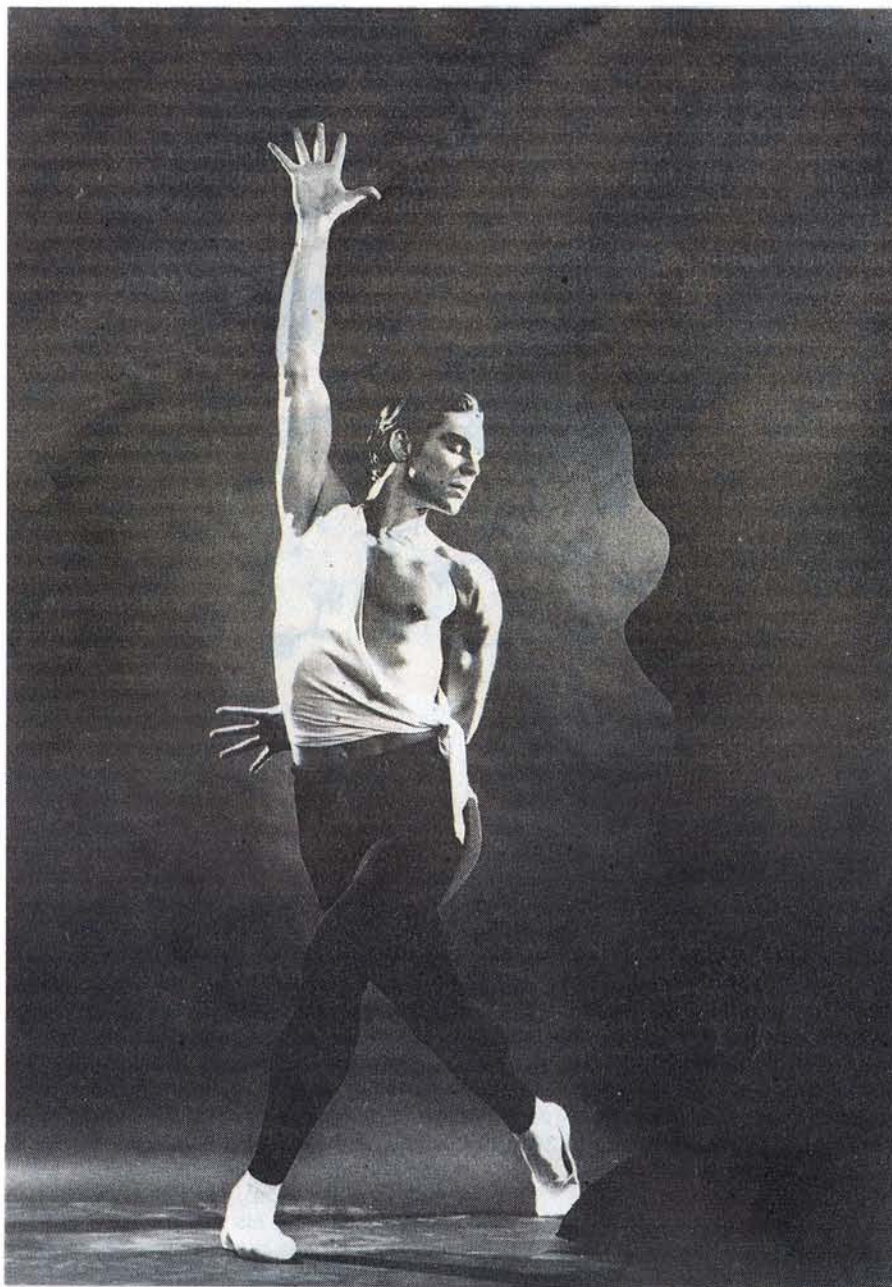
What followed, "like a bucket of water," was "a wash of shame." Within months, d'Amboise — age 15 — left high school to join New York City Ballet at the invitation of George Balanchine. And "before I was through my teens," he reflects, "I had been introduced and exposed to artists who would, in later years, become legendary."

Balanchine is foremost among the artists remembered in this memoir, but d'Amboise also mentions Frederick Ashton, Antony Tudor, Jerome Robbins, Michael Kidd, Lew Christensen, Merce Cunningham, John Cranko, Martha Graham. "They were my mentors, teachers and choreographers," he writes (though it's never clear how Graham worked with him). "Often, Stravinsky, Gould and Bernstein would be in the orchestra pit conducting or at the piano playing." The audience included Alfred Kinsey, Anna Freud, William Faulkner, Salvador Dalí, W.H. Auden and Franchot Tone.

So this is a tale of personal transformation, and of a young man recognizing himself in a great role. In 1957, Balanchine cast d'Amboise in the title role of his and Stravinsky's "Apollo." D'Amboise notes how the choreographer had already summed up this ballet in a sentence: "A wild, untamed youth learns nobility through art."

D'Amboise was the foremost inter-

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preter of Apollo in an illustrious era of New York City Ballet. It's too bad that few Americans have seen the 1966 Hamburg television recording in which he and Suzanne Farrell dance while Stravinsky himself conducts. Even though it's filmed in exceptionally cramped conditions, it remains the most galvanized performance of this classic I have ever seen: music and dance seem to meet as if for the first time.

D'Amboise stayed with City Ballet for almost 35 years, leaving a few months before his 50th birthday, in 1984. But before that departure, he'd reinvested his verve into his National Dance Institute, through which he worked and still works with children. In an affecting passage late in the book, d'Amboise takes three paragraphs to describe what was involved in assisting a boy who, unable to get from his right foot to his left on the music, became

terrified and unable to move at all. "I put my arm around him and said, 'Let's do it together. We'll do it, moving forward, in slow motion.' We did. Then I said, 'Now do it alone, and fast.' With his face twisted in concentration, he slammed his left foot down, directly in front of him, smack on the musical note. The whole class applauded. He was so excited. He was on the way to discovering he could take control of his body, and from that he can learn to take control of his life."

"I Was a Dancer" is highly engaging, with many passages of particular import for Balanchine devotees. To anyone acquainted with d'Amboise's career, however, it will feel as if central portions are missing from his account. Instead of fully covering the years 1962-82, he writes two chapters, "Balanchine's Muses" and "Lincoln," about Lincoln Kirstein. Grant-

ed, these are important — what he says about Balanchine's relationships with his ballerinas is acute and revealing, and what he says about the manic-depressive Kirstein, the co-founder of City Ballet, is generous, compassionate and, occasionally, shocking. (Among the book's other revelations, d'Amboise recounts a late-1970s incident in which Kirstein, in bad condition, approached Balanchine and bellowed, "You're fired!" This doesn't stop d'Amboise loving this "wounded giant" the more of the two.)

BUT there's nothing on the making of several major Balanchine ballets. Why nothing on "Who Cares?" (1970), one of the ultimate demonstrations that classical ballet had become American? Here, to Gershwin music, Balanchine — for whom Fred Astaire was the greatest dancer of the 20th century — gave the all-American d'Amboise a role that, without any break in style, both invoked the casual elegance of Astaire and quoted the newly minted classicism of "Apollo." By passing over it, does d'Amboise mean it was a period piece that now, without the original Balanchine style, has passed its sell-by date? He hints as much but refrains from saying so outright, instead spelling out his reservations about the way Balanchine is performed today.

In the chapters concentrating on Balanchine's last years and his death, in 1983, d'Amboise offers a chronologically chaotic collage of diary and recollection. He gives the sense that the whole purpose of life changed once the master had gone. This is heightened by d'Amboise's perplexity that nothing came from the several assurances by Balanchine and Kirstein that they had considered him to be Balanchine's successor at City Ballet. (That successor is Peter Martins. D'Amboise speaks of his admiration for Martins's work while implying that City Ballet's glory days are over.) The descriptions of Balanchine's changing moods in his final months are touching. One poignant image, of the ballerina Karin von Aroldingen, Balanchine's closest friend among the dancers of his final era, cradling the dying choreographer's head while singing the German lullaby "Guten Abend, Gut' Nacht," is piercing.

Though d'Amboise lingers on this and other deaths, his temperament is too energetic for him to end on a downbeat. He never tells us of the 2009 death of his wife, Carolyn George, a photographer and former City Ballet soloist with whom he founded the National Dance Institute; we have the sense he can't bear to include it. Enthusiasm is what he does best, and he makes it infectious. His grin — once likened by Arlene Croce to that of the Cheshire Cat — was celebrated, and is captured here in a marvelous David Levine cartoon. The smile is wider than the torso. □