

BOOKS

'I don't want people who want to dance, I want people who have to dance.' —George Balanchine

An American Apollo

More than just a dancer's life, Jacques d'Amboise's memoirs are the story of City Ballet's coming of age

I Was a Dancer

By Jacques d'Amboise
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BY LAURA JACOBS

HALFWAY INTO THE IRRESISTIBLE memoir "I Was a Dancer," it can begin to seem as if the life of Jacques d'Amboise—born Joseph Ahearn, in 1934, in Massachusetts—was composed in the key of G. His mother, who gave him purpose and a pathway, was Georgette d'Amboise. His wife, who gave him four children and a partnership of 53 years, was Carolyn George. And his boss, who gave him an incomparable career at the New York City Ballet (NYCB), was George Balanchine. The key of G, because it is easy-going, is often called the "people's key," and that's not a bad way to look at Mr. d'Amboise, who was very much the people's classical dancer. If not the first American classicist, he was certainly NYCB's first home-grown male star, having come up through its School of American Ballet, which he entered at age 8. City Ballet's co-founders, Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein, set out to build a company based on American energy, athleticism and unself-conscious elegance. In Jacques d'Amboise, with his roguish cheekbones and aw-shucks shock of dark hair, they found their perfect team player and campus hero. In 1958, when Balanchine choreographed "Stars and Stripes," he placed Mr. d'Amboise in its climactic pas de deux.

It turns out that the dancer is also a writer. If Mr. d'Amboise had finished high school—in 1949, at the age of 15, he accepted a position in the company of the year-old NYCB—his skill with the quill might have been discovered. The opening sentences of this memoir don't just pull you in; in a mere three lines they capture the essential dynamic between Andrew Ahearn and his feisty wife: "My father would tell us, 'She thinks she's Sarah Bernhardt, the queen of the theater, putting on airs.' My mother relished the comparison, ignoring the slur Pop intended. She did resemble pictures of the great actress, and acted the part as well." This is a woman who, in 1946, convinced her husband to change *his* surname, and that of their four children, to *hers*. (First names were Gallicized as well; thus Joseph became Jacques.) She argued that "it's aristocratic, it's French . . . and it's a better name." Pop was Boston Irish and mother, 4-foot-9 and dubbed "The Boss," was French-Canadian.

The book begins with tales of the parents' parents and the tough but picturesque lives they led in cold, snowy places. Like so many immigrants and first-generation Americans in the early 20th century, Mr. d'Amboise's parents were nomadic. With every move, they hoped to inch a bit closer to the American dream, and for Georgette that dream lived in New York City, where, she was always saying, "the arts are." She wasn't a grasping, Mama Rose sort of stage mother. She believed that the arts were the height of civilization,



DAISY DAYS D'Amboise dancing 'Stars and Stripes' with Patricia McBride and Suki Schorer (above); rehearsing 'Movements for Piano and Orchestra' with Suzanne Farrell, who was replacing the pregnant Diana Adams, and Balanchine in 1963 (right).

D'Amboise's technique was honest, airy and effortless, a classicism without fear or tension.

worth every penny of training. The family moved to Washington Heights (in Manhattan's northern reaches), where young Jacques was slowly seduced—by jumps and spins—into his sister's ballet class. Within a year, Georgette had them both at the School of American Ballet. She also bartered stuffed chickens for piano lessons and enrolled them in acting classes. Did she know her youngest son was hanging with street gangs during the hours he wasn't doing pliés? Or that in winter he and his friends rode Hudson River ice floes from 178th Street to 25th? ("This



"Carousel": those floating *cabrioles*, the nimble *tours en l'air*, the light touch that is a facet of American style—he's a natural. In 34 years, Balanchine made him 24 new roles. (This is extraordinary given that the considerable number of roles Mr. B choreographed or reworked for Suzanne Farrell, his consuming inspiration of many years, was 23.)

Mr. d'Amboise's long tenure with NYCB, and his privileged view of its inner workings, is the most historically important part of the memoir. He kept diaries, and his countless memories, anecdotes and observations are precious pieces to the puzzle of Balanchine's genius (and also a welcome antidote to the gulag portrayed in the recent film "Black Swan"). He discusses the oft-overlooked primacy of Diana Adams to Balanchine's art. The least known of his important muses, this cool, contained brunette obsessed the choreographer through the 1950s and early 1960s—and made a habit of derailing his dreams for her. When the married Adams became pregnant before a premiere in 1963, she taught the role to the baby-faced Farrell. Balanchine's next muse was born.

Mr. d'Amboise also revisits the glory of the lost ballet "The Figure in the Carpet," built around the unattainable Adams. It was Kirstein's idea—"George! What about a ballet about a Persian rug?"—and its interweaving of Near Eastern motifs was said to be spectacular. Because of a miscarriage, Adams never danced it, which is perhaps why Balanchine let it disappear.

As for Kirstein, d'Amboise is fascinating on the relationship between George and Lincoln (self-confidence versus self-questioning), and he sheds new light on the succession of leadership at NYCB after Balanchine's death. Even the lyrics that Balanchine wrote for a tango—"Why not I, when you were passing by? / Why not you, when I was passing through?"—offer an inroad to the master's heart. And Mr. d'Amboise dares to give us Balanchine's answer to the question: "Who of all your ballerinas do you consider the most talented?" (You'll be surprised.)

One of Mr. d'Amboise's nicknames in the company was "Daisy," because he was "always optimistic and sunny." Another was "Georgette," because the dancers often called each other by their mother's names. And so we return to the key of G, not just the people's key but also that of benediction. After he retired in 1983, Mr. d'Amboise devoted himself to the National Dance Institute, a non-profit enterprise he had founded in 1976 to introduce the art of dance to children around the world. What his mother brought to her two youngest, Mr. d'Amboise has brought to hundreds of thousands. Dance was good to Daisy and he's returned the favor many times over. With "I Was a Dancer" he has struck a satisfying balance: this memoir is exuberantly dishy, yet unkind to no one.

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gave the harbor police," he notes, "plenty to do.")

Charmingly, Mr. d'Amboise links his adolescence and coming of age with that of NYCB's. Seamlessly, Georgette hands him on to George. Balanchine and Kirstein wanted American dancers for their American company, and they especially needed men who could handle the thoroughbred ballerinas that Balanchine was developing. When he joined the

company, the teenage d'Amboise was 6-foot-1 and 145 pounds. "A broomstick," he says of himself. "A lamppost with feet and teeth," the choreographer Jerome Robbins called him. Don't let the humor fool you. His physique was Apollonian and his technique honest, airy and effortless, a classicism without fear or tension. Just take a look at Mr. d'Amboise on YouTube, in the dream ballet, for instance, from the 1956 film