

NEWS FROM
**THE JEROME
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Jerome Robbins

“The arts open your heart and mind to possibilities that are limitless. They are pathways that touch upon our brains and emotions and bring sustenance to imagination. Human beings’ greatest form of communication, they walk in tandem with science and play, and best describe what it is to be human.”

—JACQUES D’AMBOISE



We dedicate this issue to JACQUES D’AMBOISE

JACQUES D’AMBOISE (1934–2021) grew up on the streets of upper Manhattan before becoming one of the world’s premier classical dancers at New York City Ballet. He then spent more than four decades inspiring young people around the world to dance, through his National Dance Institute. Jacques was a life force who brought dance to new heights. What follows are tributes from colleagues and friends in his memory.

Jacques d’Amboise in George Balanchine’s *Stars and Stripes* at New York City Ballet, 1967. Photo by Martha Swope.

“Good luck...”

by Daniel Ulbricht

As a child, my sister and I would watch the 1983 Jackson International Ballet Competition on VHS; hosting the event was the one and only Jacques d’Amboise. He always smiled and seemed to engage every dancer he spoke to—and even me through the television screen. Little did I know that by that time he had already established himself as the Pied Piper of audiences, young and old.

It wasn’t until later in my career that I would befriend and understand the magnitude of Jacques. Jacques had an abundance of charisma, compassion, talent, wit, tenderness, intelligence, and was beloved by all. His laugh was infectious and his smile golden. If you were lucky enough, you would hear one of his many remarkable stories; time stood still until he finished.

As a dancer, I look back on his incredible impact on the American dance scene. He created and starred in masterpieces, both onstage and on the screen, and paved the way for male ballet dancers as we know them. Jacques was a creative muse and established himself as one of the most prominent interpreters of Balanchine and Robbins works, including *Apollo*, *Who Cares?*, *“Diamonds”* from *Jewels*, *Afternoon of a Faun* and *Stars and Stripes*.

Though we never shared the stage at New York City Ballet, he would invite me to dance at his charming Art Nest events. On many occasions, he would throw me steps from earlier versions of Balanchine’s variations, or even create new solos on the spot. This was both entertaining and challenging, especially while being watched by his adoring fans in the stands. Before returning to his seat, Jacques would turn back to me, ensuring I was calm under the pressure, then face the audience and give an emphatic, “Good luck.” The audience would laugh, but he always beamed with enthusiasm from the front row. Further, any note, correction, or compliment, was always taken to heart. They are moments I will always cherish.

As an educator, I was amazed by Jacques’ creation of the National Dance Institute. NDI is a haven of hope and creativity and has been for generations of students and families. It has helped equip students with structure, teamwork, collaboration, and creativity, to take on many of life’s adventures. This organization is truly mission in action. Each time I see the students’ feet tapping and hands clapping, I’m overwhelmed by the palpable joy in their hearts and the smiles on their faces. NDI’s purpose wasn’t to be a training ground, but a place to enhance children’s lives and fill them with the joy that all performance art instills.

We lost this pioneer of dance—a poet, a mentor, and a dear friend—and one can only hope to have an ounce of the impact he had on so many. I would like to think Jacques is now reciting endless poetry, dancing, reading tons of books, telling stories and grinning ear to ear in the heavens above us; or perhaps he is crafting his priceless thank you notes with hand-drawn art that many were so fortunate to receive. Whatever it may be, I know he would embrace us all if he could, smile and wish all his family, friends, fans, and student of NDI, “Good luck!”

Daniel Ulbricht is a Principal Dancer with New York City Ballet. He is also the Founder and Director of Stars of the American Ballet.



Daniel Ulbricht and Jacques d’Amboise. Photo courtesy of Daniel Ulbricht.

Remembering Jacques

by Allegra Kent

Sixty-six years ago, I sat in the audience of the City Center watching a performance by the New York City Ballet. On the program was *Filling Station*, a ballet by Lew Christensen, and Jacques d'Amboise was in the cast playing the gas station attendant, the starring role. He danced the role with a generous spirit—a guy with an everyday job filling gas tanks. The choreography had huge leaps and astonishing pirouettes. Jacques' grease monkey outfit was his costume; he was a genial workman, trying to solve the problems of the people who came in, an everyday guy trying to do his job. He was so handsome that all the girls at the School of American Ballet were in love with him; a real heartthrob and he could jump. Oh, how he could jump and linger in the air, it was as if he had caught a jet stream and thought, "I'm suspended in the air, and I'm staying up here." Could there be any glamour in a role as a filling station attendant? Apparently yes.

Even though Jacques was in the New York City Ballet, he always wanted to learn more and took adagio classes at the School of American Ballet, taught by the incomparable Pierre Vladimirov. There were three groups and Jacques chose to work in every group. In the first he danced with someone who was hard to lift. In the last section he partnered Jilana who was absolutely beautiful and knew what she was doing and in one group he partnered someone who absolutely didn't know what she was doing. And who was that? Me. But Jacques wanted the experience of working with anyone who showed up in the class.

Jacques had been coached by George Balanchine in the title role of *Apollo* and knew every moment of the ballet. Jacques, with his musicality and memory and keen attention to detail. When I danced the role of Terpsichore, he shared his knowledge with me. He remembered the subtleties of what Balanchine had told him and helped me with the part. He knew what Balanchine wanted, and Jacques and I felt rhapsodic dancing this ballet. At one point I was on his back and it looked as if we were swimming in the Aegean Sea, and I felt secure there. Jacques knew how to make his back a balancing surface, so I wasn't insecure at that moment. As *Apollo*, he was excited that he'd discovered Terpsichore, so it was a great experience to dance this legendary ballet with him.

Jacques danced this role with a rawness, and a jump that seemed to go here and then went there. It was a directional surprise. *Apollo* was the masterpiece that Balanchine and Stravinsky created in the late 1920s. It was a perfect role for Jacques. As a just-born God, wrapped in swaddling clothes, he pirouetted forever to free himself. He was newly born and had a sharp look of wonder, "What is this? Where am I?" It wasn't acting. He was a God who had just arrived in the world. When he was given a lyre he started playing it. "What is this? What comes out of this? Music?" He didn't know it was an instrument, he had that sense of discovery, I felt this wasn't a performance. The music and Jacques and the choreography were the reality, the ballet was sound, movement, and Jacques, and it was great.

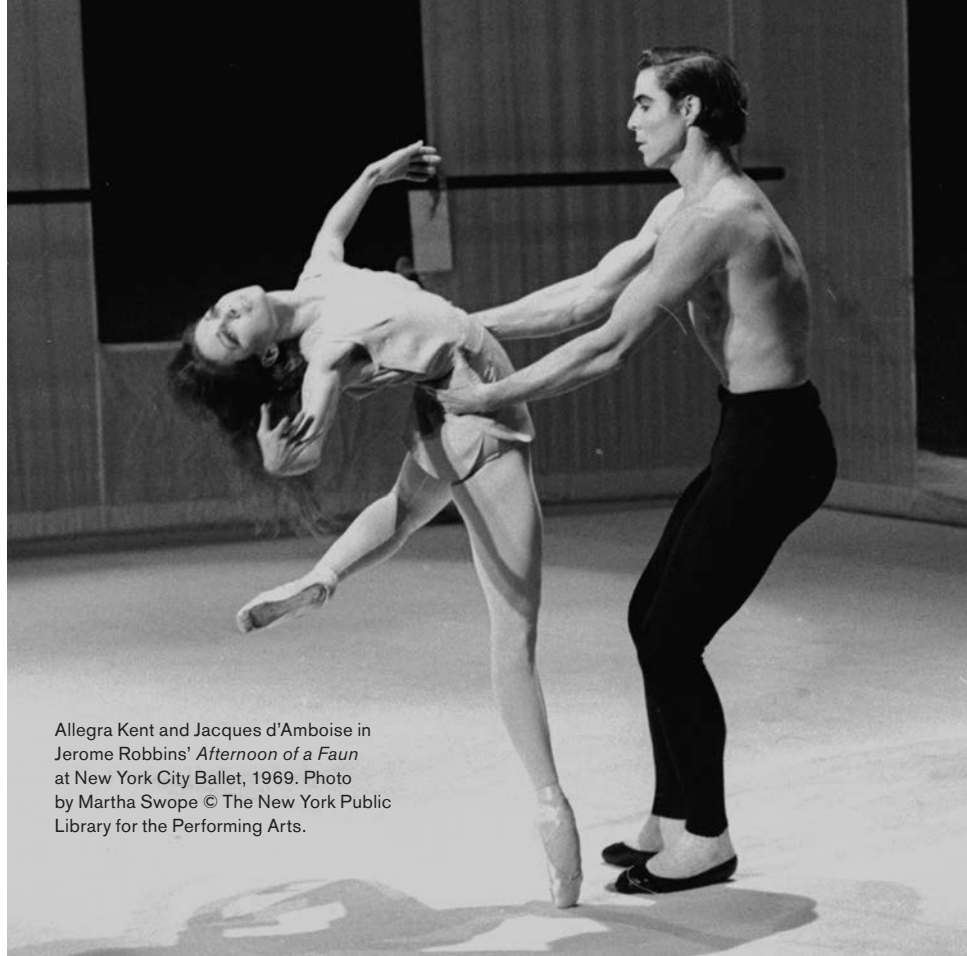
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Jacques was imaginative beyond limits. Who else but Jacques would have had the foresight to engage with thousands of young students when he founded the National Dance Institute in 1976? The Institute was an inspiration to generations of young people who wanted to learn how to dance and to challenge their mind's imagination.

One day while I was talking to Jacques in his office on 147th Street, a room filled with books on every subject, he told me about some of the trees of South America. One was the chewing gum tree, the staminodella chicle tree, whose sap is the basis for chewing gum. How about that? It turns out that a lot of people in the world like to chew and Jacques was deeply curious about the world around him. His desire to learn was unlimited, and his fascination with almost everything was something you could see when Jacques danced. That came through. How did that invisible quality come through? I don't know, but it did. Anyone who knew or danced with him always retained those experiences within them. His imagination was vividly alive.

Jacques went to films. Russian ballet films. In America they couldn't make those because of the unions, but Russian movies were out there to see in art house theaters, and he would go there to see the great Russian dancers. He would study their musicality. The extensions were not as they are today, but he was a student of the dance. He was always a student ready to explore and learn. How did this come about? It was because Jacques was curious and always wanted to learn more. I will always be grateful to have danced so many roles with him. Dancing with him was wonderful, and he gave new dimensions to every part.

After the company returned from a tour of Japan, Australia and the Philippines in 1958, the first ballet on the program for the new season at the City Center, was



Allegra Kent and Jacques d'Amboise in Jerome Robbins' *Afternoon of a Faun* at New York City Ballet, 1969. Photo by Martha Swope © The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Swan Lake. I'd never danced this ballet with Jacques. Balanchine scheduled a rehearsal and he gave us very detailed information with a narrative as he danced it himself. "She sees the prince. She's afraid of his crossbow." As the Swan Queen tries to escape, instead of a lift, Jacques threw me up into the air and then caught me. He was very powerful. It wasn't like anyone else who just lifted me with their hands, so it looked like I was really trying to flee by flying away. It gave the ballet a sense of reality. The audience saw the magic, but Jacques and I felt it. He was wonderful onstage, and it was if we were not in a performance, but in a real fairy tale, a fairy tale we believed in. *Swan Lake* is a ballet that reveals a passion for dance.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we shared a dream within a dream when we danced the exquisite pas de deux in the second act of the glorious Mendelssohn/Balanchine ballet. In the ballet, the realm of unreality becomes a strange reality.

Partnering is an almost invisible skill, and Jacques was a great partner. When I look at photographs of him, he always looks so elegant and his movements so effortless. Jacques was also uncannily musical. Every lift, from the ascent to the landing, was a breath of love. A gentle passion danced with grace. With Jacques, effort was invisible. In this pas de deux when he lifted me and then put me down, he used his arms beautifully, extending the line. For me, there is always an emotional feeling in my heart when being held in a man's arms and bending over backward, with my fingertips almost touching the floor. It's not just a pose, it's love, it's trust, it's a breath of delicate passion. It's a whisper. Thank you Jacques for being so sensitive and wonderful.

After Jacques wrote his biography, *I Was A Dancer*, he was invited to speak at the New York State Theater about his career with the New York City Ballet. For this occasion, Jacques was driving in from his upstate home, not by chariot, but by truck. On his way in from the country he passed a nursery and bought two trees, and there was Jacques, onstage, with his two botanical friends. Each Greek God was given a tree and Apollo's was the Laurel, but that afternoon Jacques had not one, but two trees.

He had won.

Jacques loved poetry and liked to quote the words of the 14th century Persian poet, Hafiz, and part of that quote is:

"God only knows four words:
Come dance with Me."

And because of Jacques, millions of children did.

Allegra Kent started studying ballet at age 11 with Bronislava Nijinska and Carmelita Maracci. In 1952, George Balanchine invited her to New York City Ballet, where she danced leading roles for the next 30 years. While at New York City Ballet, Jerome Robbins created roles for her in *Dances at a Gathering* and *Dumbarton Oaks*. Currently a teacher at Barnard College, Allegra is the author of several books, including her autobiography, *Once a Dancer...* and a children's book, *Ballerina Swan*. She is the recipient of a Dance Magazine Award.

“He had the vision...”

by Benjamin Ryan Nathan

What can one say when a giant leaves the room? One can feel the silence left behind by a man who exemplified what it means to be extraordinary. It's rare for the death of an 86-year-old to be so shocking, but Jacques d'Amboise was so alive—so full of life—that his absence is indeed shocking, as those of us who knew him continue to hear the reverberating echoes of his raw voice.

When I was in the fourth grade at PS 183 on Manhattan's East 66th Street, I was selected to be part of a dance class at school. I didn't want to dance. Dance was for girls. I was the skinniest kid in my class. I got picked on, bullied, made fun of. Dancing, I thought, would only add to my woes. But my teacher forced us all to go to the audition. I saw the chubbiest kid in my class start dancing. I figured—if he could do it, I could do it too. And that was the start of my life as a dancer with National Dance Institute.

Later that year, we were told that Jacques d'Amboise was coming to visit us. We were told that he was the first great male American ballet dancer, that he could leap higher than anyone—a dancing superhero. I imagined a sophisticated French man, with slicked back hair and a thick accent. The man who walked in was nothing of the sort. Jacques was sophisticated, yes, but also so intense as to be a bit scary, and somehow friendly and captivating, all at once. He had a thick accent, but not from France—from Washington Heights. He was a kid from the streets whose mother enrolled him in dance class to keep him out of the local gangs. He was exciting and exuberant and enchanting.

Jacques asked all of us in the class to gather around him on the bleachers. He took out a piece of paper and began furiously drawing tons and tons of tiny circles. He stopped. “Do you know what that is?” We were silent. “Those are the faces of one thousand children, dancing together at Madison Square Garden—and you all will be right here!” He pointed at a spot on the paper. I was stunned. My role was that of a single snowflake in a snowstorm. Now I could see the storm taking shape.

I became a tap dancer. I soaked up all I could in NDI's classes, and also immersed myself in the NYC tap scene, going to Buster Brown's tap jams at Swing 46, and seeing Savion Glover's Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk as many times as I could.

When I was 12 years old, NDI's Artistic Director, Ellen Weinstein, asked me to choreograph a tap piece for the “Event of the Year.” I didn't know what I was doing, but I agreed, as long as she and Jacques would mentor me. I got to rehearse and create at Jacques' home studio on West 71st Street. He welcomed me into his home and treated me with the respect and expectation that one would have for a professional. I remember sitting in his kitchen with him and he said

with a grin “Have you ever tasted star fruit?” I hadn't. He sliced one open and shared it with me.

Jacques d'Amboise was utterly magical—a transformative force for literally millions of people. That's no exaggeration. Everywhere I look, everywhere I mention his name, people have been touched and shown their own magnificence by Jacques d'Amboise. And he did this with love, with consistency, and with authenticity, again and again and again. For children and for adults all over the planet. He launched National Dance Institute to bring dance to children for free in NYC public schools. But he didn't call it NY Dance Institute. He had the vision of what this could become from the very start. And whenever anyone thought he'd done all that there was to do, he saw another opportunity, another space, another chance to do more, for more people. China, Bali, Lebanon, small African villages. Jacques brought Israeli and Palestinian children together to dance with us in New York. Blind children, children in wheelchairs. I tap danced with deaf children. There was no boundary he could not surpass. They called him “The Johnny Appleseed of Dance.” The Pied Piper. We called him Jacques.

For me, he was a mentor, a teacher, a paternal figure, someone who always saw the best in me and called it out of me. He and Ellen Weinstein gave me opportunities I never dreamed of, from such a young age. I have no idea where I would be today, and what I would be doing, if it weren't for Jacques. I am so incredibly grateful to have been a student of his and to have known him for 28 years. He is a genius. A man with no equal, and yet incredibly humble, and full of love.

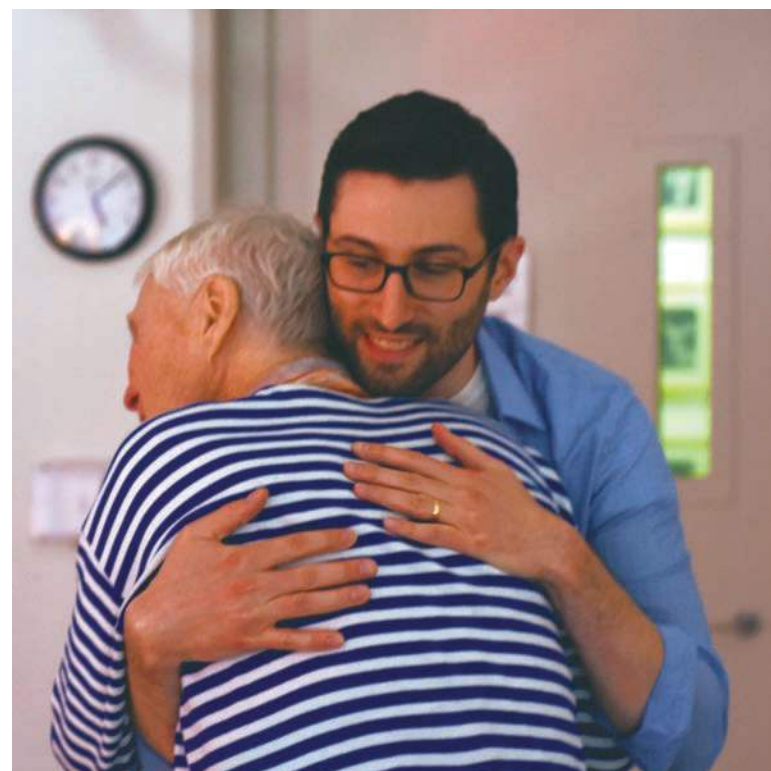
Days before Jacques passed, I was able to be in touch with him via text message, sharing how I'm teaching my 3-year-old son to dance now, and how much joy it brings. He replied to me: “Dear Ben, Thank you and Gael. Just continue in your tap rhythms. You will never fail to make sure joy is always a part of it for yourself and for all in the audience, as well as your [wife, Mariel]... Always so proud of you. Your, Jacques”

Well, if love can fly, dear Jacques, you are carried on the wings of the love of the millions of human beings you have touched and transformed. May you fly easy, and with grace, and be at peace, and reunited with your dearest Carrie. I love you, Jacques. And thank you so so much!

Benjamin Ryan Nathan is an award-winning filmmaker based in New York. He founded ALL OF US FILMS in 2012 to better the planet and inspire audiences to take real-world action. Ben's work has garnered over 20 million views around the globe. Ben discovered his love of film through his first passion, dance, which he began with NDI in 1993. He has been a rhythm tap dancer for over 25 years.



Jacques d'Amboise leading former students of NDI in rehearsal at LaGuardia High School, 2007. Photo by Angel Gardner.



Jacques d'Amboise and Ben Nathan at the NDI Center in Harlem, 2017. Photo by Ezequiel Medvietzky Burstin.



Jacques d'Amboise and Charlotte d'Amboise, in George Balanchine's *The Nutcracker*® at New York City Ballet, 1973. Photo by Martha Swope.

Jacques d'Amboise and students from the National Dance Institute in a publicity photo for the Oscar-winning film *He Makes Me Feel Like Dancin'*. Photo courtesy of NBC, 1983.

My Father by Charlotte d'Amboise

In August 2021, Jerome Robbins newsletter editor Gregory Victor had a conversation with Charlotte d'Amboise as part of the newsletter's tribute to her father, Jacques d'Amboise. What follows are excerpts from that conversation.

I have always felt lucky. I felt it at a young age. *God, I'm blessed to be with this family.* I had such a great childhood. All of us kids—we had such a great childhood. It was full of everything. It wasn't just ballet, it was everything. We lived in a brownstone on 71st Street, with people coming in and out of it all the time, and music always playing. We all went to public schools, but then we would get to travel to Europe with my father when he would tour. So, at a young age, when kids didn't do that, we did. Now everybody travels, but in the late '60s and early '70s, it was a very different, exciting experience.

Ballet was just part of our lives. When my mom would go back and take class at New York City Ballet, we would go with her and sit and watch class. I remember sitting through a few Balanchine classes with Daddy and Mom, and watching a few of those later in life, too. I also remember rehearsing with Dad when we were young. We were at the School of American Ballet, and at seven or eight years old, we were going on tour in Europe, with Ballet West, and with North Carolina, and we were on the bus with the ballet companies. We were doing overnights. Or going to the Parthenon and watching ballets danced there. Or we were playing around outside, seeing *Swan Lake* in the middle of Italy or in Malta in some cave. All I cared about was seeing Daddy come out and dance, because he was just so exciting. I remember I would always want to be the man when I watched. I always thought that to be a ballerina—how boring. I wanted to be the guy who comes out and does all the tricks and the jumps. Not until later did I appreciate the ballerinas.

I remember having a major struggle, growing up. I knew that I wasn't going to be a ballet dancer, because I really didn't have the facility to be one, and I also was always interested in other kinds of dance—anything that wasn't ballet. The great thing about Daddy was that he encouraged that so much. But I remember feeling the pressure of having to prove that I can dance. People always say it's easier for you because of who you are, but it's not. Especially in an art form where you have to have such a craft. I remember having that struggle for a long time, dealing with trying to prove myself. I got my dad's approval, though—which wasn't easy. I remember him trying to help me. When he was teaching at NDI—starting the program in the late '70s, he would go to some school in New Jersey somewhere, during the day, in some auditorium, and he would—God bless him—get up there and do his thing and get some kids that were half interested in doing it to join in. And I would dance. He would have me sing a song—a little jazz number—and then dance with my brother. He must have thought, "I'll give her an opportunity

to perform," because he was always about performing being the most important way to learn. "You have to get up and do it," he'd say, because he started so young. At 15 he was in New York City Ballet, so he was a real advocate about learning from performing, and he was always trying to expose me to performing. At that time, I was at the Professional Children's School—I was 15 or 16 years old—and I remember going on these car trips with him and Isabel Brown, who would help him, and Mitchell Lemsky, who was the stage manager. Going to these schools in the middle of nowhere during the day, and missing school, and singing a song like "I Love a Piano." So, that's when it started. Just getting in front of an audience. And then, I remember doing a show, and he came backstage and said, "I can't keep my eyes off you."

The National Dance Institute changed him, in the way he dealt with things. As a ballet dancer, he was not a promoter of himself. He was from a different time. Nowadays, everybody promotes themselves, because that's the way it is, but in those days they didn't. He was someone who could care less about critics, because he didn't need to have a good review. I don't think he even read any of them. He never did anything to make himself famous or to promote himself—just anything for Balanchine. Anything for Balanchine. But as far as doing things to make a lot of money, he never really cared. He could have been a movie star. MGM was knocking on his door, but he didn't want that. I feel that when NDI happened, I remember such a switch in his personality. Suddenly, it was, "I have to be nice," "I have to treat people differently," "I actually have to make money," and "I have to promote myself and promote NDI." There was a real change in him. But he learned, and he got better and better at it. He had to talk to critics and do interviews, and he had to go out and get money. He really learned how to do that and do it well.

My father was a chameleon, in the sense that no matter what situation he was in, he would make the best of it. Any situation. And he would change himself if he needed to, but always in an authentic way. It wasn't, "I'm going to change and be a different person," it was, "I'm going to change and be a different person if it's going to be to enhance everyone around me and myself." And it's because of a high intelligence that he was able to do this. And he did it till his death. That, to me, really sums him up when you really know him. It's such an incredible ability that he had. I don't know where he learned it, or how he learned it, but it meant that he was never somebody who would ever feel sorry for himself. Ever.

A veteran of numerous Broadway shows, **Charlotte d'Amboise** was most recently seen in the Broadway revival of *Pippin* in the role of Fastrada, for which she won the Fred Astaire Award. She was nominated for the Tony Award for her performance as Cassie in the Broadway revival of *A Chorus Line*, and for her performance as Anita and Peter Pan in *Jerome Robbins' Broadway*.

“Whatever Jacques wants...”

by Maria DiDia

On a lovely spring day in 1982, my business partner Jim Fiore and I got a call from a dear mutual friend, Lauri Wilson. She was looking to replace a friend as General Manager for The National Dance Institute’s “Event of the Year.” A meeting was set with that friend, and NDI’s Executive Director at the time, Gigi Ledkovsky. The National Dance Institute “Event of the Year” was to take place in six weeks and would include 1,500 children from New York City and vicinity.

And so, it began.

I’d been a big fan of Jacques d’Amboise for many years. I had recently read an article in the *New York Times Magazine* about Jacques and the National Dance Institute. I thought, *How amazing—children and dancing, two of my favorite things!*

Next thing I knew, Jim and I were hired. We started gathering staff. Then, the phone rang. I answered and the person on the other end said, “This is Jacques. Is Gigi there?” I paused and said, “Okay David Rubinstein (who was to be our Production Stage Manager), that’s not funny! This is moving along rapidly!” But lo and behold, it was Jacques—the real Jacques d’Amboise!

That first phone call was the beginning of 39 years of working with Jacques and the National Dance Institute—years filled with dedication, commitment, and

hard work. It took a while for Jacques to trust that the job would get done. Occasionally, he threw a curve ball at us, in his smart and careful way. One of his ideas for an event was to have a couple dozen chairs, with dancers seated and moving around the floor of what was then The Felt Forum. In addition to dancers in the chairs, he wanted the stage to look very full but felt 12 chairs were enough. So, we had the idea to tie balloons with faces painted on them to the chairs as the dancers performed Jacques’ choreography. I don’t think he believed it would happen, but I lived by, “Whatever Jacques wants, we’ll find a way!”

I like to think that his trust in me developed over the years. He was always trying to toss new challenges my way, and I hope that I was always able to meet those challenges—for Jacques and the NDI dancers, all 1,500 of them that first year!

Maria DiDia has been General Manager and/or Executive Producer for many shows on Broadway and off with her own GM/Executive Producing company, Maria Productions, Inc., which, though semi-retired, she still operates.

“Jacques was the guy...”

A conversation with Edward Villella

In August 2021, Jerome Robbins newsletter editor Gregory Victor interviewed Edward Villella as part of the newsletter’s tribute to Mr. Villella’s fellow dancer at New York City Ballet, Jacques d’Amboise. What follows are excerpts from that conversation.

Gregory Victor When you and Jacques started out, you were both kids from the streets of New York City, right?

Edward Villella He was up in the Heights.

GV And you were from Bayside, Queens, but you both studied at the School of American Ballet. Can you tell me about those days?

EV Very few guys were in the School of American Ballet. He was about two and a half years older than I. He was already in the [New York City Ballet] Company. I think he joined when he was 15. We’d take class and then afterward we’d tussle together. He was very big. You know, once we were being interviewed together at the National Dance Institute, and he said, “Yeah, we used to tussle, and I’d make you miss your train!” And I said, “Yeah, Jacques. The thing was, you were bigger, but I was faster!”

GV When you were taking classes at SAB, were you determined to become a dancer someday?

EV Well, it was my ambition. But it was not my father’s ambition. Actually, it was not originally my idea, to be a dancer. I used to hang out on the streets, and once I got hit in the back of the head with a baseball. We used to play this game on the street, running bases between one sewer and another sewer. There’d be two catchers, and you’d be the runner between them. They’d throw a baseball, and I got whacked in the back of the head. The other kids drag me home, unconscious, where they leave me on the stoop and then run away. I finally woke up and I was okay. But a neighbor had seen this, and when my mother came home the neighbor, naturally, told her. So, my mother says, “That’s it. I can’t trust you on the streets anymore. From now on, when we go to your sister’s ballet class, you’re coming with us.” So, I got dragged into this room with 40 giggly girls and their mothers. I was so bored. And then, finally, they started to jump, and I said, “Oh, I can do that!” So, I go in the back and I’m having a great old time, disrupting the class. So, the teacher came up to my mother afterward and said, “Get him out of here, or put him in tights at the barre.” The next day, there I was. That’s how I began.



Edward Villella and students at the School of American Ballet, 1946. © George Platt Lynes.

And then mother takes my sister — she'd heard about Balanchine and the School of American Ballet — and she takes my sister in, and they accept my sister. And then, as she's leaving, my mother said, "Oh, incidentally I have a son at home. But he's really not very interested in ballet—" And they said, "Oh my God, a boy! Can he walk? Bring him!" So, they drag me in, and then I'm introduced to the School of American Ballet, which is a whole other world.

GV When you joined New York City Ballet, was Jacques already a member of the Company?

EV Oh yeah.

GV Did you dance any of the same roles?

EV It took about a year. Because I had taken four years out, when I went to the military school. So, when I joined the Company, strangely enough everybody remembered me. Including Jerry Robbins. When Jerry heard, he came right in and he said, "I want you to do *Faun*."

GV *Afternoon of a Faun* was the ballet role you danced?

EV Yeah. I was only there two weeks, and Jerry showed up and chose me for his ballet.

GV Well, you were the inspiration for it.

EV He told me that.

GV And what was the first Balanchine role you danced?

EV At the end of that first year, I started to get all these understudy roles. It was a plethora of roles, so I learned an awful lot. And then a number of guys left the Company because the handwriting was on the wall that I was anointed. I just began to dance all over the place, everywhere in the repertoire. It was an amazing first and second year.

GV That's a lot of partners.

EV And I had never partnered in my life, so I had that to learn.

GV In 1969 he created a role for you in *Dances at a Gathering*. Was your role — of the Man in Brown — the first role he created on you?

EV The actual sequence was, Jerry decided to do a little pas de deux for Patty McBride and myself. And then he said, "I'm going to ask Mr. B to come and take a look." So, Balanchine came, he looked, and Jerry asked, "Well, what do you think?" And Balanchine said, "Don't stop." And then, out of that came *Dances at a Gathering*. I'm sure that was lurking in Jerry's mind. If not, I'm sure he was researching all that music. So that was my first exposure, and then when he decided to do the ballet, he asked me to do this little opening mazurka. He said, "I want you to walk in, and you see this place, and it's reminiscent, but you don't quite get it. And then you start thinking about it. You do a couple of steps, then you do this, and then this..." So, anyway, opening night comes, and I do that, and I finish and go offstage, and I look up and there's this beard, and he said, "I want to tell you. I've never done this in my life. But I had to come back and tell you, that was wonderful, just wonderful." And, boy, was I in a good place.

GV You were both a Balanchine and a Robbins dancer in the Company. Not everyone was. Did Jacques ever share his thoughts about this?

EV Jacques told me a story. Very few people were eased by Jerry's manner and passion. So, Jerry was giving Jacques a lot of dreck, and he said to Jacques, "What's the matter with you? What's going on in that head of yours?" And Jacques replied, "Well, at least it's got hair on it." I thought that one of the classic lines of all time.

GV I've heard you say before, that "more is more," especially regarding ballets that aren't story ballets. Can you tell me about that?

EV If you are attempting not only to be a dancer, but suggestive of being an artist, you have to analyze every gesture. Especially with Balanchine because he was so neoclassical. They were not steps that you learned in class. It had to be something else, and you had to figure out who you were onstage. During my first year in the Company, Balanchine had done *Agon*, and I'm looking at this ballet, saying to myself, "Oh, God!" I'd never seen a neoclassical ballet. It was startling. Todd Bolender was in it, and he was a mover like you cannot believe. He was just so liquid. And Balanchine was just about finishing up the ballet and he said to me, "You know, I like for you to learn Todd." And I thought, *Todd? There's no way I'm going to be able to do that.* It drove me nuts. And at the end of the season, Todd leaves. *What do I do now?* So, Balanchine comes to the first rehearsal, and he says, "You know, I don't want you to dance like Todd. I want you to be principal male dancer." So, I could be me, and I figured it all out. At the end of my first performance, Lincoln comes back, and he says, "Well, how



Edward Villella as Oberon and Arthur Mitchell as Puck in the film version of George Balanchine's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with New York City Ballet, 1966. Photo by Martha Swope.

do you think you did?" I said, "Well, I got through it." And this huge man leans down, and he says, "Make your own comment! Make your own comment!" And I thought, *Oh. I can make my own comment.* It freed me. These are tiny little things, especially if you had no background or experience — and I had no prior view of the repertoire — but now, I could make my own comment. I was very fortunate and full of gratitude about my good fortune. What a life I had. What a career. What a repertoire I had. What ballerinas I danced with. It was amazing. The repertoire that Balanchine and Robbins gave me was unmatched. It was an education. Not only in all this stuff — you know, how you make a character, and how you relate to people onstage — but in life itself.

GV You and Jacques both danced in several of the same ballets, including *Apollo*, *Stars and Stripes*, *Afternoon of a Faun*, and others. Did you two ever discuss the ballets you shared?

EV No. Jacques was so well established, and he was so valuable. Not only could he dance, but he could partner. He could partner anybody. I couldn't do all of that, although I ended up, finally, being a pretty good partner. When I joined the Company, he was in another category. So, it took me some time to achieve a next level. So, we didn't discuss the ballets.

GV And the level you both achieved — especially in the, to quote Balanchine, "Ballet is woman" era, was extraordinary. Balanchine did create, after all, some amazing parts for men — especially for you and Jacques — and advanced the art of male dancing in doing so.

EV Yes, and certainly with Jacques as the example that he was. Not only was he an example, but he was *the* principal male dancer. You know, André Eglevsky was there the first year I was there, and then, when he was gone, that was it. I mean, Jacques was *the* guy. I recognized that. I mean, I was grateful for Jacques because he had provided an example for male dancers to be fully accepted.

GV Well, you both did an admirable job of passing on useful information to the next generations of dancers — you at Miami City Ballet, and Jacques at the National Dance Institute. Is there anything else you would like to share about Jacques?

EV First of all, d'Amboise was his mother's name, as I'm sure you know, and his father's name was Ahearn. So, he had this Irish glint in his eye, and he had this Irish charm, which I have watched since I first met him, and he was very comfortable with that whole ambiance, which was himself. Having known him for those many years, having watched him as time goes by, I'm glad he was more Irish than French. He had that *joie de vivre* onstage. It was, for him, so wonderfully magical. It was something that I think he basically reveled in. He felt terrifically comfortable, and he could charm anything and anybody. Bless his heart, he did that a whole lot.

One of America's most celebrated dancers, **Edward Villella** did much to popularize the role of the male in dance through the supreme artistry and virility he exhibited during his performance career as a Principal Dancer with New York City Ballet. Recognized with numerous awards for his contributions to dance, Mr. Villella was also Founding Artistic Director of Miami City Ballet, bringing the Company to worldwide acclaim.

It has been a challenging past year and a half, and the dance world continues to meet the challenge in innovative and inspiring ways. What follows are contributions from four different voices. The first is from Jerome Robbins ballet stager Jean-Pierre Frohlich, followed by Duke Dang (General Manager of Works & Process at the Guggenheim), followed by dancer and choreographer Stefanie Batten Bland, while the final contribution is from New York City Ballet Orchestra member Julia DeRosa. These pieces chronicle different moments in the ongoing challenge and capture just a fragment of what these artists, and so many others, have gone through and continue to experience.



“One year and counting...” by Jean-Pierre Frohlich

Written in March 2021

This year I have watched and experienced firsthand how the arts have suffered in this country. What is disheartening about this time in the States, is that few are talking about how this pandemic has affected the people behind the scenes. They are extremely important to arts organizations in producing and maintaining the product.

I've been very fortunate to have been able to work in Europe during this time, and I've found it extremely inspiring to see how some companies are pushing through this. They are always ready when their government gives them the go-ahead to perform in front of a live audience, although many are presently in lockdown.

My first trip to Europe, in September of 2020, was to work with the Bordeaux National Ballet. The experience in Bordeaux was very different from the two that followed, later in the year. In September, there was no lockdown yet and everything, from restaurants, cafés, and museums to theaters, was open. The dancers were still in good spirits, and happy to be working, so the atmosphere within the company was high.

Company classes and rehearsals were not conducted any differently than prior to the pandemic since everyone, including myself, was being tested for Covid every week. The only difference was the rule that the dancers and staff had to wear masks. This was a bit problematic while rehearsing and coaching the ballet *The Concert*. This ballet depends on the characters (a ballerina, a wife, a husband, a shy boy, et al.) reacting to what they're seeing and thinking, which was hard to see and comprehend while having a mask on.

During stage rehearsals leading up to the performances, the masks started to come off just for rehearsals. The dancers started to feel more comfortable with one another, and there were no positive cases during the period when I was working with the company.

During my next two trips to Europe, I worked first with the Paris Opera Ballet, and then with the Vienna State Ballet. Both countries were in lockdown with a curfew. We had to plan the start of our working day keeping in mind what time the stores would close, since there would be no restaurants later.

Upon my arrival in Vienna, I was taken aback by the lack of people wearing masks in the streets, even though the number of cases was climbing. Mask wearing was not mandatory by the government, but it was required to wear them indoors, including the Opera House.

On my first day of work in Vienna, I was tested. Then the head ballet master told me that my schedule had changed. I had no rehearsals for that day because a ballet mistress had tested positive for Covid. This situation continued on my second day of work, except that I was allowed to start staging *A Suite of Dances*, since the ballet only requires working with two dancers, who both had tested negative.

What was reassuring to me, and many others, was that everyone working at the Opera House was tested three times a week. If there were to be an outbreak, then everyone would get tested every day.

When I finally got to teach *Glass Pieces*, the dancers had been off for a week, but they were very eager to work and to begin to dig into the material. Regarding social distancing, this was not the ideal ballet, since it requires forty-one dancers and the complete studio space to teach and rehearse the piece. If there was any ballet that might result in contracting the virus, this was the one.

All continued to go smoothly after the first two days, with no one testing positive until the beginning of the third week, when another ballet mistress contracted the virus. Luckily, none of the corps de ballet or first movement soloists was in contact with her, so this did not affect the corps rehearsals for *Glass Pieces*. It did, however, affect the work I had started, teaching some of the dancers *A Suite of Dances*, as well as the second movement principal couple in *Glass Pieces*. What I found interesting during this time of uncertainty was that it is important to do the best with what you have, and not to worry about the future you can't control.

Even though I had received both doses of the vaccine before leaving the States, I was a bit nervous about working in Vienna. With the rise of new variants out there, I had heard of people who had received the vaccine but still contracted the virus. Nonetheless, I was able to push through that fear and I worked as I always do, without holding back.

At the end of the day, what I found so inspiring in Europe is that the leaders of cultural institutions are fighting to continue to work, and to keep the arts alive and relevant during this time we are living in, and they won't take NO for an answer.

Jean-Pierre Frohlich trained at the School of American Ballet. He joined the New York City Ballet in 1972, and in 1979 was promoted to the rank of Soloist. Mr. Frohlich is currently a Repertory Director with New York City Ballet. Mr. Frohlich stages many of Jerome Robbins' ballets around the world and oversees his repertoire at the New York City Ballet.

Works & Process, Leading the Way

A conversation with Duke Dang

Since its creation, Works & Process, the performing arts series at the Guggenheim, has offered audiences insight into artists' creative processes. The Jerome Robbins newsletter met with Duke Dang, General Manager of Works & Process, to learn of how that organization successfully dealt with the challenges of the past year and a half.

What is Works & Process?

Mary Sharp Cronson, the founder of the program, knowing that she had an intimate access to the world of art and artists because of her philanthropy, felt that it was not fair for all others who loved the arts not to have similar access to the creative process. So, she initiated the program in 1984, when very few museums were involved with the performing arts, and she made use of the previously underutilized Guggenheim theatre. It was a program that anyone could buy a ticket to, and it would include a performance—a discussion and an excerpt of a work in progress—in the theater, followed by a reception in the rotunda. It was designed with avid fans of the arts in mind, who desired to experience the art, and then engage with the artist. A demystification of the art. It's an educational program, as well as a way to build community and build an audience.

And then came the pandemic. The way that you mobilized artistic forces has been extraordinary, resulting in Works & Process being one of the true leaders of the way forward. When other theaters were shutting down, your team at the Guggenheim pivoted to virtual commissions by establishing covid-free bubble residencies for artists in the Hudson Valley. They say, "the show must go on," and indeed, the shows did go on. So many artists entered Works & Process bubble residencies. How were you able to do this?

When the pandemic hit, we thought about our mission—to support the creative process—and how we continue that mission, even though we couldn't gather audiences and artists. But we were determined to still find a way. We were hearing from so many artists that they were facing cancellations. But we had the idea to commission artists to create works, and we realized this could be done through the medium of digital performances.

How did it work?

The most important thing was to pay the artists, and to let them know that we were here for them and that we care. We had our season all set to go before the pandemic hit, but we did not cancel on a single artist. So, we provided artists with financial support, but just as importantly, we said, 'We want you to continue being artists. Create anything that you want to create that expresses your work. Do it while you're social distancing and we will digitally present these works.' We ended up with 84 virtual commissions and paying 250 artists. Because we were reaching out to artists in this way, then we could have these conversations with them, asking, 'What do you really need right now?' The recurring story was, 'We just want a way to work together again.'

And is this when the "bubble residencies" began?

Once the Virtual Commissions program began, we realized that was just the beginning. We asked ourselves, 'How do we make it possible for artists to continue to work?', and that was when we came on the idea of a quarantine creative bubble—a way to bring artists together so that they can work, but safely. While artists in New York City were scared and feeling stuck, Covid numbers were fairly low in the Hudson Valley, so it was a natural place to develop the bubble residencies. We wondered how we could bring those artists up to Greene County. We knew who the players were in the Hudson Valley, in terms of dance venues and dance residencies. I called Kaatsbaan, Petronio, Mount Tremper Arts, and all these other organizations and asked what they were doing. When they said they were completely closed, I asked if we could rent their space. And they said yes.



Screen captures from the four-part docuseries *Isolation to Creation*, produced by Works & Process, in which filmmaker Nic Petry (of *Dancing Camera*) captures the journey of bubble residency artists returning to the studio and stage. (All episodes are available for streaming at <https://allarts.org/programs/isolation-to-creation/>).

How does a "bubble residency" work?

The artists quarantine for seven days before they enter the bubble. During those seven days, we rapid test the artists two times, four days before they enter the bubble and on the day that they enter the bubble. In addition, we rapid test the bus driver, and then after everybody has the all-clear with a negative test, everybody gets onto the bus. They drive onto a residency center, and they work and live in complete isolation. We created them in June 2020, and we executed that model. We were working with Dr. Wendy Ziecheck, who I met through Nikki Atkins at American Dance Machine. Wendy had access to rapid testing and helped us create the medical protocol. The residencies lasted for between 10 to 14 days.

What has this pandemic taught us?

That we can't just stop. We always have to find a way forward. We just have to be informed and educated and use the best available data so that we can continue to work, and connect, and create. Human connection and being together is so important.

What drives your commitment to serving others in these times?

Reflecting on the pandemic and Afghanistan, and my sister's recent work on Hurricane Ida recovery, I realize my family's story—of arriving in America as impoverished Vietnamese refugees, receiving the generosity of the American people, and enrolling in government assistance programs (welfare, food stamps, Section 8 housing vouchers, and Head Start)—this history informed my response to the pandemic. Not so different from when my family arrived in America, as it became clear how the pandemic would affect artists, we just had to find a way to help artists when they were most vulnerable rather than cancelling on them.



Company SBB performing at Lincoln Center's RESTART stage, August 2021. Photo by Eva Figuera.

On Returning to Performance

by Stefanie Batten Bland

Returning to performance has been extraordinary, as I had missed it so much. The smell and the feeling of the live, the people, the ritual, that evaporates moments later, can never be repeated. Our first live was this summer on the shores of the Martha's Vineyard Museum during our residency at The Yard. It was profoundly meaningful and brought us all to tears. In France this summer, though I didn't perform, my photo shoot for the *New York Times* Style Magazine was in one of my favorite theaters — also Franco-American like myself. Reuniting our Euro team together for that meant the world to me. To us. To see one another after the forced pause was also emotional. The changes, the exhaustion.

I think Restart Stages at Lincoln Center in August was a gut punch because it was proscenium, and everyone was in one direction, seeing you see them. And because it is my home. That home that went through such darkness. What was also so hard to chew through was the physical reality that zoom class and Peloton yoga isn't the practice, isn't the cardio, isn't the artistry, and that trauma — physical trauma — takes time to build back. Trusting others takes time. Budgets, producers, presenters, all need to take into account that there is deep pain that needs healing, and that the usual couple of brush up rehearsals is not valid for folks — some who are just coming back together after such a long pause. I think we have an opportunity to reevaluate artist fees, and what and how we heal through this, and what we can change within our casting and making formulas to create a more humane industry in both concert and commercial situations.

Watching my duet, *Pliant*, premiere at the Five Moons Dance Festival with the American Ballet Theatre Studio Company was one of last year's highlights

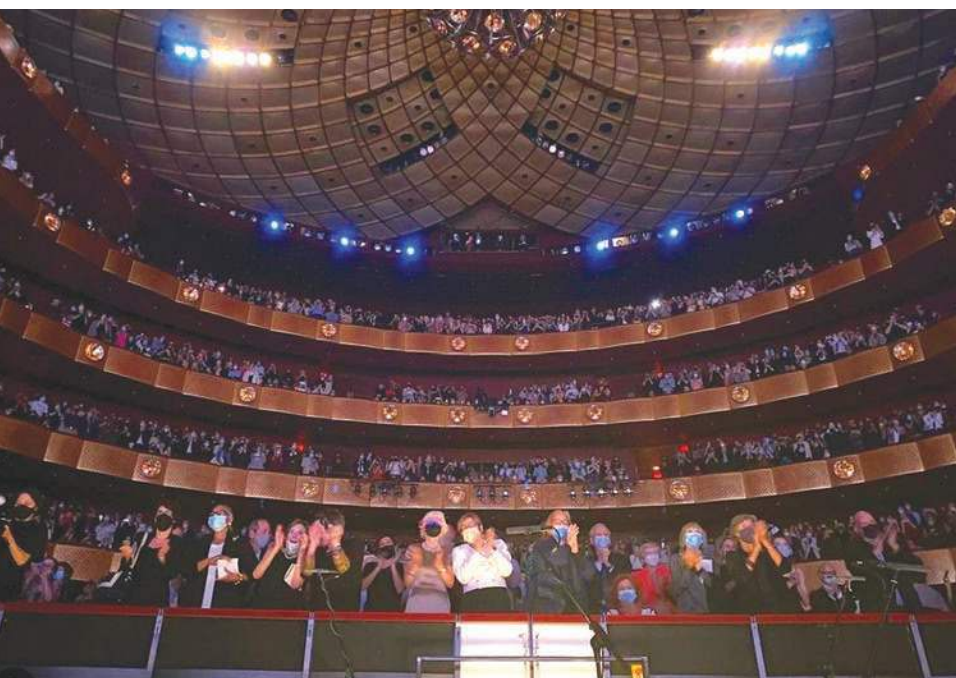


Photo taken from the orchestra pit on September 21, 2021, when performances resumed at New York City Ballet. Photo by Katharina Kang Litton, Principal Viola, New York City Ballet Orchestra.

Thoughts on Reopening

by Julia DeRosa, Principal Oboist of the New York City Ballet Orchestra

Upon our return to the David H. Koch Theater, my orchestra colleagues and I are encountering myriad emotions. We pit-dwellers are thrilled to be renewing our intimate connection with our dancers, and we know that what we do is also a kind of dance; musical lines leaping from one player to another, everything timed to the gestures of our music director, collective energy sparking joy and creativity in one another. There is nothing quite like making our jewel box of a theater ring with song, knowing that the music compels a dancer to make visual magic.

Our company, the New York City Ballet, is special for many reasons, but the one reason that is the greatest source of pride for the orchestra is George Balanchine's specific vision for the creative synthesis of music and dance. This vision is ingrained in every musician and every dancer in the Company, and it is this vision that gives us a clear sense of mission and inspiration. It is this, and the connection with all the other artists in the Company, that we have missed most. It is a privilege to earn a living doing something we love that speaks directly to the spirit of those who attend our performances.

Few things in this world give us such a respite from our normal cares as does live performance. Those of us lucky enough to play in the NYCB Orchestra know what it is like to sit in that glorious world of music every night, sounds and colors swirling around us, adding our own voices to the mix. We often feel that time is suspended when performing in the orchestra pit, and our ultimate goal is to make our audience feel that way too.

The pandemic has given us all a chance to reinvent ourselves as artists, in a kind of adolescent, try-everything-and-see-what-sticks approach. Speaking for myself, I became, at various times over the last year-and-a-half, a gardener, a stonemason, a mosaic artist, an illustrator, a logo designer, a website builder, and a concert producer, and a Lego engineer. I found talents I never knew I had

for me. This inaugural festival that brought the Osage and Native American community truly together with the large Oklahoma University community was awe-inspiring. To watch live work, connect and touch people who are reckoning with economical, land, and exclusive oppressive practices of the past/present create change thanks to the live arts was important on a human species level. We can create change and create dialogue even within this awful pandemic. Restorative change and collaboration touched me deeply.

To have been nominated for the Bessie Awards this year is particularly meaningful. Nominations are a sign, a validation of the larger community, a recognition of work. This is something I don't take lightly. I am so proud of this achievement and the Company SBB team. For it to come during COVID is extra special, as it is particularly during this time that we are most vulnerable. I work extremely hard at what I do, and how I do it, with people I care deeply about. Making films like *Kolonial*, my dance cinema piece, has been part of my creative practice for over ten years. So, when folks were looking to *look* at something, we were there — ready, and full of films for eyes to feast upon. The storytelling mechanisms of film offer me access to a broad range of people who would usually never have heard of my work. For this to be “seen” by my peers is meaningful. It takes the work back into the homes from which it originates.

Jerome Robbins Award recipient **Stefanie Batten Bland** is an interdisciplinary global artist who interrogates contemporary and historical culture and situates her work at the intersections of dance-theatre, film, and installation. A 2021 commissioned artist by Baryshnikov Arts Center and 2021 Toulmin Creator for New York University's Center for the Ballet Arts, Batten Bland is a choreographer for American Ballet Theatre's inaugural Women's Movement Initiative. Her 2021 Baryshnikov Arts Center dance-cinema production *KOLONIAL* was nominated for Bessie Awards for outstanding production, visual design, and costumes. She created Company SBB in Paris in 2008 and relocated to New York City in 2011 for a residency at Baryshnikov Arts Center where she continues to develop projects and perform.

and grew skills I never thought I would need. And yet, of course, I remain who I am at my core: principal oboist of the New York City Ballet Orchestra, more sure of my dedication to the arts than ever before.

I am often asked if I ever get tired of playing *The Nutcracker*. At New York City Ballet, we perform this Tchaikovsky behemoth 50 times every year. I have a tally chart on the last page of the oboe part of how many *Nutcracker* performances I've done, a tradition passed down to me from my predecessors. Before the pandemic struck, I had just reached 300 *Nutcrackers*, which I know is just a small drop in the bucket compared to many of my colleagues. It is a score that keeps giving. I find new depths in it that lead me to play each performance with a little more understanding and pleasure. I marvel at the end of each show that I still have so much to learn from this great work and that I will have the chance to do so again the next night.

So, the answer is no, I never tire of *The Nutcracker*, and I don't believe I ever will. I hope I never again have to face a silent December as I did in the year 2020. I've missed the proud exhaustion of another long day's work rehearsing and performing, and I've missed our wonderful and exhilarating repertoire. This season features two of the great ballets (*Opus 19/The Dreamer* and *Glass Pieces*) of Jerome Robbins, who, like Balanchine, had impeccable taste in music. What a pleasure to encounter both of these ballets again.

Our community is large and collaborative throughout all its departments. We think of our stagehands, lighting directors, costumers, solo pianists, stage managers, and repertory directors as all part of our family. We've missed them. Our artistic vision would never become reality without them.

We in the orchestra are excited about the chance to once again “see the music” and “hear the dance” as we share our love of this great art form with all of you.

Julia DeRosa is the principal oboe of the New York City Ballet Orchestra, the second oboe/English horn of the Santa Fe Opera Orchestra, and the second oboe of the American Symphony Orchestra. She also performs regularly with the Metropolitan Opera, the New York Philharmonic, New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, New York City Opera, Orchestra of St. Luke's, American Ballet Theater, and the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival. Julia is on faculty at the Mannes School of Music at the New School. She is also the reed-making instructor at the Juilliard School.

2021 marks the fiftieth anniversary of Jerome Robbins' *The Goldberg Variations* at New York City Ballet. In his review of the premiere in the New York Times, dance critic Clive Barnes wrote: “Jerome Robbins' new ballet is a work of such amplitude and grandeur that it can make you fall in love with the human body all over again.” Set to Bach's *Aria* and 30 Variations, the ballet has proven to be an enduring masterwork.

The Goldberg Variations

Music

Johann Sebastian Bach: *Aria with Variations in G, BWV 988* (1742), “Goldberg Variations”

Choreography

Jerome Robbins

Premiere

May 27, 1971, New York City Ballet, New York State Theater

Original Cast

PART I: *Theme*, Renee Estópinal, Michael Steele; *Variations*, Gelsey Kirkland, Sara Leland, John Clifford, Robert Maiorano, Robert Weiss, Bruce Wells; *with* Bryan Pitts, David Richardson, Delia Peters, Christine Redpath, Bettijane Sills, Stephen Caras, Hermes Conde, Richard Dryden, Francis Sackett, Suzanne Erlon, Gloriann Hicks, Virginia Stuart; PART II: *Variations*, Karin Von Aroldingen and Peter Martins; Susan Hendl and Anthony Blum; Patricia McBride and Helgi Tomasson; *with* Merrill Ashley, Rosemary Dunleavy, Johnna Kirkland, Deborah Koolish, Gail Kachadurian, Colleen Neary, Susan Pilarre, Giselle Roberge, Polly Shelton, Marjorie Spohn, Lynne Stetson, Victor Castelli, Nolan T'Sani

Piano

Gordon Boelzner

Costumes

Joe Eula

Lighting

Thomas Skelton



Dancers of New York City Ballet in the original production of Jerome Robbins' *The Goldberg Variations*, 1971. Photo by Martha Swope.

Robbins' ticket to the premiere of his ballet *The Goldberg Variations*, 1971. Jerome Robbins Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.



“If a ballet is good, it’s all about experience. And maybe the experience cannot be detailed. It does not have to be a story, or a logical, specific, realistic experience. It could be an experience of something quite internal that you never have quite understood yourself or have never verbalized. It has nothing to do with words, it has to do with feelings.”

— JEROME ROBBINS (1970)



(left to right) Taylor Stanley, Daniel Applebaum, Abi Stafford, Lauren Lovette, Anthony Huxley, and Joseph Gordon in Jerome Robbins' *The Goldberg Variations* at New York City Ballet. Photo by Costas.



The photographer Costas was the photographer in residence at both New York City Ballet and American Ballet Theatre for over forty years. In addition, he has documented both the Kirov (Mariinsky) and the Bolshoi ballet companies on their U.S. tours since the 1960s. Hailing from the Greek island of Chios, Costas studied in the United States at Wagner College on New York's Staten Island, at Virginia Polytechnic Institute, and at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island where he focused on math and physics. When dance photography began to intrigue him, choreographer George Balanchine invited him to rehearsals. The resulting dance pictures have appeared in a variety of publications including books, periodicals, film and television footage and in gallery exhibitions around the world. Costas' 2003 book, *Balanchine: Celebrating a Life in Dance*, has gone through several editions. Costas was also responsible for the photographs included in the annual Balanchine calendar which featured dancers of the New York City Ballet for 19 years.



Photos by Costas of Jerome Robbins' *The Goldberg Variations* at New York City Ballet: Heather Watts and dancers from New York City Ballet; Ask LaCour and Teresa Reichlen; Amar Ramasar, Ashley Boudier, Megan Fairchild, and Jared Angle; and members of the company.



Jerome Robbins and J.S. Bach's *Goldberg Variations*

A Fusion of Gesture and Sound by Erinn E. Knyt

In 1937, William Dollar initiated what would eventually become an artistic trend by choreographing part of J.S. Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, BWV 988. Jerome Robbins subsequently choreographed the entire work in 1971, and at least eighteen additional choreographed versions have followed since that time. Although Dollar's version has not stayed in the repertoire, the setting by Robbins continues to be performed into the twenty-first century; it is often cited as a foundational model for other choreographers.

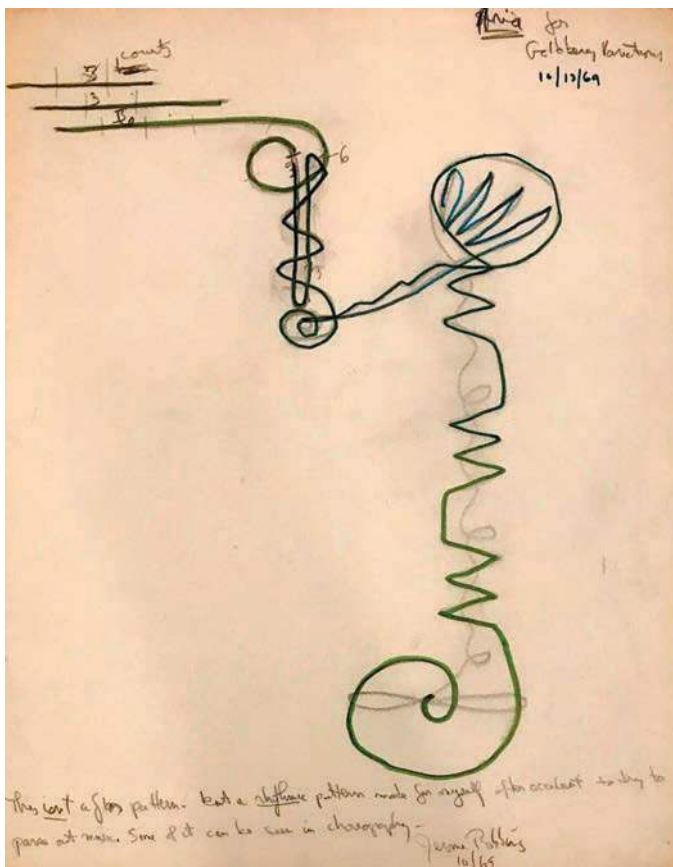
Robbins' version of J.S. Bach's *Goldberg Variations* is so closely tied to the composition that it can be viewed as a visual representation of Bach's music. Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, originally composed for a double manual harpsichord, consists of thirty variations on a 32-bar bass line. The variations are framed at the beginning and end by a lyrical aria. In addition, beginning with variation three, they follow a pattern in sets of three variations: 1. Canon; 2. Character sketch or dance; 3. Virtuoso variation. The rhythmic and dance-like character of many of the variations make them particularly suitable for choreographed movement; thus, it is unsurprising that so many choreographers have chosen to set this particular piece. Variation seven, for instance, is a lively gigue. In addition, there is an overarching architectonic structure to the piece, which is divided into two large parts by an austere and regal French overture in the middle (variation 16). This structure supports a seemingly infinite variety of Baroque styles of music. There are canons in trio-sonata textures, a fughetto, contrapuntal treatment of folk tunes, ornate and lyrical arias, and toccata-like pieces with numerous hand crossings. The variations range from the lyrical to the impassioned, to the somber, and the austere. They explore diverse technical skills, such as figural passage-work, ornamentation, and contrapuntal complexity.

When setting Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, Robbins opted for an abstract and non-narrative approach.¹ Robbins, who typically immersed himself in the music that he was choreographing, created a setting that physically embodies, encapsulates, and reflects the rhythms, styles, and forms found in Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. When setting variations five (a fast virtuosic toccata with numerous hand crossings) and six (a lyrical canon at the second in trio sonata texture), for instance, which he called playful and relaxed, respectively, Robbins chose related physical movements. He described his impressions of the music in the following manner: "Var[iation] 5 was about the zest of gamesmanship in

friendship— & that led me straight thru Var[iation] 6...a relaxed pause [...]."² Cameron Grant, pianist for a 2015 production of the Robbins version by the New York City Ballet noted that the rhythm and vitality of the music is integrally related to the motion and pacing of the dancers. Grant and dancer Tyler Angle argued that Bach's visceral music is integrally related the movements, specifically illustrating this in relation to variation 22, a fugato: "The music happens, and it is forcing him [the male solo dancer] to pick up the hand, another note, pick up the other hand, another note, turn your foot out, you are not done yet. The male solo music brings the dancer to life."³ The connection between the physical movements and Bach's music can also be observed in variation 25, for instance, which Robbins set as a *pas de deux*. One of only three variations in a minor key, the slow variation creates a stasis between vigorous variations. It is an embodiment of lyricism and teems with ornamentation. Robbins' choreography reflects the sounds when the female dancer slowly raises and lowers her legs in response to the rising and falling pitches in the melodic line.

In addition, Robbins depicted the encyclopedic stylistic variety found in Bach's variations through his encyclopedic use of dance steps. At the same time, Robbins' choreography reflected the larger bipartite structure of Bach's composition. Robbins reportedly stated: "It seemed to me that in the *Goldberg Variations*, Bach was describing something very big and architectural— very life-cycle, if you want, and so I thought I'd try that and see what I could do..."⁴ Robbins' choreography reflects the structure in Bach's music by getting decidedly more complex in the second part of the piece. He starts with simple dance steps often used only in the classroom, such as small jumps and frappés while the second half features more complex steps.

Robbins' setting of the *Goldberg Variations* remains, to this day, an iconic and monumental setting of Bach's masterpiece. Grant concludes that like any masterpiece, "It has the ability to slightly transform your life [...] it slightly alters your vision of the world."⁵ A similar sentiment is reiterated on the website of the Bayerische Staatsoper Ballet, which states that the "crown belongs to Jerome Robbins" and that the ballet has "transcended into a metaphysical event."⁶ Robbins' absorption of Bach's music and his transformation of the tones into gestures remains an unforgettable achievement as music and physical movement become one.



"Aria for Goldberg Variations," sketch by Jerome Robbins, created while in the process of choreographing *The Goldberg Variations*, 1969 ["This isn't a floor pattern, but a rhythmic pattern made for myself after accident trying to parse out music. Some of it can be seen in choreography." — Jerome Robbins, 10/69]. Jerome Robbins Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

1. For more information about Robbins' experience with music, see: Wendy Lesser, *Jerome Robbins: A Life in Dance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

2. Robbins, entry of March 11, 1970, in "Yucatán—New York Journal, Feb.–March 1970," in Amanda Vaill, ed., *Jerome Robbins, By Himself: Selections from his Letters, Journals, Drawing, and an Unfinished Memoir* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 287.

3. Cameron Grant and Tyler Angle, "NYC Ballet's Cameron Grant & Tyler Angle on Jerome Robbins' *The Goldberg Variations*," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZVIKlhrAGw> (accessed March 13, 2020).

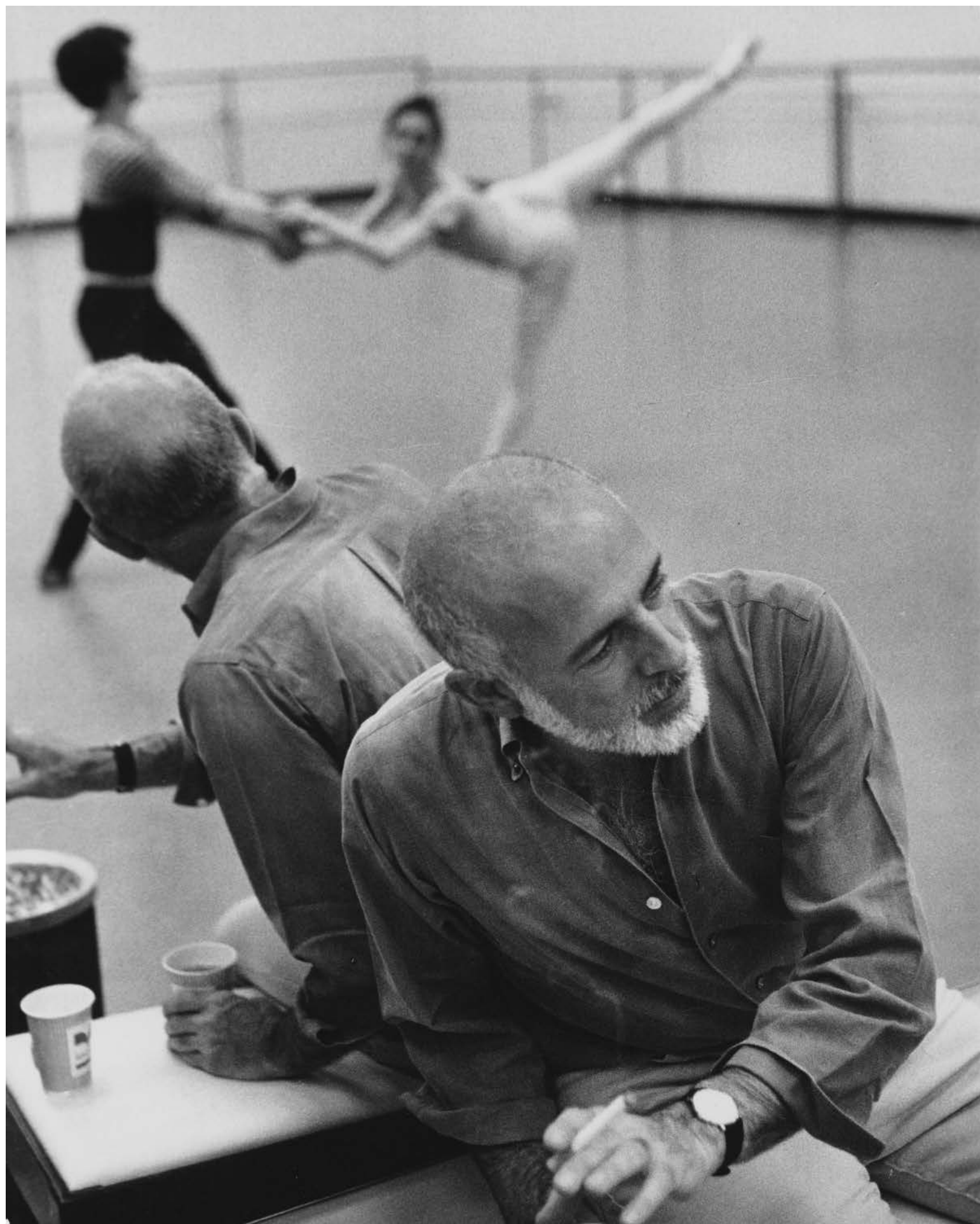
4. Robbins, quoted in "Robbins," *The New Yorker*, June 19, 1971, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1971/06/19/robbins-2> (accessed March 14, 2020).

5. Cameron Grant and Tyler Angle, "NYC Ballet's Cameron Grant & Tyler Angle on Jerome Robbins' *The Goldberg Variations*," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZVIKlhrAGw> (accessed March 13, 2020).

6. "Goldberg—Variationen/Gods and Dogs," Bayerisches Staatsballett, <https://www.staatsoper.de/en/staatsballett/productioninfo/goldberg-variationen-gods-and-dogs/2014-05-22-19-30.html> (accessed March 15, 2020).

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Jerome Robbins, Helgi Tomasson, and Patricia McBride rehearse Robbins' *The Goldberg Variations* at New York City Ballet, 1971. Photo by Martha Swope © Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.





Helgi Tomasson in Jerome Robbins' *The Goldberg Variations*, New York City Ballet. Photo by Costas.

The Goldberg Variations' 50th Anniversary

A conversation with Helgi Tomasson

In August 2021, Jerome Robbins newsletter editor Gregory Victor interviewed Helgi Tomasson in his office at San Francisco Ballet, in recognition of the fiftieth anniversary of Jerome Robbins' *The Goldberg Variations*, a ballet in which Mr. Tomasson originated a principal role. What follows are excerpts from that conversation.

Gregory Victor While choreographing *The Goldberg Variations*, did Jerome Robbins ever mention why he chose this music by Bach?

Helgi Tomasson He never talked about that—at least not to me, or Patty McBride, who I danced with in the ballet. He just choreographed and you did what he wanted. The only time that he talked about the music was when he did *Dybbuk*. Not only did he talk to us about the music, but he gave us the story to read, which for him was very unusual because he always kept his ideas very tight to himself.

GV *The Goldberg Variations* followed Robbins' twelve-year absence from New York City Ballet. He returned with *Dances at a Gathering* in 1969, followed by *In the Night* in 1970, and then *Goldberg*. One can't help but feel that *The Goldberg Variations* could only have been created after Robbins spent two years in the mid 1960s at his American Theatre Laboratory—an experimental theater workshop with no expectation of any performances. Once he returned to the Company, these ballets reflect that experimental period, don't you think?

HT Definitely. And going more towards the theatrical part with *Watermill*, for instance.

GV *The Goldberg Variations* premiered at New York City on May 27, 1971, but its first viewing was at an "open working rehearsal" in Saratoga Springs on July 4, 1970. What was the difference between the Saratoga performance and the premiere a year later?

HT I think the difference when we did it first in Saratoga to coming to the State Theatre—which I still call the State Theater, I'm sorry—I think there were some changes in the feeling of it. In the beginning, in Saratoga, he [Jerome Robbins] announced to the audience, "Please do not applaud," which was sort of, I don't want to say upsetting to us, but it was like what I would imagine the athletes in Tokyo are going through, where there is no audience. It felt like there was no audience, even though we knew they were there.

GV How much of it had been completed by that Saratoga performance?

HT I think most of it was, if not all. It was just that he was fussing with it. You know how he did, even with his Broadway shows he would go in and fix things.

GV At the Saratoga performance, wasn't a harpsichord used as accompaniment?

HT Yes.

GV Then, the harpsichord was replaced by a piano. Can you compare the two versions?

HT I preferred the piano.

GV You had rehearsed with a piano, correct?

HT Yes. I felt it was more dynamic. A harpsichord tends to be very delicate. You had to listen more carefully to the harpsichord music and put the choreography together with it. I could see his idea of having the harpsichord because it was Bach, and it was from that time, and he wanted to create something that was a blend of the old and the new—his new choreography, the old music—but I always felt that from an audience's point of view, they would prefer the piano. I always enjoyed it. It was nice to dance.

GV You were with the Harkness Ballet before joining New York City Ballet. While you were with Harkness, did you dance any Robbins ballets there?

HT *N.Y. Export: Opus Jazz*. But it goes back further than that, because my first year at the School of American Ballet was in 1960.

GV When Jerome Robbins arranged a scholarship for you. He'd seen you dance in Reykjavik, when you were 17 years old, when his company Ballets: USA was on tour, right?

HT Yes. He was the one who brought me to America.

GV When you came to America, you first joined the Joffrey Ballet, and then you joined the Harkness Ballet.

HT While I was with Harkness, we had gone to Indianapolis to appear at Butler University. We did some performances there just to get the feeling of performing together before we moved to New York, and Jerry came there. I remember he had torn his Achilles, and when we finished rehearsal, he asked me to stay because he wanted me to try a few things. He started telling me what to do, and it turned out that what he was making me work on ended up being Ricky Weiss's variation—the fast emboîtés changing direction—in *The Goldberg Variations*. He had me do all that, which he later used.

GV Before he choreographed *Goldberg* on you, had you danced any other of his ballets in the repertoire?

HT I had done a solo from *Dances at a Gathering* at the Moscow Competition in 1969. He gave me permission to do that. Before I got there, I realized that I wanted to bring repertory that was new to the Russians, and not do the standard *Don Q*, and *Black Swan*, and *Giselle*. So far as I know, Jerry never gave permission to a dancer to do any of his works at a competition. This was the one and only time. It was a big success, of course, in Russia, and I was thrilled to be able to do it.

GV Having danced both *Dances at a Gathering* and *The Goldberg Variations*, how would you describe your approach to each?

HT This is maybe the wrong thing to say, coming from myself, but I always felt I heard music the same way Jerry did. Each person hears music slightly differently. I say that because whenever we rehearsed, or whenever he choreographed, he didn't find any fault with it. It was like I did the right thing from the beginning. He never was upset with me. He never yelled at me. It was other dancers who got that, unfortunately. I had grown up in Iceland, hearing a lot of piano music by Tchaikovsky, Chopin... So, when *Dances at a Gathering* came along, I just felt this was right.

GV What was Robbins' choreographic process?

HT I remember being up in the big studio—and I'm just trying to think of what ballet it was—but he was choreographing, and he choreographed about eight bars of music and then told me, "Hmmm. No, no. Okay, Scrap it. Let's start again. Same music." This went on for two or three days. There were multiple versions. Six or seven versions of it. And then, he would say to me, "Do you remember the second version I did? Show it to me." Or the fifth one, or whatever. I don't know what it was, but I retained it. I was able to. And, of course, he was very pleased because he couldn't remember. But if somebody couldn't remember, he would get very upset. That's what I mean about hearing the music in the same way, and for me *Goldberg* was Jerry's encyclopedia. Everything he knew about dance, in that form of dance, he put in there.

GV In his choreographic notes, Jerome Robbins added descriptions to the variations—"class choreography," "on the beach," "conversations," "celebrate," etcetera. Did he ever describe the variations to you any other way than choreographically?

HT Yes, I think he did. In the heat of choreographing, he might say, "Well, think of it like you're having a conversation..." or something like that. But he didn't start the rehearsal by saying, "Okay, this is about this and this..." No. One thing I remember about *Goldberg* was—because I was in the second section—it felt like such a long wait, before you got out there. Then there was this long adagio that he had done for Patty and me—I think it lasted a little over seven minutes, and there was a joke in the wings, where the other dancers would ask, "Is Patricia upside down yet?" Because that was their cue to get ready for their next entrance. There were times I thought I heard it onstage, "Is Patty upside down yet?"

GV I wanted to ask you about the lifts that he choreographed for you, particularly the lifts in the 25th variation—the adagio. Did he demonstrate them while choreographing?

HT No, he would not demonstrate them. He would explain them—"Try this, and then move over there, and put the leg over there... and put your arm through this..." That type of thing. I recall—and I don't remember if it was for *Goldberg* or something else—that there were times when he was in the studio, choreographing, and asking for a lift, and he'd say, "I can't do it, because my back is bad." So, he relied on you to find what he was looking for.

GV And the wonderful moment when you and Patricia McBride both have your hand on your hips and throw your heads back and let out laughs in time to the music—did he ever discuss that? What is that moment about from your point of view?

HT It was something that Jerry found funny. When you say that, immediately I see his face lighting up and him going, "Ha! Ha! Ha!" I thought that he was like Santa Claus. That kind of thing. Jerry always thought it was very humorous and he always loved it. He always brought humanity to his work.

GV Toward the end of the ballet, the big group bow—is that bow to the pianist?

HT I think it was to the music. Bowing to the music.

GV In 1993, Robbins said, during an interview, that Mr. Balanchine suggested an ending for the ballet, which Robbins said he tried to do. Robbins found that it just didn't work for him, so he did not use it. Do you remember anything about Mr. Balanchine suggesting an ending?

HT I don't recall that, but I'm not surprised that Balanchine suggested something, because he was known for suggesting things with other choreographers.

GV The whole "full circle" aspect of the ending—with the dancers fading into the wings while, perhaps, the next generation steps forward—is almost a consecration of the art of ballet dancing.

HT That would not surprise me if that was his intention.

GV I want to ask you about the costumes, designed by Joe Eula. The way they evolve as the ballet continues—from the opening Baroque couple to a stage of dancers in contemporary practice clothes, to an accumulation of Baroque costumes for all, to the return of the opening couple, but this time in practice clothes—offers a guide to Robbins' theatrical concept of the ballet. When you previewed the ballet in Saratoga Springs, were you still in practice clothes?

HT I truly don't remember.

GV Might that have influenced Robbins' costume decisions? When he saw something by chance that he liked, he tended to want to keep it.

HT Now that you say this, I want to say, yes, we did use practice clothes, didn't we? Once we got to the State Theater, I remember those beautiful, formal jackets, sort of hinting of the 18th century period.

GV Did performing the ballet change you in any way, as a dancer?

HT I think the whole experience of being in New York City Ballet changed me—from the type of dancer I was, and what I was dancing before then. I just grew so much, and I have no doubt it was from the ballets of both Balanchine and Robbins. They were so superior to most of the things I had danced before that it made me come up to that level.

GV Is there any other insight you'd like to share about *The Goldberg Variations*?

HT Like Balanchine's *Liebeslieder Walzer*, *The Goldberg Variations* has two sections. In *Liebeslieder Walzer*, Balanchine did everything you could do with a waltz. And there were people in the audience who left *Liebeslieder* because it was so long. There's a wonderful story that I heard. There was a Russian lady who used to come very often to watch Balanchine's ballets and sit with him, and in that little break in the ballet, apparently there were a few people who got up to leave. She gasped and said, "Mr. Balanchine, there are people leaving. How awful!" And he said, "Ah, but look how many people are staying." I remember Balanchine saying once, "There might be only one person out there who appreciates what you're doing, but there's that one person."

GV What was the first Robbins ballet that you brought to San Francisco Ballet?

HT I seem to remember we did *Interplay*. Then *Glass Pieces*, *In the Night*, *Afternoon of a Faun*, *Dances at a Gathering*.

GV You took good care of his works. As only an artistic son could.

HT When you say "son"—when he brought a group to Jerusalem, to Israel, he did *Dances at a Gathering*. One day he said, "Come with me." It was just he and I. And he took me to the Wall, and he explained everything about it—the history, and what it meant, and all that. That meant a lot to me because my mother had divorced when I was five years old. She remarried when I was ten. My stepfather was very nice to me, but he was not like my father. I remember when I left New York City Ballet, I went upstairs to the office that he shared with Mr. B. He was there alone. I said, "Jerry, I just want to thank you for everything you've done for me, and the beautiful ballets that you let me dance." He said, "No, n-n-no, no, no. I thank you for dancing my ballets the way you did." And I said to him, "I have to tell you, Jerry." I said, "One of my fondest memories with you was not in a studio—although there are—but when you took me to the Wall, because that's what I thought, at that time, that fathers would do with their sons." And I meant that. And he looked at me, and he said, "Well, you have been like a son to me all these years."

Helgi Tomasson is regarded as one of the supreme classical dancers of his generation. Mr. Tomasson began his ballet training in his native Iceland and continued his studies at Denmark's Pantomime Theatre and at George Balanchine's School of American Ballet in New York. He then joined The Joffrey Ballet, and Harkness Ballet. In 1969, Mr. Tomasson entered the First International Ballet Competition in Moscow and returned home to the United States with the silver medal. The following year George Balanchine invited him to join New York City Ballet as a Principal Dancer. Mr. Tomasson left the stage in 1985, when he became Artistic Director of San Francisco Ballet.

NYPL for the Performing Arts' Jerome Robbins Dance Division 2021 Dance Research Fellows

The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts' Jerome Robbins Dance Division has selected its new class of Dance Research Fellows. Selected from a robust pool of applicants, these researchers and dance artists will explore the complex relationship between dance and democracy.

This year's fellows are:

Tommie-Waheed Evans
Petra Kuppers
zavé martohardjono
Ariel Nereson
Jason Samuels Smith
Huiwang Zhang

Each fellow will receive a stipend of \$7,500 and a research period from July 1 to December 31, 2021, to complete their work. The fellows will also enjoy the invaluable assistance of the Dance Division's curatorial and reference staff throughout the duration of their fellowship.

The Fellows will showcase the outcome of their research in a presentation or performance at a day-long symposium on Friday, January 28, 2022. The symposium — which serves as the culmination of the fellowship — is free and open to the public, and attendees are encouraged to observe as many presentations as possible throughout the day. Online reservations will be accepted beginning in late 2021. After the success of last year's virtual symposium, a virtual option will also be available.

The Jerome Robbins Dance Division Dance Research Fellows was created in 2014 to support scholars and practitioners engaged in graduate-level, post-doctoral, and independent research using the division's unmatched holdings.

The 2021 round of the Dance Research Fellows is made possible through the generosity of the Anne H. Bass Foundation, The Evelyn Sharp Foundation, the Geraldine Stutz Trust, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and the Committee for the Jerome Robbins Dance Division.



Dance Research Fellow Jason Samuels Smith's project aims to rebuild, restore, reclaim and reconnect to his roots. Challenging the current tap canon he will seek out alternate resources to surface an unwritten history in tap and to challenge a tap narrative that is scattered and skewed. Photo courtesy of Jason Samuels Smith and Divine Rhythm Productions.

With appreciation to NANCY LASSALLE



NANCY LASSALLE (1927–2021) devoted her life to the School of American Ballet and the New York City Ballet. After serving on both Boards for many years she continued as Trustee Emerita.

Founded in 2007, the Lassalle Cultural Program is named in honor of Nancy Lassalle, an SAB alumna who helped found the program and who dedicated her life to the promotion of the art of classical ballet exemplified by New York City Ballet and the School of American Ballet. The program services students at the School of American Ballet and aims for two principal outcomes. The first is to help students explore the history of ballet within the larger context of classical and contemporary art. The second is to ensure that students have opportunities to experience New York City's vast cultural landscape in ways that are educational and enriching for their developing artistry.

Over the course of the year, students have the opportunity to attend performances and exhibitions at The Metropolitan Opera, The New York Philharmonic, New York City Ballet, Jazz at Lincoln Center, The Guggenheim Museum, The Museum of Modern Art, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, as well as other non-ballet dance performances and Broadway theater.

A great supporter of the arts, Nancy left an indelible mark on many institutions, including the Jerome Robbins Dance Division at the New York Public Library and Eakins Press Foundation. What follows are tributes from colleagues and friends in her memory.

Nancy Lassalle with students from the School of American Ballet, 2019. Photo by Rosalie O'Connor.

Silas Farley

My first memories of Nancy are from when she would come to the School of American Ballet to watch classes, and when she would come to the student choreographic workshop. That was her vision. I was so thankful because at my school in Charlotte, North Carolina, my director there, Darleen Callaghan, with Jean-Pierre Bonnefoux and Patty McBride's total support, started a student choreography initiative, so I started choreographing when I was 11. When I got to S.A.B. at 14, I was too young to choreograph, so I farmed myself out as a rehearsal assistant to Lauren Lovette and Peter Walker, and different people who were just starting to choreograph. I was thrilled when I finally got my chance, and I was always very aware of the fact that it was this woman—who would be rolled in, in her wheelchair—whose vision was making this opportunity possible.

Then Nancy connected with me about doing a cultural program for the students. She asked if I would meet, which began what was a constant throughout most of my time in the Company—visits to Nancy's. In October 2012 I had just become an apprentice at New York City Ballet. Nancy asked me to be part of the development of an app, which would be called "Ballet Society: Conversations on Classicism." It was devised in the form of little discussions. There would be a slide, and then it would have a question that you would ask to catalyze discussion with a small group, and there was another button you could push where you could go even further into the idea. For example, there was an image of the golden ratio, and when you clicked on that, it would talk about that. Then it would show examples of different buildings in the history of architecture that were built with that, and the spiral, and the arabesque, and that kind of idea. You could go into it as deep as you wanted. I just remember going through all that material with her and thinking about what examples we should use. Then she wanted me to find a way to connect the students at the School with it. That was really our first project together, asking how the different art forms are networked to each other and inform one another. We did that for about a year, because although the app was interesting, we were in New York City. The app made sense if you were in another part of the country where you couldn't go to the Met, or to the performance, or to the lecture. Then we started thinking about this idea. The phrase we came up with was "the pedagogy of the direct encounter." Take the student to see the work of art and let that encounter shape them. One of the next things we did was to start planning different kinds of cultural excursions. I'd already had a long connection with the Library and with Nancy's guidance, we built a more formalized connection there so that at the beginning of every school year each new cohort of students would go over, get a Library card, and get a tutorial on using the research catalogue in the Dance Division. That developed into working closely with the Dance Education Coordinator, Kathleen Leary, and we started curating various lectures for the students.

I teach a class at Colburn every Monday called "Artistic Inquiry." The first day we introduced the students—kind of an ice-breaker—but then I immediately gave them a paradigm for George Balanchine and Merce Cunningham. Those were the choreographers whose visions would shape the work that the students would be doing in the first week, because the teachers on the faculty were teaching in the Balanchine aesthetic, and because a former Cunningham dancer—Tamsin Carlson—is their modern teacher. I wanted them to have a paradigm for what it looks like to work with a choreographer who sees the music and the dances as totally integrated, and what it is to work with a choreographer who sees the different disciplines as independent, but that can co-exist. That program is a time to put the classwork in context.

I think what really moves me is that every time I would go to her house, especially the last couple of years, I would always get a photo of her before I left, because I never knew if it would be the last time. So, I have a lot of sweet photos of just me and Nancy. So many times, I would go over and sit with her in her "salon" in her home, and she would just share her insights. I remember one time, it was around the time of the transition, she said, "Silas, New York City Ballet is an artistic animal, not a political tool." That's a direct Lassalle quote.

When I moved out of the city and was living in Texas, we talked a few more times. I told her about my plans to pursue leadership and education. She was so supportive of it, and I made a voice recording of our last conversation. She was frail, but her mind was still so keen, and it just moved me because to the very end she was fascinated and devoted to Lincoln and Mr. Balanchine's vision. It's almost

like she was meditating on how Mr. Balanchine showed us the possibilities of what the body can do, even beyond what the body can do. Always in an honorable way. Always in a humane way. In a noble way. A life devoted to pursuing beauty. And invention. And exploration. And devotion. I think a lot about that, because in that very first letter from Lincoln to Chick Austin, he said, "It won't be easy. It will require a lifestyle of service from all of us." That was Lincoln's whole point—we're here in service. And Nancy was the epitome of that. I think it's about devotion and curiosity and service, and I feel like Nancy modeled those three magnificently.

Silas Farley is Dean of the Trudl Zipper Dance Institute, and an Amplify Artist, at the Colburn School in Los Angeles. He began his training when he was 7 years old in Charlotte, North Carolina. He continued his training at Charlotte Ballet Academy and completed his training at The School of American Ballet. He joined New York City Ballet in 2012 and danced with the Company until 2020.

Barbara Horgan

I had come to New York City Ballet in May of 1953. I don't think I had met Nancy those first six months, but I did meet her in early 1954 because Lincoln [Kirstein] had asked if she could share my office. My office was the tiniest little room you've ever seen in your life. Naturally, I said yes. I even went to the building manager and found a desk and a chair. I came in one Sunday and painted it white. I put pencils and pens on her desk. She didn't have a phone. There was only one phone and we had to share it. And when she came into the little office, she said, "Oh my goodness," and she cried. I said, "What's the matter?" and she said, "Oh, my goodness, you're so kind. You've done so much. You did all this for me?"

I think Lincoln's idea was to try to promote her into fundraising. I think the first time I really felt that she put her able hands on doing something to raise money was with the first benefit we ever had, which was in 1962, of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. There was a dance and dinner gala. That was the first time I remember her galvanizing a group of people to support the Company. I saw quite a bit of her and she was [an] enormous support for me. It's hard to explain, but she was someone I could go to, and she always stuck up for me.

The first move the School [of American Ballet] made—from Broadway to Juilliard in the 1970s—was when she became interested, and as active as she could be, with regard to the students having more of an outside agenda, in the sense of the cultural world. She set up a library. The School had a relationship with the High School of Performing Arts, so Nancy would push the directors of the School into having a reading room and a place where the students could study dance or study art.

Nancy always had her hand in things, with furthering the education of the students at the School. I think the big moment for her was, after her own children grew up and her husband had died, when we moved into the Rose Building at Lincoln Center in the 1980s. That became a place she could focus on. She had made connections with the Library [for the Performing Arts], which she had always been involved with, and she went from there and developed her own program for the students, which included all sorts of things, and was hand in hand with the Library. She remained a really stalwart member of the board of both School and Company. If she didn't like something, she would say so. She really helped a lot of people to understand—to understand the School, to understand the art, and understand the history.

You have to remember that I met her in 1954 and it's now 2021. That's a long, long time. We were very tight, and we could confide in each other, and we both had some rough times. So, that's what a friendship is.

There are not a lot of people like Nancy. I can think of very few. But we were family. We were her other life. She loved her children, and she was a very good mother, but this was her life. She really felt it. I do feel Nancy's contributions were really important. I think it's about loyalty. People come and go. Nancy never came and went. She was there.

Barbara Horgan served as the personal assistant to George Balanchine from the 1950s until his death in 1983. She then served as the executor of his estate, followed by serving as the general partner and director the George Balanchine Trust from 1987 until 2004.

Peter Kayafas

Nancy Lassalle performed many roles in the world of dance during her long and preternaturally productive life: fierce devotee of the great Kirstein/Balanchine collaboration and its resultant school and company; beloved and generous patron of a variety of deserving organizations; outspoken board and committee member of places that will benefit from her exacting standards of hard work and moral decency for years to come. But it was her role in supporting the education of future dancers, her “kiddies,” as she referred to them, over generations of students at the School of American Ballet that was her greatest joy and will be her enduring contribution to posterity.

For those of us lucky enough to have known Nancy as both collaborator and friend (and that list is long given her 93 years of life), we shall mourn this great loss, but allow it to be mitigated by the knowledge that Nancy lived fully to the end, receiving in her last years the kind of recognition and celebration usually reserved for posthumous ceremony. Further, that her lifework will continue in the minds and bodies of the dancers she actively nourished through the many aspects of her support. This was her greatest wish in life. Fortunately, she had the prescience to ensure there were people left behind who would work tirelessly to see it to perpetual fruition in her stead.

Peter Kayafas is a photographer, publisher, curator, and teacher who lives in New York City where he is the Director of the Eakins Press Foundation.

Kay Mazzo

One of the things that people always talk about is institutional memory, and to me Nancy is the epitome of that because she started out as a student. Way before many of us knew the School, she knew it. She knew Balanchine and knew his training, and she saw the Company come to fruition. So, when she talked about the past, I understood that she was looking at it with eyes like I would look, as a dancer, which is pretty remarkable.

I saw Nancy when I first joined the Company. She would give these wonderful parties, and she'd invite the whole company. She was somebody who was around all the time. I remember her coming on tours and showing up in different places. She was there when we traveled to difficult places. I'm pretty sure she was in Dubrovnik during the first tour I was ever on.

I came to the School in '81, '82 — filling in teaching, when anybody was sick. Mr. Balanchine said, “Well, if you feel like you're going to retire, then you'll go and teach at the School.” Nancy was there to help financially, to bring people in, and help with fundraising. That was what she wanted to do. Then, when Mr. Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein were no longer there, she did her writing, her books, and she got much more involved with the School because I think she realized that, as Mr. Balanchine had said, “But first, a school.” And if something's wrong with the school, then you're in trouble. All these years, Nancy would come in and out of class, watching, but not to talk about the students. It wasn't to come in and say, “Oh, well, this is the person I think is going to be —”, or whatever. No. She came in to see how it was all going, who was teaching, and how it was all being taught. She never interfered with that, but we all know that if Nancy thought something was wrong, she would have said something. Luckily, she felt it was all going very well. Even towards the end, she said, “I know the School is in good hands, and it's going in the right direction.” She was very protective of the School. When we'd get together and have lunch at her apartment over the last 10 to 12 years, that mind was still very bright, and she'd talk about the way the dancers looked, the way the students looked, and how proud she was of the School. I felt that if *she* thought that way, then it wasn't just my thinking that the School was doing well, but it was from somebody who had seen it from its baby beginnings, and knew that we were going in the right direction.

Mr. Balanchine surrounded himself with quality. You had Eddie Bigelow, you had Betty Cage, you had Barbara Horgan, and you had Nancy. The people around Mr. Balanchine, he knew who he could trust. They were very few, and Nancy was one of them. We were so lucky to have her, and to have her as long as we did. Look what she did with Silas. She brought him, this brilliant, young

man, who wanted to hear from her and wanted to learn from her, and she was so open and willing to do that, and work with him. She understood her usefulness, and she was there to serve. It was always in service. Mr. Balanchine used the word, too. “I'm there to serve,” and boy, did he serve well. It was about loyalty.

I think sometimes that I didn't recognize the fact that I was there every day with Balanchine, working with him. You know, it was what we did. I was only there because of him. Nancy was only there because of him. She wanted to remind people what the School is, and represents, and what it stands for, how well we do what we do, and why we do things the way we do it. If something was going wrong, she was going to tell whoever, and if something was going right, she would also be right there for it. And the fact is she always spoke her mind. I think that's hard to do. You know, if you don't look at the past, you don't learn from the past, and you make some of the same mistakes. So, you have to learn from the past and do what you think is right. But you can't say, “Oh, that was a long time ago, that doesn't matter.” She always had her opinions and wanted people to hear them, but it wasn't to say, “50 years ago was the right way.” Not at all. She was very *au courant*. I think it's the honesty of how Nancy looked at what she was looking at, when she was looking at the Company and the School. She was somebody who always had an attitude of going forward, making things better.

Her presence was bigger than life. She always wanted the students to know that the ballet world was part of a bigger art world. Part of the world. She wanted that all to be part of the school training, which it has become. For a long time, we didn't have the money to do that, and Nancy made sure that something like that would be carried out, and it's all important to the students. You know, you can't live in this little world. You have to see what's going on in the rest of the world, and the rest of the art world, and she made sure that our students get an idea of what they should be seeing, and learning, and trying to find out what's going on in this big world and trying to see so much and understand so much. We have the Lassalle Cultural Program, and that will continue.

Again, when I go back to the idea of institutional memory, I just keep thinking that hers is the heart and soul of the memory of the company, and the heart and soul of what both the Company and the School represents. So, it's institutional memory, but it's more than that. It was her life, like most of us.

Kay Mazzo is the Chairman of Faculty at the School of American Ballet.

Jonathan Stafford

Nancy Lassalle was one of those individuals whom you never forgot even after just one encounter. I clearly recall seeing the beautiful and elegant Nancy walking through the halls at SAB when I was a student at the School. When I asked who she was, I was told that she was Nancy Lassalle, one of the most important people in the history of SAB and NYCB.

I was enthralled with Nancy and her long connection to Balanchine and both SAB and NYCB. I tried to learn as much about her and her story as I could. For years after that first encounter, I was a bit nervous when in her presence, which I think came from the enormous influence and importance she carried. I always sought her opinion of my work. We had short conversations over the years, but I'll never forget any of the words she spoke to me.

Her kindness and direct nature were always evident and her passion and care for preserving Balanchine's ideals at NYCB and SAB were second to none. Nancy's profound generosity has impacted countless young dancers and her legacy will live on for many years to come. I miss her deeply and I thank her from the bottom of my heart for all she was in our lives.

Jonathan Stafford is the Artistic Director of New York City Ballet and the School of American Ballet. A former NYCB Principal Dancer, he retired from performing in 2014 and was named one of NYCB's Ballet Masters. In 2017, he was appointed to lead NYCB's interim artistic team and in February 2019, he was named Artistic Director of NYCB and SAB.

From the Archives

Nancy Lassalle and Anna Kisselgoff in conversation

In 2011, dance critic and writer Anna Kisselgoff interviewed Nancy Lassalle, Trustee Emerita of both the School of American Ballet and the New York City Ballet, as part of the Jerome Robbins Foundation's Oral History Project. The interview took place in Nancy Lassalle's apartment in Manhattan. What follows is an edited excerpt from that conversation.

Anna Kisselgoff Nancy, you are a longtime observer of Jerome Robbins' association with New York City Ballet, and I'd like to ask how you became associated with the School of American Ballet and New York City Ballet. You had studied at the School of American Ballet first, as a young person, right?

Nancy Lassalle Yes, but I didn't become a dancer. I wasn't very musical, I was too tall, and I began too late. Nevertheless, I tumbled to ballet and I've never left. My first memories of Jerry Robbins were in *Fancy Free*, like everybody else, I imagine, of my age. It was a knockout and at that point I was young, and I wasn't associated officially with anything, except that I was glued to the School and to whatever Balanchine did next.

AK What was your association with Ballet Society?

NL My association was as a member. It was a member driven company. And my friends, my links with Lincoln and Balanchine and Pat and Tanny—and all of that—became my world. Without me dancing. Ballet Society, you know, was only '46 to '48. New York City Ballet started in '48. And that is the permanent thing with which one is associated. Ballet Society, once it stopped being a producing organization, was taken over by Betty Cage. To keep it going it accepted commissioned gifts. It did continue what Lincoln had started—publishing—and then I inherited it from Betty. In general, the proper thing for it is publishing and education, and we still have it. I am in the process of setting up a cultural curriculum using Ballet Society as its producer and so on, for the School of American Ballet. It's still a co-publisher with the Eakins Press for a number of books having to do with Balanchine, Lincoln, and so on. But it's limited to Lincoln and Balanchine kinds of things, not further afield.

AK You were a supporter on many levels of New York City Ballet, including philanthropic support, and you were present and aware of what was going on when Jerry Robbins joined New York City Ballet in the bridge between '48 and '49.

NL Yes.

AK Did you see Jerry as a dancer in the early years?

NL Yes, he was so witty, and so marvelous, and he was a wonderful actor. When you think of him in *Prodigal Son*—

AK Well, how was he?

NL Fabulous.

AK But he did it through his dramatic projection, rather than through the huge jumps that Edward Villella did later, right?

NL Oh, yes.

AK What were Jerry's qualities in *Prodigal Son*—acting?

NL Well, I don't think acting so much as a kind of inner feeling for what the thing really was.

AK Do you remember anything of his early ballets?

NL Yes. *Age of Anxiety*. I remember that the most.

AK And then, in the early '50s, of course, it was *The Cage* and *Afternoon of a Faun*. Would you like to speak about any of those ballets?

NL Well, I would say *Faun*, and I still feel this way, was really a masterpiece and the very, very best of Jerry. It had this beautiful set by Jean Rosenthal, and it was, in its way, perfect, I thought—and think.

AK Do you think—and I ask this question because he referred to this himself—that when he came back to City Ballet in '69 he wanted to be more abstract, less narrative? On the other hand, many people feel that his masterpieces were things like *Faun*, which evoked a situation that was emotional rather than pure dance—

NL The pure dance in *Faun* was perfectly beautiful.

AK And what did you think of *The Cage*?

NL Well, you know, it's, in its way, brilliant. And it's lasted. I can't say I love it, but I admire it. Whereas *Faun* I really love and admire. When I see *Faun* now, I think, *Ooh, beautiful*.

AK Were you able to watch any rehearsals of Robbins ballets over the years?

NL Oh, sure. At New York City Ballet. And then he wasn't there for a while.

AK Were you present at the rehearsals for *Dances at a Gathering*? Can I ask your opinion of that ballet?

NL I think it's way up there. It's terrific. It's a beautiful, beautiful ballet. It allows the dancers a lot of room to grow.

AK Do you have a favorite Robbins ballet? *Faun*?

NL I think *Dances at a Gathering*, as well. Shall I be very frank?

AK Yes.

NL I worry that Jerry's repertory won't survive in as wide a range as one would hope.

AK And why is that?

NL I don't know. Certain things were too ephemeral to begin with. You know, another ballet that's quite touching is *Antique Epigraphs*.

AK That's interesting. A lot of people can't connect with it. Tell me how it appeals to you about it.

NL Well, the dancers, each one, have quite lovely things. It's not a huge, major work, but it's lovely in its context.

AK You've really hit upon something. It's not cold aesthetics. There is a warmth about it.

NL Oh, it's lovely, if you really look at it that way. It's beautiful. Again, it allows the dancers to do with it what they can.

AK Do you think that he had a company within a company? Balanchine was quite apt to take anybody out of the corps and put them in the role that he wanted. Jerry concentrated, sometimes, on dancers that he liked—like Patricia McBride and Villella, or Patricia McBride and Helgi Tomasson—but he brought out Peter Martins. Peter's first major role was in *The Goldberg Variations*, not in the Balanchine ballets. What do you think of *Goldberg*?

NL Oh, I like *Goldberg*. I wouldn't say it's my favorite, but I like it. I admire it. I remember when it was growing, as a ballet. I think it's up there, as a major work, don't you?

AK I think so. It's a special kind of work. Maybe it's good that it's in a class by itself and we don't see that many works like it. It's a full work, rich in technique and imagination... Balanchine always said the vocabulary extends through the choreography, and not in daily class where you keep doing the same thing.

NL He invented a lot in his daily classes. But Jerry did too.



Nancy Lassalle with students from the School of American Ballet, in Jerome Robbins' *Mother Goose Suite*, 1991. Photo by Paul Kolnik, courtesy of William H. Wright II.

AK Did Jerry ever give class?

NL Here and there. The ballet that he got closest to all that was the little ballet that he did for the School.

AK *2 & 3 Part Inventions*. The Bach ballet.

NL Now that's a very pretty little thing. He did that for the School specifically for the Workshop. And he was lovely with the kiddies. Another ballet where he had a lot of fun with the dancers—and it works in its way—was *Mother Goose*.

AK You were the storyteller—

NL Oh, very late on.

AK The ballet was premiered with Sophie Pourmel as the Reader. Can you tell me how he approached you and what direction he gave you?

NL I don't think he gave me much direction. Jean-Pierre Frohlich was really in charge of things like that. But Jerry came up to me one day in the hall and said, "Would you like to do *Mother Goose* now that your hair is grey?" And I said, "Oh, my goodness. I've never been onstage before," and so on. But I was extremely nervous, and very bad about the music. Jean-Pierre helped me completely because he was on the stage at the same time.

AK So, he came up to you, and you said yes?

NL I said yes. He helped me a bit here and there and he was very nice to me.

AK Tell us what you had to do.

NL Nothing! You walk in and you sit down, and you read the book, by turning the pages to the music. And then you turn a little bit to the dancers. You're reading to them, after all.

AK That's the whole point because the dancers become the characters.

NL Yes. And then you get up and go away. And the ballet begins. You're *Mother Goose*, and that's what you're reading. It sets a kind of tone.

AK How did you feel?

NL I was thrilled.

AK Don't you think that's part of his experimental way of dealing with things—putting non-performers into those roles? The ballet was full of in-jokes about New York City Ballet props and costumes, and here was somebody who those in the know knew. They knew you.

NL Absolutely. I will say that kind of thing he was charming about, and we know that he was one of the funniest characters ever. At Ballet Theatre, when he was just beginning, he was all over the place in that way.

AK In what way?

NL Funny. Amusing, Witty.

AK He had a sense of humor.

NL Oh, a vast sense of humor. Then on Broadway, of course, it flourished.

AK I've heard many good things about him in these Oral History interviews and some people feel that although he worked in a way that provoked dancers, and he yelled at them, that his reputation for bullying has snowballed and that it's basically unjustified.

NL No, I don't think unjustified, but I do think it has snowballed and been taken right out of proportion. I do think he worried terrifically all the time whether each ballet was going to be a success, as the kind of successes he had on Broadway. And then his nervousness about not being Balanchine, and wishing he were. All that pertained, but I think it's way out of proportion. It wasn't charming, but it wasn't as terrible as everybody likes to blow it up to. It was at times a pain in the neck.

AK Could you give me an example?

NL Oh, too much rehearsal time. Demanding. The source was nervousness. But Balanchine let him do it.

AK How would you say the unholy trio—Balanchine, Lincoln, and Robbins—managed to survive for so many years?

NL Because Balanchine valued Jerry to the nth degree.

AK Why did he value him?

NL Well, you have only to look. And Balanchine understood Jerry's American contribution to everything. Whatever went on, Balanchine understood it perfectly.

AK Do you feel that Lincoln, like Balanchine, understood that at times they needed Jerry?

NL Yes.

AK In the early years, when they went to Europe, Jerry's ballets were the big success. When I saw the company in France, Jerry's ballets were, quote, more successful, with the audience—only the audience.

NL Jerry's ballets, in France, have always, always been on top. To France, after all, Balanchine was more conventional. And Jerry was American. To me it's very clear, but you have to be fairly honest with yourself to say things like that.



Pianist Susan Walters and NYCB MOVES dancers Unity Phelan and Andrew Veyette in Jerome Robbins' *In the Night* at the Vail Dance Festival, 2021. Photo by Christopher Duggan.

cover: Allegra Kent and Jacques d'Amboise in Jerome Robbins' *Afternoon of a Faun* at New York City Ballet, 1965. Photo by Martha Swope © The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

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Upcoming Performances of Jerome Robbins Works

A SELECT LIST

JANUARY 14, 24, 28, 31 / FEBRUARY 3, 21, 26 / MARCH 1 (2022)

OTHER DANCES
Vienna State Ballet, Vienna

FEBRUARY 3, 5, 8, 9, 11, 13 (2022)

IN THE NIGHT
San Francisco Ballet, San Francisco

FEBRUARY 18, 19, 20 (2022)

2 & 3 PART INVENTIONS
Oklahoma City Ballet, Oklahoma City

APRIL 1, 2, 3, 7, 9 (2022)

GLASS PIECES
Ballet West, Salt Lake City

APRIL 29, 30 / MAY 3, 21 / JUNE 2 (2022)

THE CONCERT
Slovenska National Theater, Bratislava

Please keep in mind that cancellations or postponements are always possible.