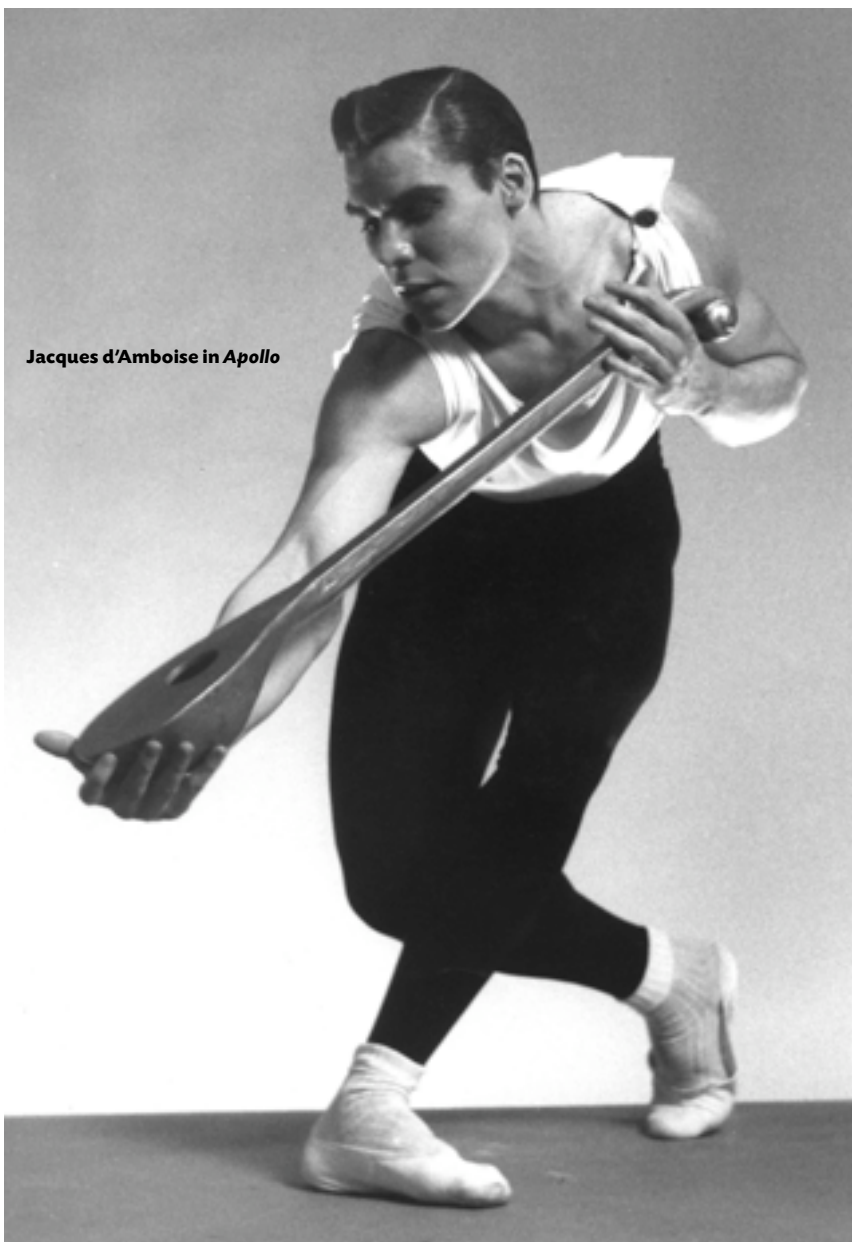


by Katia Bachko

# Jacques d'Amboise

Life is never dull for the famed dancer and educator.



Jacques d'Amboise in *Apollo*

Spend five minutes with Jacques d'Amboise and you'll believe that amazing things can happen: that children in New York's public schools can help eliminate poverty in Africa and that dreams really do come true.

D'Amboise's life story reads like an adventure novel. As a legendary New York City Ballet principal, he created roles in countless ballets and partnered numerous well-known ballerinas, including Suzanne Farrell. Even after his retirement, d'Amboise has remained in the spotlight, thanks to National Dance Institute, the outreach organization he founded in 1976. To date, NDI has provided dance training to more than 75,000 children in NYC's public schools. For his accomplishments in performance and education, d'Amboise has been honored with The Kennedy Center Honors Award, a National Medal of the Arts and a New York Governor's Award.

Now, the exuberant 71-year-old takes a break from his hectic schedule—you should see his day planner!—to share some wisdom and stories from along the way.

*Dance Teacher:* What are you working on these days?

**Jacques d'Amboise:** This year, National Dance Institute is going to adopt a village in Senegal, called Potou. We're going to get children in NYC to raise money—\$50 each for the whole year.

This money will be matched by individuals and given to Millennium Promise [Columbia University professor Jeffrey Sachs' initiative to eradicate poverty one village at a time]. Imagine if children all over the world could send \$1 or \$10 to Millennium Promise—it could be millions of dollars. But no matter what, NYC school children will raise \$25,000 this year.

**DT:** Have you observed any trends in dance training today?

**JD:** Most of the ballet training is not good. It's because movement allows so much more latitude than music, for example, and dance movement is so much more complex than sound. Lift your right foot and put it directly in front of you. Someone may not put it directly in front; they'll put it to the side, or right off, or they won't really lift it and teachers don't stop them. They let it go by.

Now in music, lift your index finger and put it on middle C. If you don't put it on middle C, you're hitting D or B! It has to be precise.

So in ballet, glissade front: front is directly front, like a straight line; it's geometric. If you were teaching fencing, karate or boxing, you'd have to be more precise. And that's the problem with teaching dance. Instructors want to please their pupils. They don't want to make them work! "I know this is early in the morning, so take it easy, we don't have to do 64 front. We'll only do 8." Why not do 64? You're trying to develop a skill.

**DT:** Both your son Christopher and your daughter Charlotte are in the dance world. (A Broadway veteran, Charlotte will perform the lead role in the upcoming revival of *A Chorus Line*, while Christopher is an acclaimed choreographer.) Do you give them advice on their careers? Do they come to you for guidance?

**JD:** No, I keep out of it. I love every-



Jacques d'Amboise with Ellen Weinstein, artistic director of National Dance Institute, and students.

Eduardo Patino/Courtesy of National Dance Institute

thing they do, and they're really talented, but I keep away from it because you can't tell your children what to do. The whole purpose of bringing them up is [so that] when they're through their teens, they don't have to depend on anybody telling them what to do. Every time I've tried to, it's a disaster. They rebel, they get irritated, they do the opposite.

**DT:** Do you keep up with NYCB? Do you see performances often?

**JD:** The problem is that every time I see a ballet that I've seen other people do, I see the ghosts. So I see Todd Bolender in *Agon* and in *Fanfare* and *Four Temperaments*. And nobody's like him. Arthur [Mitchell, NYCB principal, founder and artistic director of Dance Theatre of Harlem] was wonderful, and Baryshnikov, but none of them are like Todd. Todd is 93 years old, and he imbues the stage for me in those ballets. And Eddie V[illella] in *Rubies* and other roles—you see little Eddie there, and you miss Eddie's energy and smiles, and his eagerness to please.

**DT:** During your time at NYCB, what was your favorite ballet to perform?

**JD:** Melissa Hayden had the answer to that. "Dance is my favorite ballet. And what I'm doing tonight is the whole world. After that I don't know." Every performance was my first, because I was new. Different from yesterday, maybe a little better than yesterday. And it may be my last. So it's the first and last performance every time you go onstage.

Some roles, even at the height [of

your career], you can't do them any better, because the challenge is better than you. In other words, you reach a certain plateau and it's a plateau that is equal to the challenges of the piece. Some ballets are beyond your ability to ever reach, and for me, *Apollo* was that. I just staged it for a beautiful dancer in San Francisco, and I did it for Arthur Mitchell the other day, and they're wonderful, but they didn't have Balanchine to teach them. You can't have someone staccato when it should be legato.

So you won't see that ballet done again like it was done. And I was never good enough for it. I wasn't. I did it exclusively for 15 years; I worked on it beyond belief, and I had Balanchine constantly coaching me, but I could never achieve the possibilities in that ballet.

So I think the most interesting ballets to dance are those that demand more than you're capable of. And you have to strive to be equal to that demand. But the other thing is that dance is whatever you do at the moment.

**DT:** If you didn't have a career in dance, what would you have done instead?

**JD:** I had dreams of being a priest, I had dreams of being an archeologist, I had dreams of being a forest ranger. I seriously thought about going into medicine, and when I first had to stop [dancing] for a while because of my knee injury, I thought 'That's what I'll do—I'll be a doctor.' But I had dropped out of high school. So I would have had to finish high school, college and then medical school. But those were dreams. I could have probably been a really great gangster. **DT**