

# *The Boy Who Became a Dancer*

The story of  
JACQUES  
D'AMBOISE

by Fanny Wong

SEVEN-YEAR-OLD  
JACQUES LOVED

living in Washington Heights in New York City. In 1941, it was a vibrant working-class neighborhood. He and his pals whooped up and down the stoops of apartment buildings. They played on the rail tracks bordering the Hudson River.

The iron trestles over the tracks became the battle decks of a ship. The neighborhood cemetery was a perfect spot to sit on “ghost dust” and tell scary stories. Saturdays were the best days of the week for fun with his friends.

Not this Saturday! Jacques’s mother dragged him to Madame Seda’s Dance Studio to watch his sister’s ballet class.

“Ah, Boss, do I have to go?” Jacques asked. “I want to play with the fellas.”

“Of course, and you will love it,” his mother said.

Jacques and his three siblings called their mother “the Boss” because she made plans for them no matter what they thought.

At the ballet studio, Jacques plopped on a bench while his sister danced. What could be more yawn-inducing than watching little girls prancing in pink tights and wispy tutus? Thoroughly bored, Jacques couldn’t sit still and made irritating little noises, chirping, clicking, and burping. Jacques’s mother gave him a stern look. Madame put a finger to her lips.

Eyeing a box of rosin—bright yellow crystals of pine sap that dancers rub on the soles of their shoes to make the floor less slippery—Jacques imagined the crystals were nuggets of gold. He ground some with his feet.

LOOK—I'M DOING FIFTH POSITION!



*Crunch, crunch, crunch.* He closed his eyes and saw himself fighting with pirates over gold dust. Swords clashed and clanked in his imagination.

Madame's voice brought Jacques back to the studio. "If you have so much energy, little brother, do these jumps. See if you can jump as high as the girls."

Madame propped Jacques into fifth position, with his legs crossed and feet sideways, pointing in opposite directions. His right foot was in front, its heel against his left big toe, and his knees turned outward.

"Now leap into the air and change your feet so when you land your left foot is in front."

Jacques sprang into the air, his arms flailing. Somehow he landed in the correct position.

"Good! That's called a changement," said Madame. "Now do thirty-two of them without a stop."

Jacques jumped and landed, jumped and landed, popping up and down like a pogo stick. He was flying! His grin grew wider and wider. He imagined that a red cape billowed behind him and a sword dangled from his belt. It was more fun than he expected.

Madame liked how high Jacques jumped. Jacques's mother agreed to bring him back to the studio every

BUT-BUT-BUT— YOU ONLY HAVE ONE FOOT!



Saturday. She was eager to keep her son off the city streets where he might get into trouble. Jacques would rather be scaring his friends in a dark, abandoned icehouse, but the Boss was not a person to say no to.

Class after class, Madame trained Jacques to bend his knees into a plié, so he could spring and land his jumps as softly as a cat. He learned to point his toes and to move his arms, head, and shoulders gracefully, like a dancer. He didn't mind being the only boy in the class.

After six months, the Boss was pleased when Madame recommended that Jacques and his sister attend the School of American Ballet, a prestigious academy for professional dancers that had recently begun a program for children. There, Jacques impressed



Jacques dancing a hoedown at about age ten

EVERYBUGGY ON YOUR TDEES, IF YOU'VE GOT 'EM! CHANGEMENT! PLIÉ! PIROUETTE!



MEW!

COM CA!



HOW'S MY PIROUETTE? ONE FOOT, RIGHT?



TOTALLY.

George Balanchine, the school's Russian-born founder and a world-renowned teacher and choreographer.

Balanchine created a dance for the nine-year-old Jacques in the role of Puck, a mischievous sprite in the ballet *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The Boss made Jacques a chocolate-brown costume and attached clusters of fake grapes and berries to it. The fabric was the itchiest wool. But Jacques forgot his itching when he began to dance! He jumped high, kicking his feet behind. On landing, he wiggled his bottom. The applause made him feel like he had scored a home run in a baseball game. He even earned ten dollars for the performance!

The kids in Jacques's Catholic school teased him about ballet classes. One tough boy confronted him. "You a sissy?"

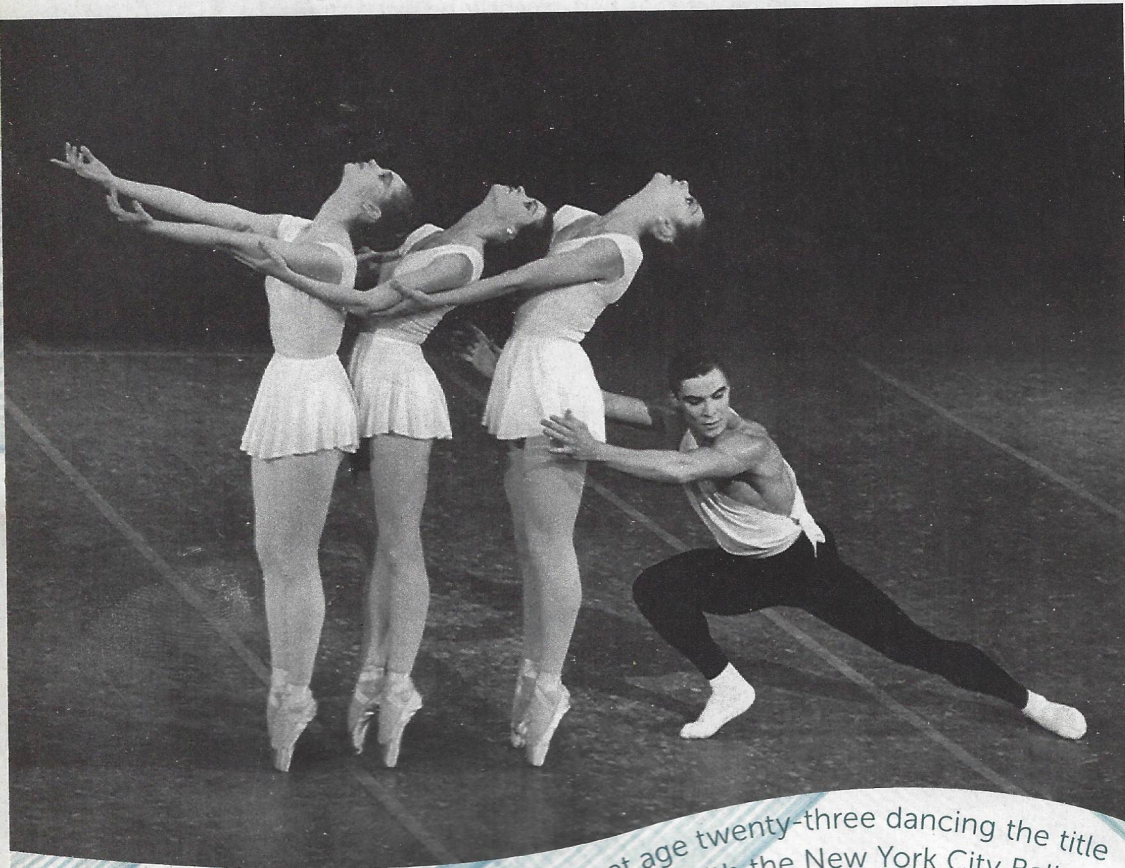
Jacques replied, "Ballet's great. It's so hard."

Jacques told them about a male dancer, Eglevsky, who had muscular thighs as big as their chests and did a jump called a sauté. Jacques put down the bag that held his tights and T-shirt for dance, stood in fifth position, leaped in the air sideways over the bag, and landed on the other side.

"Here, you want to try it?" Jacques challenged the boys. They tried the sauté to comical effect. They struggled to get their feet into fifth position and jumped awkwardly over the bag, landing with whirling arms and

unsteady feet. On other days, Jacques demonstrated pirouettes and the latest steps he'd learned, eliciting *oohs* and *ahs*. Not only did these boys accept Jacques's ballet classes, the whole school did, too.

Jacques remained one of the rough and tumble boys in the neighborhood. Although busy with school and dance lessons, he still found time to get into mischief with his young gang. He tingled



Jacques at age twenty-three dancing the title role in *Apollo* with the New York City Ballet

with excitement when he acted as a lookout for the Panthers, a gang of older boys who shoplifted and broke into cars. If Jacques saw a police car coming, he warned the gang with a loud whistle, then yelled the signal, "Chickie! Chickie!" He loved life on the streets.

Meanwhile, in his other life of ballet, Jacques was beginning to dance more small roles on stage. He watched productions starring dancers he admired. Sitting up tall in his seat, lips apart, eyes wide open, he was entranced by the dancers, the lighting and scenery. It was magic. Most of all, he lost himself in the beautiful music of the ballets.

Still, Jacques had not left the streets. One day when he was fourteen, a gang member threatened him with a knife. Jacques's grand battement, a big kick, sent the knife flying and the gang member onto the ground. This incident made Jacques aware how dangerous life on the streets could be.

Back in the ballet school, Balanchine watched Jacques try to copy the best male dancers in the professional company. He noticed the athleticism, exuberance, joy and most of all, musicality in Jacques's dancing.

Balanchine asked Jacques, "Maybe you would like to join our company? We are making it bigger. How old are you now?"

A stunned Jacques answered, "Fifteen."

"Maybe you should talk to your parents and let us know," Balanchine said.

The Boss couldn't have been happier with the invitation. Her rambunctious boy wouldn't have time to be in the wrong crowd. But what did Jacques want? As a child, he had

wanted to be a pilot, a superhero, or a director of movies. Now that he had been introduced to the world of ballet, did he want to cut off the world of the streets he knew and loved?

Jacques loved to move to music, whether in class, at rehearsal, or during a performance. After he had learned the steps, the music set him free to dance, to soar. But if he chose to be a dancer, he had to calm down. He couldn't be a noisy wild brat backstage or in the dressing room. Aside from the professional male dancers in the American Ballet Company, Jacques didn't know any men or teenagers who were dancers.

Jacques also loved his rowdy self on the streets of Washington Heights. He wouldn't have time to fool around with his friends. He would miss the petty crimes that excited him. He had so much energy, he could light up the whole neighborhood. But he was with a wrong crowd. It was a big decision for a fifteen-year-old.

In the end, Jacques could not resist the pull of beautiful music and movement. He chose to be a dancer. He dropped out of high school and began a new life of hard work and discipline.

In daily classes, inspiring teachers and dancers showed Jacques the magic of dance. He repeated the exercises that made a dancer powerful and elegant. He learned to partner a ballerina, but it was hard to develop the muscles to lift her. Classes ended with him dripping sweat and panting. The rehearsals were long and exhausting. He suffered sprained ankles, stubbed toes, and bruised

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ENERGY, EXCITEMENT.



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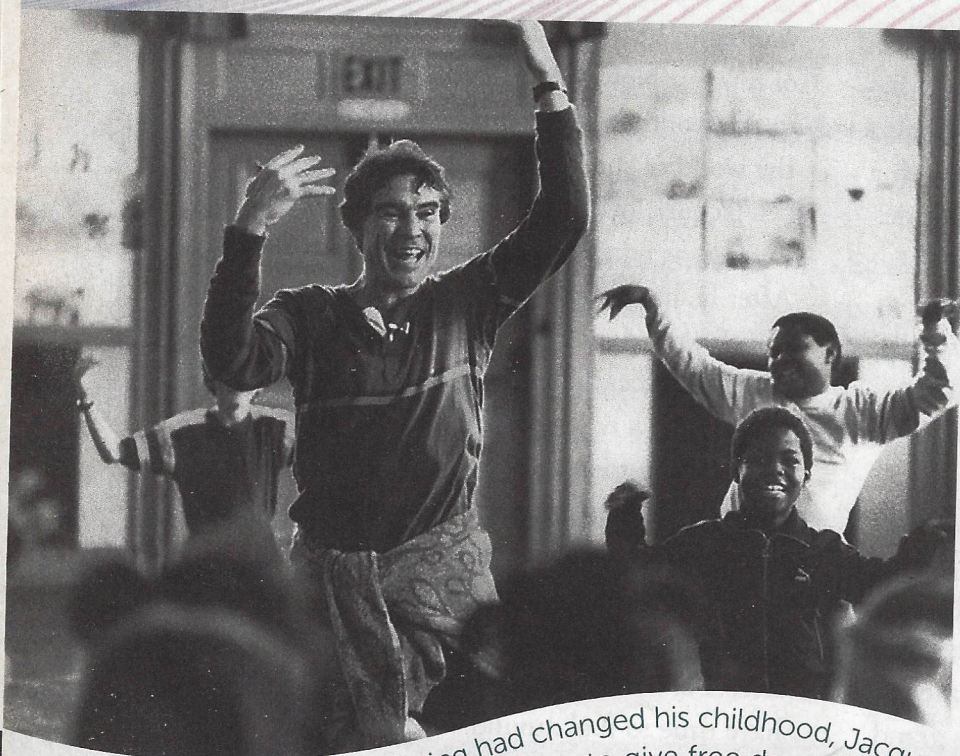
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Remembering how dancing had changed his childhood, Jacques started the National Dance Institute to give free dance classes for thousands of children in New York City public schools.

knees. He was also prone to frequent bouts of bronchitis, which made dancing difficult. But he kept learning, practicing, and performing.

Jacques loved to be absorbed in the music as he danced, floating and flying through space and landing as softly as a raindrop in a drizzle. He expressed feelings with movement, while making difficult steps look effortless. His jumps exploded with energy and exuberance. But he was just as immersed in the music when he was lightly holding a ballerina's hand as she balanced on one foot. When the music was quiet and slow, his elegant gestures were silent words that told a story.

In the early days of his career, Jacques danced in the corps de ballet with a group of other dancers. At seventeen, he was promoted to principal dancer and took on important individual roles. For Jacques, Balanchine revived a ballet he had choreographed—*Apollo*, about an uncouth young God who learned nobility through art. It was a breakout role for Jacques professionally and personally. From then on, he set the bar higher and higher for himself as an artist.

In 1953, Hollywood noticed the handsome young dancer. At the age of nineteen, Jacques danced in the role of Ephraim in the film *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*. At twenty-two, he danced in a dream sequence duet in *Carousel*, his trademark enthusiasm at full display. But it was on stage that he truly belonged.

Instead of dreaming about being a super hero or a pirate, Jacques danced the roles of a prince, a cowboy, a prodigal son, and a Greek God. Whether he was turning, leaping, or just walking, beautiful music transported him to another world. Surrounded by choreographers, musicians, and dancers, ballet became Jacques's life. In a career of over thirty years, Balanchine choreographed more roles for him than for any other dancer.

The boy transformed by dance became the first great American male dancer of his era. 