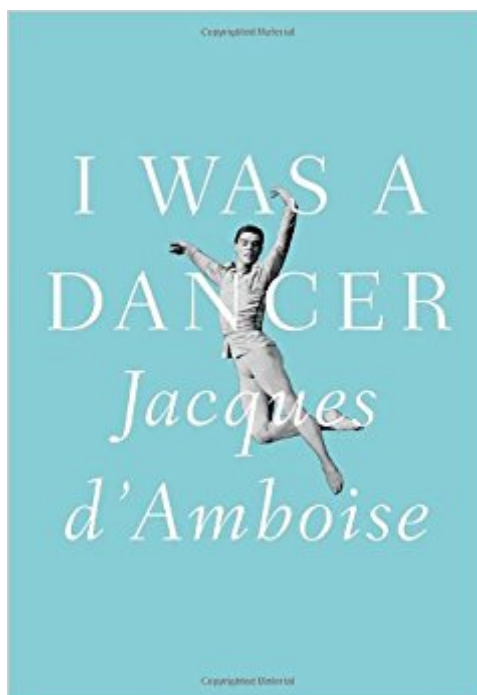


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I Was A Dancer



Synopsis

“Who am I? I am a man; an American, a father, a teacher, but most of all, I am a person who knows how the arts can change lives, because they transformed mine. I was a dancer. In this rich, expansive, spirited memoir, Jacques d’Amboise, one of America’s most celebrated classical dancers, and former principal dancer with the New York City Ballet for more than three decades, tells the extraordinary story of his life in dance, and of America’s most renowned and admired dance companies. He writes of his classical studies beginning at the age of eight at The School of American Ballet. At twelve he was asked to perform with Ballet Society; three years later he joined the New York City Ballet and made his European debut at London’s Covent Garden. As George Balanchine’s protégé, d’Amboise had more works choreographed on him by “the supreme Ballet Master” than any other dancer, among them Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux; Episodes; A Midsummer Night’s Dream; Jewels; Raymonda Variations. He writes of his boyhood—born Joseph Ahearn in Dedham, Massachusetts; his mother (“the Boss”) moving the family to New York City’s Washington Heights; dragging her son and daughter to ballet class (paying the teacher \$7.50 from hats she made and sold on street corners, and with chickens she cooked stuffed with chestnuts); his mother changing the family name from Ahearn to her maiden name, d’Amboise (“It’s aristocratic. It has the apostrophe. It sounds better for the ballet, and it’s a better name”). We see him, a neighborhood tough, in Catholic schools being taught by the nuns; on the streets, fighting with neighborhood gangs, and taking ten classes a week at the School of American Ballet . . . being taught professional class by Balanchine (he was “small, unassuming, he radiated energy and total command”) and by other teachers of great legend: Anatole Oboukhoff, premier danseur of the Maryinsky Theatre (“Such a big star,” said Balanchine, “people followed him, like a prince with servants”); and Pierre Vladimiroff, Pavlova’s partner (“So light on feather feet”). Vladimiroff drilled into his students, “You must practice, practice, practice. Onstage, forget everything! Just listen to the music and dance.” d’Amboise writes about Balanchine’s succession of ballerina muses who inspired him to near-obsessive passion and led him to create extraordinary ballets, dancers with whom d’Amboise partnered—Maria Tallchief; Tanaquil LeClercq, a stick-skinny teenager who blossomed into an exquisite, witty, sophisticated “angel” with her “long limbs and dramatic, mysterious elegance . . .”; the iridescent Allegra Kent; Melissa Hayden; Suzanne Farrell,

who Balanchine called his "alabaster princess," her every fiber, every movement imbued with passion and energy; Kay Mazzo; Kyra Nichols ("She's perfect," Balanchine said. "Uncomplicated like fresh water"); and Karin von Aroldingen, to whom Balanchine left most of his ballets. D'Amboise writes about dancing with and courting one of the company's members, who became his wife for fifty-three years, and the four children they had . . . On going to Hollywood to make *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* and being offered a long-term contract at MGM ("If you're not careful," Balanchine warned, "you will have sold your soul for seven years"). . . On Jerome Robbins ("Jerry could be charming and complimentary, and then, five minutes later, attack, and crush your spirit" all to see how it would influence the dance movements). D'Amboise writes of the moment when he realizes his dancing career is over and he begins a new life and new dream teaching children all over the world about the arts through the magic of dance. A riveting, magical book, as transformative as dancing itself.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Highly engaging. . . with many passages of particular import for Balanchine devotees. . . enthusiasm is what he does best, and he makes it infectious." —Alastair Macaulay, *The New York Times Book Review* "In his memoir, *I Was a Dancer*, Jacques d'Amboise proves that great artists are not necessarily limited to their own fields of accomplishment. He leaps gracefully from one superbly written paragraph to the next, carrying the reader high in the air through a fascinating life, illustrated by wonderful photographs and his own amusing

illustrations." **Hannah Pakula** "God of music, poetry, and the arts. It's no coincidence that Apollo was Jacques's greatest role. And when he tossed me into the air in Swan Lake, I knew I could really fly. An honest and revealing glimpse into the soul of one of our greatest dancers. The heart of a lion, the stamina of a thoroughbred, the grace and beauty of a Michelangelo. Unpredictable, generous, dependable, infuriating and consistently brilliant. In other words: Jacques d'Amboise. The fascinating journey of one of our great dancers, honest, revealing and beautifully told." **Allegra Kent** "Jacques d'Amboise is one of the great dancers of our time. His story is an American story: how did a poor street-kid from Washington Heights rise to the summit of ballet and make himself an American Apollo and a household name? It is all here in this poignant and personal memoir: he did it through discipline and poetry; through romantic love and fierce intelligence. Above all, he did it through dancing." **Jennifer Homans**, author of *Apollo's Angels* "Jacques's searingly honest, endlessly-fascinating voice takes you on a wild, fun-filled ride through the world of dance, introducing you to unforgettable characters and entertaining adventures. It is a tribute to Jacques that he speaks to readers as if he was talking to his best friends." **Donald Newhouse**

Jacques d'Amboise was a principal dancer with the New York City Ballet for more than thirty-three years. In 1976, he founded the National Dance Institute, and is the author of *Teaching the Magic of Dance* (1983). He has been the recipient of numerous honors and awards, among them the Kennedy Center Honor, the National Medal of Arts, and fellowships from the Academy of Arts and Sciences and the MacArthur Foundation. He has won an Academy Award, six Emmy Awards, and the Peabody Award. He lives in New York City and Hunter, New York.

"When Madame Seda said, 'There are better teachers than I,' she sent me to a crucible, a laboratory of theater and dance that would shape and influence the performing arts in this country for the rest of the century. There, I would plié, change, and pirouette my heart out, guided by some of the greatest artists and innovators residing in New York City, most of them from pre-Soviet Russia, role models who demanded the best of their students." **Jacques d'Amboise** began his dance career in a small Washington Heights studio prior to World War II. His mother and the teacher conspired to encourage Jacques to join in his sister's dance classes through a dare. "See if you can jump as high as the girls." Pretty soon, he was

joining in the part of the class where they practice leaps. Then came another challenge:

“Now leap in the air and change your feet so when you land, your left foot is in front. That move is called a changement, and Madame Seda soon had Jacques doing thirty-two of them. It wasn't long before he was taking the entire class and on his way to becoming a danseur. D'Amboise was eventually sent to the School of American Ballet and George Ballanchine, where he became a favorite student and friend of the master. D'Amboise became a corps member of the New York City Ballet at the age of fifteen, and eventually a principal dancer and star in his own right. I admit I love the ballet and I love reading about dancers and their journeys. But, D'Amboise is such a natural story-teller, this memoir is much more than an autobiography. It is a glimpse into a perfect point in time when the world of dance brought together the most amazing talents in one place, and achieved greatness that has yet to be matched. His stories are funny, fascinating and charming. And I loved every minute of this wonderful book. Even if you know nothing about the world of ballet, you will enjoy *I Was a Dancer*.

A fascinating book. If you are a dancer you will love this book with a capital "L". If you are not a dancer you will also love this book. It is not only a book about a dancer and the world of dancing it is a book about an incredible man who I knew was incredible before I even read this book but now am positive just how incredible he was. He represents the spirit of joy and of course you could see this in his dancing. More than that, he is so human, so down to earth, a real New York boy who became a dancer because of his incredible energy and "wildness" all of which could have gone in the wrong direction if not for "the boss", his mom who had a vision for her children and was the guiding light in his life as well as his siblings. Besides contributing so much to the world of dance, where everyone who knew him and danced with him, loved him, he went on to work with under privileged children bring the joy of dance to a world that was grey, hopeless and with no light. His life as a performer was only a prologue to what he did when he left the stage bringing dance not only to the slums of New York but widening the very meaning of dance, movement to the entire world. When you finish this inspiring book you not only love dance even more than when you began the book, but love Jacques d'Amboise for being this incredible human being, this wonderful, exciting person. You feel "if only I had had the privilege to work with him."

A good read from a wonderful dancer. I was lucky enough to see D'Amboise dance. The best parts of his book are his memories of the New York City ballet in the '40's and '50's, when ballet was

growing and developing in America, and his memories and affecting description of the decline of George Balanchine. One might wonder about D'Amboise's relentless upbeatness, as he, like Will Rogers, 'seems to have 'never met anybody he didn't like,' but I have seen him in interviews, and his boyish optimism (even recently) is unforced and genuine. That leads to my one reservation about the book. Dance is grueling, extremely competitive and can be very hard on its dancers. Company directors and choreographers (most notably Jerome Robbins) often got away with harsh and even abusive behavior to dancers. Balanchine is reputed to have said to a dancer he ultimately promoted, 'I'll give you a solo in one matinee and you can invite your mother. That's as far as you are going to get.' (Even if it had been true he could have said it more kindly). D'Amboise shows none of this, and thus the book is less realistic than it should be. I would still recommend it to dance fans.

Bravo to Jacques D'Amboise for this intimate, engaging autobiography! Writing about colleagues at NYCB and Mr. B with honesty and warmth, this is a book to be cherished because of the love that comes through in every chapter. He does indeed "make you feel like dancing". His definition of dance and the metaphor of the attic trunk is applicable to us all. His description of the deathbed visit with Melissa Hayden brought tears to my eyes and made me realize once again that great artists teach us so much of what is important in life,

Ballanchine supposedly centered and choreographed his ballets for female dancers, but Jacques did wonderfully in the NYCB. He has partnered many famous ballerinas and has wonderful stories to tell about them as well as his long career as a dancer. He has interesting insights into Ballanchine and his genius. For a warm, wonderful, honest yet compassionate autobiography that centers around NYCB, I highly recommend this detailed book. Jacques is also featured in many wonderful dancer biographies, those notably "Suzanne Farrell: Elusive Muse" and "Tanaquil LeClerq: Afternoon of a Faun."

I've been a fan of Jacques D'Amboise since my mother took me to see him when I was 10 with the NYC Ballet. This book, long in coming, is inciteful, touching and at times funny. He was so much more than just a star dancer. He was one of my prime inspirations into becoming a professional dancer and teacher of young boys. I couldn't put this book down. Wonderfully written. Wish I could thank the man for his contribution to my life. This book bridges that gap.

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