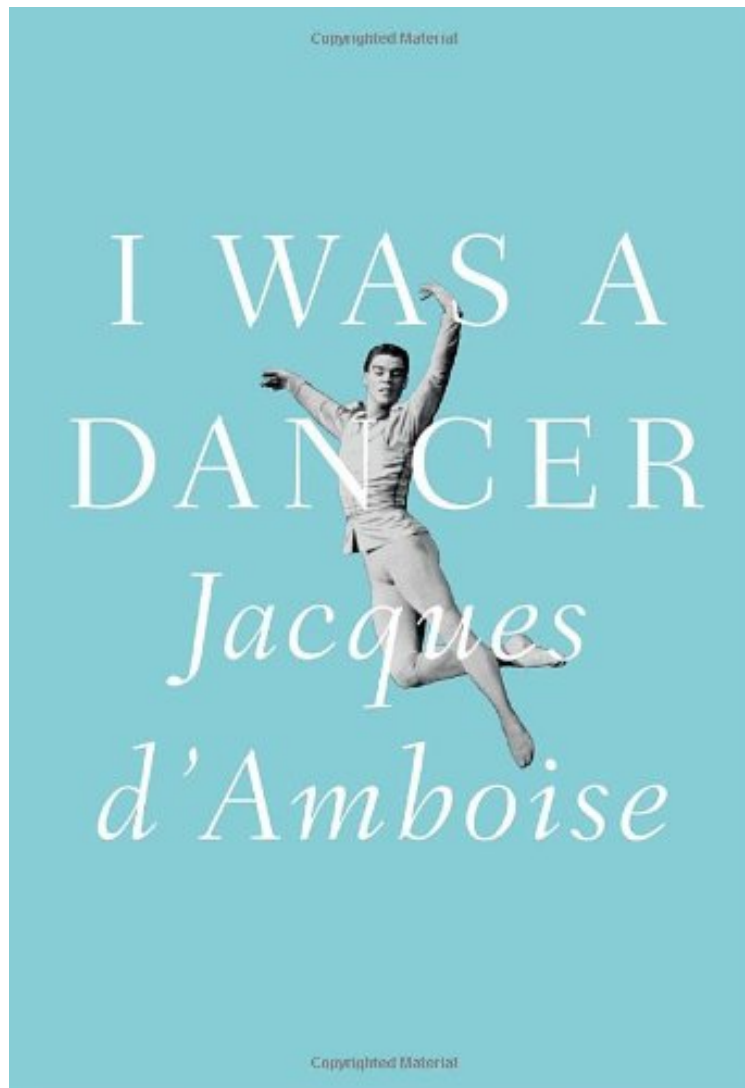


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I Was a Dancer

Jacques D'Amboise

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Jacques D'Amboise : I Was a Dancer before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised I Was a Dancer:

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. An amazing life told by a gifted storytellerBy Suzanne DobbinsWhen 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 pli, changement, 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

dAmboise 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 sisters 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. DAmboise was eventually sent to the School of American Ballet and George Balanchine, where he became a favorite student and friend of the master. DAmboise 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, DAmboise is such a natural storyteller, 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*. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. He was a dancer, now he's a writer By Customer 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. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. If you love ballet By BT Stewart 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,

Who am I? I'm 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 dAmboise, 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, dAmboise had more works choreographed on him by the supreme Ballet Master than any other dancer, among them Tchaikovsky's *Pas de Deux*; *Episodes*; *A Midsummer's 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, dAmboise (Its aristocratic. It has the d apostrophe. It sounds better for the ballet, and its 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. DAmboise 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 dAmboise 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, whom Balanchine called his alabaster princess, her every fiber, every movement imbued with passion and energy; Kay Mazzo; Kyra Nichols (Shes perfect, Balanchine said. Uncomplicated like fresh water); and Karin von Aroldingen, to whom Balanchine left most of his ballets. DAmboise writes about dancing with and courting one of the company 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). Damboise 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.

"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' 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' 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 About the Author 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. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Balanchine's Burial Tuesday, May 3, 1983. Balanchine's funeral commenced at nine a.m. The church, located on Ninety-third Street between Madison and Park avenues, has a mouthful of a name: Cathedral of Our Lady of the Sign, Synod of Bishops, Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia. At Russian Orthodox rites, there are no pews or padded kneeling pillows, so STANDING ROOM ONLY means more than a packed house. By eight a.m., the church was already full, but my family and I squeezed ourselves in, got a candle each, lit them, and by nine o'clock were immovable. A few people fainted standing, unable to fall. Packed together and unaccustomed to standing in place, we undulated in a slow dance, shifting our weight from foot to foot hot, tense, bereaved, seeking comfort. As I looked up, I'd swear the figures in the icons layered up the walls were rocking too. Hundreds gathered outside the church, blocking the doors. In the sanctuary, the environment of loss was thick and darker than a shadow's shadow. On my left, almost crushed by the mass of people, was Tusia, the mouse-like Russian seamstress, four feet tall, weighing about fifty pounds. She had been a devoted serf her whole life to the great costume designer Madame Karinska. As a pagan sorceress or goddess has a familiar to do her bidding (the black cat to a witch, Jiminy Cricket to Pinocchio), so Karinska had her Tusia. Occasionally, my gaze would meet other pairs of tearful eyes, pause a moment, then sadly move on. Familiar friends nearby received a hug and then a silent separation: Allegra Kent, Merrill Ashley, Kay Mazzo, Tanaquil LeClercq. Across the way stood Alexandra Danilova, the legendary ballerina assoluta (in the ballet world, there is no crown higher). Danilova was known for her gorgeous legs and, at seventy-something years old, she was still teaching. At that time, I was taking her class regularly and admired how beautifully those still-elegant legs demonstrated a *battement tendu*. She headed a cluster of balletomanes White Russian mafia seamstresses from Karinska's costume shop, teachers and administrative staff from the School of American Ballet, and other Russian friends and cronies, all paying homage to the man who epitomized and carried forward pre-Soviet culture through the art of ballet. Balanchine had preserved vestiges of another time and culture, and to Danilova and all the Russians, he represented St. Petersburg and the Maryinsky Theater before it became Leningrad and the Kirov. As many present-day Cubans loathe Castro, so the White Russians loathed anything Soviet. Balanchine choked with anger when, at the UN in October 1960, Nikita Khrushchev spoke vehemently about how the Communists would someday crush capitalism. Khrushchev took off his shoe and slammed it into the desk before him repeatedly, and said, We will bury you! Though you rarely saw Balanchine lose his cool, he was still choking the next day, complaining, They're not translating it truthfully! Khrushchev is cursing and using foul language, spewing vulgarities of the most common Russian of the street! Peasant pig talk! Over a multitude of heads, I spotted Frances Schreuder, the underwriter of Balanchine's ballet *David's Bundlertnze*, her back to the wall, her face expressionless. Her son had been convicted of murdering his grandfather, and she was accused of conspiring and instigating the murder. Her trial was scheduled for the fall and she was the only person standing in that church who

had space around her. Eddie Bigelow was at my shoulder. Stuffed into a tall, bony frame with a surly exterior was the heart of a caring, loving man. I reflected Eddie was there, in thrall to Balanchine and Lincoln, from the earliest days of Ballet Society in 1946. Eddie performed in anything and everything, and was a lifelong servant to dance and dancers. Eddie filling in for injured corps de ballet dancers; acting the character roles, the monster roles; holding a banner at the back of the stage in *Firebird*; fixing costumes; running errands; dyeing shoes; carrying injured dancers to the hospital. Eddie could always be counted on. If you needed a moving man, Eddie carried your furniture up and down stairs. A chef? He would cook giant pots of spaghetti, supply the vodka, Chianti, or scotch, and argue with you incoherently for hours, rambling off lots of words that sounded like they meant something, but we never could zero in on what his subject was. We loved to play cards together . . . canasta, poker, bridge. God bless him. In service his whole life! Behind the scenes Eddie and the self-effacing Betty Cage gave their love, labors, and most of their lives to the ballet company. They should have their Oscars, along with Balanchine and Lincoln. Suzanne Farrell, white-faced and sheathed in black, stood near the coffin, holding lilies in her arms, like Albrecht in *Giselle*. The young, imposing Father Adrian, standing over six feet tall, officiated from the altar. He had been Balanchine's priest. Russian liturgy echoed off the walls, intoned by Father Adrian and answered by the many Russians in the church. The power of ritual, communally shared, is meant to establish an architecture of order and become a road to healing, yet throughout the ceremony all I registered was the murmuring and the subdued sobs of those around me, as if my brain heard only the bass line of an orchestra. The presence of deep sorrow generates loss, fearfulness, and even anger. The only comfortable person present and at peace was the deceased. In my unease, my mind wandered and focused on Bigelow, imagining him in the role he created in the ballet *La Valse*: cloaked in black velvet, white pancake makeup on his face, black circles under his eyes, a shadow of Death; a timeless presence overlooking Balanchine in his coffin. The high point in the British 1949 movie of Pushkin's *Queen of Spades* takes place at the funeral for the old Countess Ranevskaya. The army engineer, Hermann, who brought about her death, leans over the open coffin to kiss her forehead, and her eyes pop open! Then, I heard it. A little sniff. Didn't anyone else hear it? It came from Balanchine. One nostril, a slight twitch. Didn't anyone else see it? I saw it! And then another, and then his mouth twitched. A woman near the coffin began gasping, backing up. Balanchine sitting up! Screams! Bodies paralyzed, frozen with disbelief. Others scrambling to get away. Balanchine was looking around. I pushed my way through the backing multitudes to embrace him. And he announced, I was sleeping . . . The service was reaching its end, and lights faded on the stage. Many of us stayed, lined up to approach Balanchine on his bier. At my turn, I stepped up, touched his hand, petted it, really, tears dripped off my cheek. I leaned over to kiss his forehead. Luckily, I did not drip on his face. What did I expect? Balanchine's forehead to be cold on my lips! It was warm. Leaving the church, Shaun told me that Danilova didn't cry at Balanchine's funeral because, she claimed, Makeup and tears don't mix. Carrie, Chris, and I joined Tanny and her buddy, the boyish-looking Randy Bourscheidt, New York City's deputy commissioner for cultural affairs. We packed ourselves into a limousine, supplied by Nancy Lassalle for Tanny's use, and followed the cortege, a line of black beetles traveling in limbo-land along the right lane of the Grand Central Parkway. We were being drawn toward Oakland Cemetery in Sag Harbor, New York, where Balanchine's plot lay open, calling. There was no small talk in our vehicle, until . . . I don't believe it! Randy declared. He was looking out the window. In the left lane, hurtling by, was Frances Schreuder, alone in the back of her limousine and desperately determined. She passed our entourage, the Wicked Witch of the West from *The Wizard of Oz* melded with Carabosse from *Sleeping Beauty*. The cemetery, beautiful with its newborn foliage emerging from winter sleep, was a landscape to rest in. The weather was far from restful, a tumultuous, windswept, gray, watercolored day, but appropriate for the occasion. Lost in grief, we gathered on a knoll a short distance from the roadway. Our small group, less than half a hundred, stood around the coffin each of us touched in different ways by the monument that Balanchine had been. A large part of our identities was molded by our association with him. As musical themes introduced in the early movements of a symphony come together in the last movement, so did grief, palpable during the ceremony at the cathedral, unite all of us at the gravesite. Few were without tears. I felt divided a part of me was separately watching myself and everyone else in a slow-motion dream. I was playing my part in a silent movie, surrounded by a trio of Balanchine's ex-wives: Tanny, next to me in her wheelchair; Alexandra Danilova; and Maria Tallchief, a few feet away. The set, a vision of tree branches running their fingers through the wind. Grieving nearby were Karin von Aroldingen; her handsome, salt-and-pepper-haired husband, Morty; and their yellow-haired, teenage daughter, Margot. Balanchine never had a family of his own in the traditional sense, except the one Karin, Morty, and Margot gave him. They opened up their home to him, and he was Margot's godfather. He had a comfortable, homey life with them, the kind where you sit around in your underwear reading the morning paper, or watching TV late at night with your feet up on the coffee table and eating junk food. Years earlier, Karin and Morty had acquired a condo for their family in a development in Southampton, and they had persuaded Balanchine to invest in a small one for himself. He loved it there and would cook scrumptious feasts in his sandals and bathrobe. With Karin, Morty, and Margot, he had a life of the ordinary, a world away from Lincoln Center, the State Theater, and his New York City Ballet. The Sag Harbor cemetery is a few miles away from his condo. We formed a circle, clustered around the grave. Some of us stood alone, others huddled close, perhaps trying to find solace in one another, but, just as in all death, the solitary is supreme. A quartet of lumpy gravediggers waited on

the outskirts, leaning on their shovels, routine for them, since they probably bury half a dozen people a day. Outside our circle, on a solo knoll some twenty- five to thirty yards away, stood Frances Schreuder. Conducting the ceremony, Father Adrian led the prayers, the wind blowing his long, curled hair and belly-warming beard into fluttering black-brown ribbons. After the prayers, one by one we went up to the hole and dropped flowers into it. I pushed Tanny there in her wheelchair, her hands like eagles claws gripping the chairs arms; it seemed all her life forces centered in those clutching fingers. I split the flowers I had, and we threw them on the casket. The very bones in Tannys face seemed to tighten. Get me out of here, she said. She was on the verge of screaming, so I quickly wheeled her toward the limousines. Were supposed to go to Gold and Fizdales,* I mumbled, for the reception. Im going back to New York, she screeched. Ive got to get out! It took a while, returning along the dirt road to where the cars were parked. At Tannys limo, she took command, and in clipped, short sentences, ordered a litany of directions: Dont forget to lock the wheelchair before you try to lift me out. Now, pick me up carefully. Dont bang my head against the edge of the door. Id been her partner for years. I used to tell her what to do. I would fling her in the air, catch her, spin her, and always be in total control. At that moment, I was terrified and could barely move. Okay, next, make sure my back is placed tight against the seat. Push that switch to fold the chair up, you can put it in the front seat next to the driver. Then you can go, get out! Have you ever noticed how quickly mourners leave the cemetery after a burial? Everyone wants to get back to life, as quickly as possible. When I wended my way back to the grave, only the four gravediggers were in sight. As I got closer, I could see someone else, a girl on her knees. It was sweet, round- faced Margot, sprawled out at the edge of the open grave, sobbing, with her arms reaching down toward Balanchines casket. The gravediggers stood nearby, uncomfortable, unable to shovel in the dirt. Get back, little missy, one of the shovelers said. Its all over. I put my arms around Margot and lifted her out of the way. Where were Karin and Morty? Tanny had taken the limousine and left. I was at a loss. I didnt know how to get to the reception. I didnt know where Carrie and Chris had gone. Frances Schreuder had vanished, and there I was stuck with a dead body and a sobbing teenager. There was a car coming up the dirt road! Thank God! Karin and Morty were returning with Carrie and Chris to pick us up. PHEW! When people are under emotional stress, theyre likely to indulge their pleasure centers go shopping, buy themselves unnecessary gifts, drink, and gorge themselves on food. Or the reverse, they go alone into a dark corner and try to sleep, turn off the world. Everyone was confronting a future without Balanchine. The cemetery crowd gathered at Gold and Fizdales to party, and food was being gobbled and wine flowed. I headed straight for the biggest table and proceeded to slurp away, trying to sample every delicacy at the ample smorgasbord. Amidst all these people, grieving the loss of the giant of dance, I reflected that aside from his favorite muse at the moment and, perhaps, Stravinsky Balanchine never cared much for anybody. Someone tugged my sleeve. I looked down, and there was Tusia at my elbow. Woeful Tusia. (The tugging reminded me of her once fiddling with my arm at Madame Karinskas studio, where I had been summoned for a costume fitting on my day off. It was a sunny, brilliant day, and I stood patiently, half- clad in a pin- studded muslin mock-up of a ballet tunic. Under Madame Karinskas eye, Tusia basted the gusset, and mumbled, with great foreboding, Oh, Jacques, you must be careful today. The sun is out.) Gloom was her nature she had dark circles under her eyes, even when they werent there. Today, at Gold and Fizdales, fussing with my sleeve, she mumbled, Balanchine is gone, Jacques, and soon Madame will be gone. What do we do now? What do we do? Through a mouthful of shrimp remoulade, I managed, What do you mean, what do we do? We do what we always do. We eat and drink and keep going. Tanny had bolted with the limousine, so, champagne glass in hand, I made the rounds, trying to solicit a ride home. Lchaim! I proclaimed with every glass. A Hebrew toast, from a people who have suffered great loss and tragedy responding with a cry TO LIFE! Go on, survive, continue! We had him once a little while, and dance did sport with song, but now no more. I was reminded of a line from Aeschylus The Persians: Death is long and without music. In August 2003, Karin von Aroldingen and I visited Balanchines grave. Standing on the grass over him, I took Karin in my arms, and we danced a waltz. There was an audience. Across a dirt path, less than ten yards away, stood a single headstone bearing the names of Gold and Fizdale; they were buried beneath, one on top of the other. Around a corner of the path was Alexandra Danilovas grave. Right around the death of Balanchine, I flippantly mentioned to a friend, Hope Cooke, After fifty, its harder to stay in the air. But National Dance Institute kept my fingerprints on the ceiling, and has allowed me to spend a life playing my games not so different from the stoop in Washington Heights (Youre going to be pirates! Id order my pals from the gang. Ill be the captain! Here are your swords.) Though at the start, I wanted only to introduce children (boys especially) to the magic of dance and the arts, NDI became my way of interpreting Balanchine and Lincolns legacy bringing together the highest caliber of artists from the worlds of music, dance, and the visual arts, in collaborations on the highest level only applying and evolving this legacy in service to children, and vice versa (children in service to the arts).