

Robert Joffrey (1930-1988)

by Nicole Duffy Robertson

Robert Joffrey, an American dancer, teacher, choreographer, and founder and artistic director of the Joffrey Ballet, dedicated his life to building a uniquely American ballet company with an unmatched repertory and exceptional dancers. His contributions to the dance landscape in America include meticulous reconstructions of Diaghilev-era works and revivals of 20th-century masterpieces by choreographers such as Kurt Jooss and Frederick Ashton. In addition to his curatorial genius, he consistently commissioned new work that expanded and challenged notions of what ballet could be. His early commissions from modern and postmodern choreographers, such as [Alvin Ailey](#) and [Twyla Tharp](#), broke the rigid boundaries that existed between ballet and modern dance, and have since guided and informed the creative process and repertory programming of ballet companies around the world. An accomplished choreographer in his own right, Joffrey created works that reflected his broad interests, including the Romantic era-inspired *Pas des Déesses* (1954), the ground-breaking multimedia rock ballet *Astarte* (1967), *Remembrances* (1973), and *Postcards* (1980).

Robert Joffrey was born Abdullah Jaffa Anver Bey Khan in Seattle, Washington, the son of an Afghan father and an Italian mother. He began studying tap as a young child, then studied ballet with Ivan Novikoff and Mary Ann Wells. In 1947 and 1948 he attended the [School of American Ballet](#), where his teachers included Alexandra Fedorova, Anatole Obukhov, and Pierre Vladimirov; he also trained in modern dance with May O'Donnell and Gertrude Shurr, both former dancers with [Martha Graham](#) (1894-1991). In 1948, Joffrey presented his choreography for the first time in Seattle (the program included *Vestris Suite*, *Two Studies: Obsession and Dedication*, *Punch*, *Suite of Waltzes*,

Slavonic Folk Dance, and *24 Liberty*) in Seattle. He made his first professional appearance as a soloist with Roland Petit's Ballets de Paris in New York in 1949-50, and performed with O'Donnell and Company from 1951-53.

In 1952-53 he established the American Ballet Center, known as the Joffrey Ballet School, with Gerald Arpino (a lifelong friend and associate, dancer, choreographer, and his successor as artistic director of the Joffrey Ballet) in New York City. A sought-after teacher, Joffrey taught students who came from both the ballet and modern worlds, and included such renowned figures as [Rudolf Nureyev](#), Violette Verdy, Erik Bruhn, Carmen de Lavallade, and Yvonne Rainer. Concurrently, he was on the faculty of the La Guardia High School for the Performing Arts and Ballet Theatre School. In addition to creating works for his company, he choreographed for the New York City Opera from 1958-69.

In 1956, The Robert Joffrey Theatre Dancers, which grew out of the Joffrey School, went on its first tour. Six dancers travelled in a station wagon: Glen Tetley, Dianne Consoer, Gerald Arpino, Brunilda Ruiz, John Wilson, and Beatrice Tompkins. Meanwhile, Joffrey stayed in New York to support the company with his teaching. The all-Joffrey program included *Pas des Déesses*, *The Ball (Le Bal)*, *Within Four Walls*, and *Kaleidoscope*. *Pas des Déesses* (1954) was based on a 19th-century lithograph probably by A.E. Chalon (some sources cite Jacques Bouvier) depicting Arthur St. Léon with Marie Taglioni, Lucile Grahn, and Fanny Cerrito in a pose from Jules Perrot's *Judgment of Paris* (1846). One of Joffrey's most enduring works, *Pas de Déesses* was both a tribute to and a subtle satire of the personalities and manners of these great 19th-century ballerinas. The success of *Pas des Déesses* brought early recognition to the young choreographer,

and an invitation to restage the ballet for Ballet Rambert in London in 1955. While working with Rambert, the young Joffrey conversed with her about her work with Vaslav Nijinsky and the Diaghilev company, an early sign of his future ambition of reviving Diaghilev-era works.

At the time that Joffrey was establishing himself as a director and choreographer, most dance audiences in America had an image of ballet as glamorous and aristocratic, due in part to the successful tours of the [Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo](#) (1932-1952) and Sergei Denham's Ballet Russe (1938-62), two cosmopolitan (if not entirely "Russian") companies that toured extensively in America during the 1940s and 1950s. (Joffrey himself had seen the Ballets Russes as a child in Seattle). In contrast, the Robert Joffrey Theatre Ballet (as it was called after the first tour) was a small group of young, fresh, all-American dancers based in New York City's Greenwich Village, without old-world pretensions, and with the mission of taking a ballet company with a distinctly American style that drew from our rich and varied culture, to every corner of the country. This democratic vision, along with the small size of the company, helped define the Joffrey's "all-star, no-star" policy: from its earliest days, it has been a ballet company without ranking (principal, soloist, corps), where every dancer is expected to dance at the highest level, and to perform every kind of role.

The 1960s were formative years for Robert Joffrey's uniquely American approach to ballet. While training and hiring dancers with an excellent classical ballet foundation, he commissioned cutting-edge ballets from modern dance choreographers such as Alvin Ailey (*Feast of Ashes*, 1962) and [Anna Sokolow](#) (*Opus '65*, 1965), a bold and unprecedented strategy for a ballet company. Gerald Arpino began choreographing in 1961, eventually

becoming the company's resident choreographer. Arpino's versatile and often controversial ballets defied convention and helped define the Joffrey's image, engendering critical debate while attaining widespread popular success. Joffrey also rapidly expanded the repertory with works by [George Balanchine](#) (who was always supportive of Joffrey), as well as works by [Jerome Robbins](#), Todd Bolender, [Lew Christensen](#), [Agnes de Mille](#), and many others.

From 1962-64 the Robert Joffrey Ballet functioned under the patronage of Rebekah Harkness. In 1963 the company performed at the White House for President John F. Kennedy, went on State Department-sponsored tours of the Middle East, India, and the Soviet Union, the last a critically-acclaimed tour during which Joffrey premiered his Balinese-inspired ballet *Gamelan* in Leningrad. The relationship with Harkness ended in 1964 (after Joffrey's refusal to change the name of his company to the Harkness Ballet), and as a result he lost most of his dancers and much of the repertory commissioned during that period. In 1965, the company rebounded from that devastating setback with an enormously successful run at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park, followed by an invitation to become the resident ballet company at the City Center Theater, replacing the New York City Ballet.

In 1967, Joffrey choreographed *Astarte*, the first ballet danced to rock music and the first with a multi-media component. Inspired by two of his most compelling dancers, Trinette Singleton and Maximiliano Zomosa, and created to a commissioned score by Crome Syrcus, *Astarte* included film projections of the dancers during the performance and an audacious breaking of the "fourth wall" (in tune with postmodern experiments). Zomosa entered the stage from the audience (costumed as an

audience member), stripped down to his briefs, danced an erotic duet with the goddess Astarte, and eventually exited through the backstage door. *Astarte* shocked the dance world and beyond, and the Joffrey became the first ballet company to grace the covers of both *Time* and *Life* magazines.

In 1973, Joffrey commissioned Twyla Tharp (then a relatively unknown choreographer outside the downtown New York dance scene) to create *Deuce Coupe*. An infectious blend of stylized vernacular dance and balletic vocabulary set to music by the Beach Boys, the ballet had a backdrop that was painted live by graffiti artists during the performance. *Deuce Coupe* was a critical and popular success, and further eroded the hard line between ballet and contemporary dance. Joffrey also gave early opportunities to choreographers such as Laura Dean, Eliot Feld, William Forsythe (who also danced for the Joffrey), [Mark Morris](#), and James Kudelka.

Also in 1973, Joffrey created *Remembrances*, one of his most moving works, to a song cycle by Richard Wagner, with lyrics by Mathilde Wesendonck. A vehicle for Francesca Corke, whose musicality and superb technique made this evocation of unrequited love in the Victorian era a dreamy sequence, full of both intense longing and a quiet passion, *Remembrances* became the subject of a Dance in America documentary, one of several on the Joffrey Ballet made in the 1970s.

While expanding notions of ballet beyond the traditional mold through his own work as well as commissions, Joffrey began reviving important works of the 20th century. In 1967 he presented Kurt Jooss' anti-war ballet *The Green Table* (1932), followed by Leonide Massine's *Le Tricorne* (1919), *Le Beau Danube* (1933), and most

notably *Parade* (1917), a ground-breaking artistic collaboration with a libretto by Jean Cocteau, costumes by Pablo Picasso, and music by Erik Satie, originally made for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. With classical ballet dancers performing circus sideshow acts, *Parade* blurred the lines between "high" and "low" art, an important historical precedent to some of the Joffrey's new repertory that challenged elitism in dance.

Following his revivals of Massine's works, Joffrey's historic revivals continued with Fokine's *Petrouchka* (1911), and Vaslav Nijinsky's *L'Après-Midi D'Un Faune* (1912), and culminated with the reconstruction of Nijinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* (1913), set to Igor Stravinsky's avant-garde score, composed for the ballet. The reconstruction by Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer (controversial because of the difficulties posed by a lack of primary sources) brought to life a long-lost ballet famous for its radically modernist vision, which caused riots at its Paris premiere but was subsequently recognized as a watershed moment in the history of both ballet and music.

Joffrey assiduously cultivated his relationship with living choreographers, and his reputation for impeccable attention to detail and insistence on fidelity to the choreographer's vision enabled him to acquire an astonishing repertory unlike that of any other ballet company at the time. In addition to the historic revivals, Joffrey presented the works of established choreographers then virtually unknown to American audiences, most notably works from Frederick Ashton's oeuvre, including *Façade* (1931), *Monotones II* (1965), *The Dream* (1964), *Les Patineurs* (1937), and *A Wedding Bouquet* (1937). In the early 1980s, Joffrey gave American audiences their first glimpse of works by European contemporary ballet choreographers, such

as John Cranko's *Pineapple Poll* (1951) and *Taming of the Shrew* (1969), as well as Jiří Kylián's *Return to the Strange Land* (1975) and *Transfigured Night* (1975).

Inspired by café songs and compositions by Satie, Joffrey choreographed his last ballet, *Postcards*, creating a whimsical picture of Paris at the turn of the twentieth century. In 1987, Joffrey oversaw the realization of his long-planned version of *The Nutcracker*, set in Victorian America with choreography after Alexandra Fedorova (based on the Petipa/Ivanov original), with additional choreography by Arpino (for the Snow scene and Waltz of the Flowers). Unable to set the work himself because of his deteriorating health, Joffrey entrusted the setting of the ballet to George Verdak and Scott Barnard. Joffrey died in New York a few months after the premiere, from AIDS-related complications, a fact not publicly acknowledged at the time for fear of the prejudice it might engender toward his company and legacy.

Robert Joffrey's vision elevated his company to the forefront of the New York dance world and defined its "American" profile: producing cutting-edge contemporary ballet and providing a home for important 20th-century revivals. His interest in dance history as well as contemporary innovation shaped a unique repertory and profile that set the Joffrey Ballet apart from every other ballet company. Moreover, his ability to develop talented dancers, teachers, choreographers, and future directors--such as Kevin McKenzie ([American Ballet Theatre](#)), Helgi Tomasson (San Francisco Ballet), William Forsythe (The Forsythe Company), William Whitener (Kansas City Ballet), James Canfield (Nevada Ballet Theatre), Tom Mossbrucker (Aspen Santa Fe Ballet), Glen Edgerton (Hubbard Street Dance Chicago), Adam Sklute (Ballet West), and Ashley Wheater (Joffrey Ballet)--has had a clear

and lasting influence on American ballet and its contemporary iterations well into the twenty-first century.

The Joffrey Ballet continues to thrive in its home city of Chicago, where it has been based since 1995. In 2006, the Joffrey celebrated 50 years of being at the forefront of American dance, and in 2008, the company moved into its first permanent home, the Joffrey Tower, in the heart of downtown Chicago.

Nicole Duffy Robertson danced for the Joffrey Ballet from 1990-2000, where her repertory included Clara in Robert Joffrey's *The Nutcracker*, featured roles in Gerald Arpino's *Kettentanz* and *Light Rain*, as well as works by Ashton, Balanchine, Cranko, Jooss, Limón, Massine, and Nijinska, among many others. She graduated summa cum laude with a degree in art history from Columbia University and is currently on the faculty of the Joffrey Ballet School in New York, where she teaches ballet and dance history. She is also a repetiteur for the Arpino/Joffrey Foundation.