



Joffrey, Robert (1928-1988)

by Douglas Blair Turnbaugh

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

The great contributions of Robert Joffrey to American dance are his creation of a major dance company and his distinguished work as teacher and trainer of dancers. Dedicated to gender parity in ballet, he helped elevate the status of the male dancer, making male virtuosity a priority in his repertoire and in his classroom.

Joffrey was born Anver Bey Abdullah Jaffa Khan Joffrey on December 24, 1928 in Seattle, the only child of a loveless marriage between a Pakhtun Afghani father and an Italian mother. His parents owned a restaurant.

As a small, sickly child, with bowed legs and turned in feet, Joffrey had to wear casts on his feet and began studying ballet to strengthen his frame. Fortunately, Seattle was blessed with exceptional ballet teachers. He was introduced to the grand tradition of the Ballets Russes by Ivan Novikoff. Later, he studied with Mary Ann Wells, famous for producing professional dancers of note.

When he was sixteen, Joffrey met twenty-two-year-old Gerald Arpino, then serving in the Coast Guard. "It was love at first sight," Arpino later recalled.

They became lovers. Arpino moved into the Joffrey family home. Soon the young men became artistic collaborators as well when Arpino began studying ballet with Novikoff.

Although their sexual intimacy ended soon after 1949, Joffrey and Arpino shared a domestic relationship for forty-three years, one that ended only upon Joffrey's death.

Joffrey later studied at the High School of Performing Arts in New York, and in 1949 and 1950 he danced with Roland Petit's Ballets de Paris. But at 5 feet 4 inches tall, Joffrey realized that his height limited his potential for a career as a dancer. He began to think of choreography and teaching as ways to contribute to dance.

Joffrey began to choreograph his own ballets. He scored an early success with *Persephone* (1952). He also staged dances for musicals, operas, and London's Ballet Rambert.

In 1954 Joffrey formed his own small ensemble troupe, dedicated to presenting work by himself and Arpino. This ensemble gradually grew into a major national company that revolutionized American dance history.

Based in New York City, the Joffrey Ballet distinguished itself in a number of ways. It commissioned the work of modern choreographers (for example, Twyla Tharp's *Deuce Coupe* in 1973), and it revived great ballets of the international repertoire that were neglected by other American companies (for example, work by Tudor, Massine, Nijinsky, and Nijinska, as well as ten ballets by Frederick Ashton and evenings devoted to Diaghilev masterpieces).

Other milestones in the history of the company include Joffrey's multi-media psychedelic ballet *Astarte*

(music by Crome Syrcus, 1967) and Arpino's rock ballet *Trinity* (1970).

Joffrey was an unusually gifted teacher. From the beginning, his school, the American Ballet Center, trained many important dancers. Joffrey dancers became known for their youthful sexual vitality and brilliant physical technique.

Joffrey's emphasis on male virtuosity was an attempt to redress the gender imbalance that had developed in ballet, in part as a result of Balanchine's famous dictum that "Ballet is woman." Joffrey's commitment to improving the status of male dancers influenced both his teaching and his and Arpino's choreography.

The Joffrey Ballet Company became popular throughout the United States and abroad. Sometimes criticized for its commercialism, the company made ballet accessible to a large and diverse audience, including people who were not already devotees of the form.

The Joffrey's repertoire contained no overt homosexuality, but there was a great deal of covert homoeroticism as a retinue of gorgeous, bare-chested, late adolescent dancers unfailingly delighted the gay male audience.

Although Arpino has repeatedly denied the presence of homoeroticism in his work, his 1966 all-male ballet, *Olympics*, a tribute to athletics, featured a suggestive pas de deux.

During one curious phase, the men's costumes featured a distracting athletic cup, shaped rather like half a large grapefruit. The cup effectively covered the natural shape of the genitals--previously clearly seen, especially under white or light colored tights--but gave the impression of a giant tumor.

Joffrey produced less choreography as he devoted himself to shaping his company. Arpino became the house choreographer, while Joffrey synthesized his own creative aesthetic with the Diaghilev legacy of nurturing the talents of others.

Joffrey was sexually promiscuous but discreet. His pattern was to have Arpino at home for domestic stability, one principal romantic attachment, and numerous one-night stands.

In 1973, Joffrey fell in love with A. Aladar Marberger, a twenty-six-year-old gay activist and manager of the Fischbach Gallery in Manhattan. In the 1980s both men contracted AIDS.

While Marberger was outspoken about his illness, Joffrey remained silent. He was ashamed and wanted his obituary to say that he died of liver disease and asthma. Arpino agreed to his pleas, but the secret could not be maintained as AIDS took a staggering toll on the dance world in general and on Joffrey's company in particular.

Robert Joffrey died on March 25, 1988. Aladar Marberger died on November 1, 1988.

The Joffrey Ballet, now based in Chicago, survives under the direction of Gerald Arpino.

Bibliography

Anawalt, Sasha. *The Joffrey Ballet: Robert Joffrey and the Making of an American Dance Company*. New York: Scribner, 1996.

Solway, Diane. *A Dance against Time: The Brief, Brilliant Life of a Joffrey Dancer*. New York: Pocket Books, 1994.

About the Author

Douglas Blair Turnbaugh is Representative to the U.S.A. and Membre Conseiller of the Conseil International de la Danse/UNESCO. A contributor to *New York Magazine*, *The Atlantic*, *Playbill*, *Advocate*, *RFD*, *James White Review*, *New York Native*, *Performing Arts Journal*, *Ecrits sur Nijinsky*, among others, he is author of *Duncan Grant and the Bloomsbury Group*; *Private: The Erotic Art of Duncan Grant*; *Strip Show: Paintings by Patrick Angus*; and *Beat It: 28 Drawings*. He has been awarded the Nijinsky medal (Poland) and the Diaghilev medal (Russia). His *Serge Diaghilev* is forthcoming.