



Jock Soto.  
Video still from YouTube.

## Soto, Jock (b, 1965)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Half Navajo Indian and half Puerto Rican, Jock Soto is one of the most influential ballet dancers of his time. He has been instrumental in shaping the role and identity of the contemporary male American dancer through his work with the celebrated New York City Ballet.

More than 100 ballets have been choreographed especially for Soto. His extensive repertory at New York City Ballet included featured roles in many works by the legendary George Balanchine. He also inspired the creation of roles in numerous new ballets by such dance-world luminaries as Jerome Robbins, Peter Martins, Lynne Taylor-Corbett, Richard Tanner, and Christopher Wheeldon.

In a profile for *Playbill Arts*, Soto is described as "strikingly handsome and solidly built with broad shoulders, speed-skater thighs, and beautiful hands as sensitive and elegant as a concert pianist's. His unequalled gift for partnering, enhanced by his impeccable musicality, athleticism, and a willingness to try anything, inspires and enables choreographers to stretch and refine what is possible. He is the catalyst that has elevated the art of the pas de deux to new heights."

Peter Martins, Ballet Master in Chief of New York City Ballet, noted that Soto "opened up a whole new world of possibilities for choreographers--myself included--to go where no one had gone before. This guy can do anything. He has no limits."

Throughout the 1980s Soto was a regular performer at AIDS benefits, but remarkably never came out in the gay press. He claims that he simply was not asked, and adds, "I think everybody just knew."

After an acclaimed 24-year career, Soto retired from ballet in 2005. Playing off of George Balanchine's famous pronouncement, "Ballet is woman," the *New York Times*, on the eve of his retirement exclaimed: "Ballet is a man called Jock."

Jock Soto was born on a Navajo Indian reservation in Gallup, New Mexico in 1965 to a Puerto Rican father, Joseph, known in the family as "Papa Joe," and a Navajo mother, Josephine, affectionately known as "Mama Jo."

One of Soto's earliest recollections is of his mother teaching him intricate Navajo hoop dancing.

"I am three and she is immortal--as big and beautiful and bright as the sun in the sky," Soto recalled. "We are dressed in special dancing clothes that she has made for us. I have little beaded moccasins and a headband of wiry horsehair; my velvet loincloth and matching fringed vest with sparkling sequins are a pretty purple. We are carrying smooth circles that never start and never end, beautiful wooden loops . . . made by my grandfather."

His family relocated to Phoenix, Arizona when Soto was four years old.

At the age of six, Soto became captivated by a televised performance of the renowned dancer Edward Villella on the *Ed Sullivan Show* dancing in the "Rubies" section of George Balanchine's ballet *Jewels*. Subsequently, Soto begged his parents to let him take dance lessons. They eventually enrolled him in the local Ballet Arizona, a school run by Kelly and Isabel Brown, alumni of the American Ballet Theatre, based in New York City and recognized as one of the world's leading classical ballet companies.

In an interview given later in his career, Soto reminisced about his father taking him to his first ballet class. "My mother told him he had to buy me ballet slippers and tights, and I had a little T-shirt or something. I took them out of the little bag, I was changing in the backseat, and he had bought me blue fishnets! He sort of didn't look at the package. I was like, Oh God, what am I going to do with these? But I had to wear something! I think I probably put shorts over them."

When schoolmates learned of Soto's dance lessons, they teased him mercilessly, calling him "Ballet-Sissy" and "Gay Boy."

As a result, he made friends with the only African-American girl at his school, who was also getting picked on by classmates, and another boy who was unpopular. Together, the three hung out and tried to protect one another.

Soto found acceptance and encouragement, however, in his dance classes and his instructors at Ballet Arizona were immediately impressed with his natural talents and abilities. They encouraged him to consider moving to New York to pursue a serious career in dance.

When he was 11, Soto spent a summer at the School of the American Ballet, one of the most famous classical ballet schools in the world and the associate school of the New York City Ballet. Two years later, he received a full-paid scholarship to the school.

Although his family fully encouraged his ambitions, they could not afford to relocate, and so in 1977, at the age of 13, Soto moved by himself to New York City and began to study at the School of the American Ballet.

In 1981, he was invited to become a member of New York City Ballet's corps de ballet by George Balanchine, one of City Ballet's co-founders.

That same year he made his New York City Ballet debut, as a last minute replacement, dancing the lead in *The Magic Flute*, choreographed by Peter Martins. The *New York Times* praised Soto's "dream of a performance," and his "technical gifts."

In 1984, he was promoted to the rank of Soloist, and one year later, at the age of 20, Soto was named a Principal Dancer.

"At the time I was the youngest principal," Soto reflected. "I was in a shock. It was hard to live up to."

Around the same time, Soto began a long-term relationship with the New York City Ballet choreographer Christopher Wheeldon. The two men shared a weekend home in Connecticut, as well as a beach house in Barcelona, Spain.

Although the couple eventually separated, the two men continued to collaborate professionally. In total, Wheeldon choreographed seven ballets for Soto, including the groundbreaking *Polyphonia* (2001), set to the atonal music of the twentieth century Hungarian composer György Ligeti, and *After the Rain* (2005), with music by Arvo Pärt.

Wheeldon has called *After the Rain* a "love letter," and said the piece touched on his personal, as well as professional, relationship with Soto.

"Jock offered me the courage to develop something that was very much my own," Wheeldon later noted in an interview. "He was more than a muse, he was a mentor--because he was there encouraging and guiding me as well as being there as a body. There'll certainly be a 'Jock Soto period' for me, and I'll be very lucky to come across that kind of experience again."

Although he is highly regarded for his solo work, it is for his superlative partnering that Soto is most renowned. As Astrida Woods noted, in *Playbill Arts*, "When it comes to partnering, Mr. Soto has no equal. Ballerinas fearlessly fling themselves into his arms, fly over his head, and spin with abandon at his touch; they confidently respond to his capable hands as he twists and folds their limbs like pretzels, and shape their bodies into origami-like sculptures."

"There's a certain trust level with Jock," explained New York City Ballet principal Wendy Whelan. "He's incredibly sensitive, but he's got brute strength."

After an acclaimed 24-year career, Soto retired from dancing in 2005.

He gave his farewell performance on Sunday, June 19, 2005. The program featured an ambitious suite of five ballets by five visionary choreographers chosen to showcase his versatility: "Dance at the Gym" from Jerome Robbins' *West Side Story Suite*; Peter Martins' *Barber Violin Concerto*; Christopher Wheeldon's *Liturgy*; Lynne Taylor-Corbett's *Chiaroscuro*; and the "Royal Navy" section of George Balanchine's *Union Jack*.

A documentary, *Water Flowing Together*, by the filmmaker Gwendolen Cates, follows Soto for several months as he contemplates his retirement from ballet and prepares for his farewell performance (the title comes from an English translation of the name of Soto's Navajo clan). The film also looks at Soto's Navajo and Puerto Rican heritage, as well as his coming out as a gay man. It was first broadcast on PBS in 2008.

In an interview, Soto explained that he had asked Cates to make the documentary, in part, to show "how after dance, you don't just die." He also wanted to explore his sexuality in the film. "I obviously was not embarrassed at all of being gay and I wanted that to be noted, and to show how accepted I was in New York and with my family."

Although Soto retired from performing, he has not left the world of dance behind. Since 1996, Soto has been a member of the School of American Ballet's faculty, teaching boys, men's and partnering classes six days a week.

In addition to his full-time position at the School of American Ballet, Soto attended the Institute of Culinary Education in New York City. He graduated in 2006 and has since been involved in the food industry with his husband Luis Fuentes.

One June night in 2003, Soto met Fuentes, a wine consultant, at the bar of a Manhattan restaurant. Soto started up a conversation and when he mentioned that he was a ballet dancer, Fuentes replied, "Aren't you a little too old to be doing that?"

"I had no idea what ballet is," Fuentes later explained. "It's surprising he didn't walk away then."

Instead, the two men began dating, and within months were living together in Soto's Greenwich Village studio apartment.

They were married on October 14, 2011 at the Manhattan Marriage Bureau and two days later, exchanged

vows at a New York restaurant before the former Massachusetts governor, William F. Weld.

Their wedding was featured in the popular *New York Times*' "Vows" column.

Soto is the recipient of the Casita Maria Award for Hispanics and The First Americans in the Arts Trustee Award, created to recognize, honor and promote American Indian participation in the entertainment industry. Friends In Deed, a crisis center providing emotional and spiritual support for anyone with a diagnosis of HIV/AIDS, cancer, or other life-threatening physical illnesses, recognized Soto for his patronage of AIDS research, and in 2002, the School of American Ballet presented him with the Mae L. Wien Award for Distinguished Service.

Soto's memoir, *Every Step You Take*, was published in 2011.

He currently resides in New York City with Fuentes.

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**Craig Kaczorowski** writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.