

Robert Joffrey

Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered History in America, 2004

Born: December 24, 1930 in Seattle, Washington, United States

Died: March 25, 1988 in New York, New York, United States

Nationality: American

Occupation: Choreographer

JOFFREY, Robert (b. 24 December 1930;d. 25 March 1988), dancer, choreographer.

Born Abdullah Jaffa Bey Khan in Seattle, Washington, the only child of an Afghan restaurateur father and an Italian mother, Joffrey began dancing at the age of nine to combat his asthma and bowed-in feet. He took quickly to dance, and started exploring choreography almost immediately. When he was sixteen he met Gerald Arpino, his lifelong partner who was six years his senior, and the couple poured themselves into dance study. He moved to New York in 1948, where he studied briefly at the School of American Ballet and with Alexandra Fedorova, and by 1949 he was performing solo roles in Roland Petit's Ballets de Paris. He also studied modern dance and performed briefly in May O'Donnell's company. He became an accomplished teacher of ballet in New York City and founded his own school in 1953. The next year he formed his first small company, the Robert Joffrey Ballet Concert, drawn from his students, and made a successful new work *Pas des Déesses* to a musical score by gay composer Lou Harrison. The dance was acquired by the London-based Ballet Rambert, and Joffrey's career blossomed. In 1956, he rechristened his company the Robert Joffrey Ballet and appointed Arpino as the company choreographer. Joffrey became the resident choreographer for the New York City Opera from 1957 to 1962.

Through a well-managed series of tours in unlikely venues, the Joffrey company introduced scores of Americans to the art of ballet. Traveling in station wagons to high-school gymnasiums and rotary clubs, the company built an audience through a series of one-night-stands uncommon for ballet. Buoyed by the patronage of wealthy socialite Rebekah Harkness, the company secured a United States State Department sponsored tour of Western Europe and Russia in 1962. Joffrey achieved his greatest choreographic success with the breakthrough work *Astarte* (1967), set to a score by the iconoclastic rock band Crome Sycrus. The mixed-media work featured a film projected on a billowing screen behind a male-female duet. A sensuous experiment that married ballet to rock music, the work attracted national attention to Joffrey's youthful vitality and creative outlook. *Astarte* put the company on the cover of *Time* magazine and confirmed the potential for an uninitiated broad American audience for ballet.

Joffrey choreographed fifteen ballets in his lifetime, but gained more fame as a company director and teacher. He encouraged his young male dancers toward an explosive dynamism on stage that attracted audiences swayed by their brash virtuosity. His company became known internationally for its broad repertory and youthful attack in performances. The company staged reconstructions of important ballets long gone from any active repertory, including several landmark works from gay impresario Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes: Léonide Massine's *Le Tricorne* (1919), staged in 1969, and *Parade* (1917), mounted by Joffrey in 1973, both with sets and costumes by Picasso. He also reconstructed bisexual choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky's *L'Après-midi d'un faune* (1912), staged in 1979 with gay ballet star Rudolf Nureyev in the role of the Faun, and *Le Sacre du printemps* (1913), staged in 1987. Joffrey's interest in the past, present, and future of ballet led him to remount Kurt Joos's classic antiwar ballet *The Green Table* (1932) in 1967, offer new productions of work by Sir Frederick Ashton, Agnes de Mille, and Jerome Robbins, and commission new ballets from choreographers then unfamiliar with the idiom, including Alvin Ailey, Laura Dean, William Forsythe, James Kudelka, and Twyla Tharp.

Joffrey's company attracted large LGBT audiences interested in the company's blatant convergence of youth

and sensuality. Although Joffrey and Arpino each remained firmly closeted to the press, many LGBT audiences understood them to be lifelong domestic partners, even as they each conducted affairs outside of their relationship. In 1973 Joffrey began a long relationship with gay activist A. Aladar Marberger, and in the 1980s both men contracted HIV. Joffrey died of AIDS in New York City. He received many awards throughout his career, including the Dancemagazine Award, the Capezio Award, and the Handel Medallion of the City of New York. His legacy to the dance world was to harness an unflappable youthful bravado to the idiom of ballet and in the process encourage audiences to imagine an American style of classical dance performance.

Thomas F. DeFrantz

Further Readings

Bibliography

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