

**FINIS JHUNG**  
**BALLET FOR LIFE**

*A Pictorial Memoir*

*Ballet for Life: A Pictorial Memoir* by Finis Jhung

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## Praise for *Ballet for Life: A Pictorial Memoir*

“Thousands of lessons, hardships, joys, and triumphs . . . thousands of moments when generosity shapes the future. These are gifts along the journey of life! In this book, Finis Jhung shows—through his words, teaching, and career—that the journey is not successfully navigated without a stunning love for the work and a great deal of inspiration. As a teenager, I walked into Finis’s class with my dance bag and with countless hopes and dreams. Luckily for me, a stunning love for the work and a great deal of inspiration was waiting at the barre!”—Andy Blankenbuehler, three-time Tony-winning choreographer for *Hamilton*, *In the Heights*, and *Bandstand*

“Finis Jhung has had a long and remarkable career as dancer, teacher, choreographer, and company artistic director—and now, he has written a pictorial biography that beautifully describes his life in dance. His devotion to the art of ballet is palpable, and his search for knowledge is ongoing. This biography is complete and compelling, touching and honest. The photographs are exquisite. All dance fans will be happy to have this book.”—Lawrence Rhodes, artistic director emeritus, Dance Division, The Juilliard School

“When I was in need of serious mind and body recuperation, a friend suggested Finis Jhung and his superb technique of mind and body. Finis helped to put me back on my feet again. He teaches with gentle strength and focus. Finis is a true artist—as you will see when you read this book. Thank you, Finis, for making strong, balanced bodies and minds.”—Chita Rivera, two-time Tony-winning actress for *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and *The Rink*

“Finis Jhung’s memoir is a uniquely American tale of trials and tribulations met with strength and determination. It encapsulates the incredibly demanding journey to success in the world of ballet. I flew through every page and loved every anecdote. Cheers to a beautiful book, a beautiful story of an artist, and a beautiful human being.”—Adam Sklute, director, Ballet West

“I met Finis when I was performing my first principal roles as a corps de ballet member, and he immediately knew I would make it to the top. He seemed to have this sixth sense that can't be taught. After reading his

story and learning about his devotion to Buddhism and how it completely changed his outlook on life, I was inspired to see life with that same clarity and compassion. Finis's life journey as a dancer, turned Buddhist leader, turned ballet teacher and coach has not only motivated me to aspire to achieve my greatest dreams and hopes, but also allowed my journey to be never-ending and unexpected."—Sara Mearns, principal dancer, New York City Ballet

"Something in Finis Jhung's deeply lived experience of dance afforded him the vision and the voice to lead dancers to a refined freedom of engagement through the exquisite challenges of ballet's demands. His considerations of the what and the how of classical practice have left their indelible mark on generations of artists like myself, who still feel the influence of his practical clarity."—William Forsythe, world renowned choreographer; professor of dance and artistic advisor, the Choreographic Institute at the University of Southern California's Gloria Kaufman School of Dance

"When we were casting the Broadway company and the tours of *Billy Elliot*, we knew we needed to have an extraordinary teacher and coach for the Billys. Finis was the perfect teacher and coach for the Billys, bringing a lifetime of experience in ballet, sharing his perspective on performing, teaching them how to visualize and build stamina, and bringing out the artist in each one of them."—Nora Brennan, children's casting director for *Billy Elliot, the Musical*

"Learning from his own experiences, Finis Jhung truly did it his way and became an iconic teacher and master of ballet. Finis's story will enlighten those who have made dance their life, and it will give you an appreciation of the struggles that took him from Hawai'i to New York."—Cynthia Harvey, legendary principal dancer, American Ballet Theatre and The Royal Ballet; artistic director, American Ballet Theatre's Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School

"Finis Jhung is a compelling, elegant, and exciting teacher. I have benefited from his classes through the years and have truly been enriched by them. May he continue to pass on his wisdom for many years to come."—Dame Gillian Lynne DBE, two-time Tony-winning choreographer for *Cats* and *Phantom of the Opera*

"*Ballet for Life: A Pictorial Memoir* is an enjoyable, informative, and inspiring account of a performing career that happened during a time of rapid ascendancy for American ballet. Finis was in the heart of it; his

influence as a performing artist and as a teacher cuts across a broad swath of ballet companies stylistically, geographically, and generationally. This memoir is an illuminating account of his own career, of falling down and getting up, and of moving forward. Using captivating photography as his inspiration, Finis guides us through his remarkable life story. He is an important contributor to ballet in America, and that contribution is both revealed and enhanced in his pictorial memoir, which can be readily enjoyed by anyone.”—Daniel Duell, artistic director, Ballet Chicago

“Finis Jhung’s beautifully written memoir tells of self-transcendence—from a poor student in Honolulu to a world-renowned dancer on Broadway and with the Joffrey and Harkness ballet companies—culminating in his work as a master ballet teacher, whose wisdom helps countless dancers become their personal best!”—Linda Hamilton, Ph.D., performance psychologist and author of *The Dancer’s Way: The New York City Ballet Guide to Mind, Body, and Nutrition*

“This is a must-read for aspiring dancers, seasoned dancers, patrons, and dance aficionados alike! This is a REAL journey through every unimaginable obstacle to success. The passion, the daily commitment, and the pure joy and love for ballet seep from each page. From his eloquent words to the wonderful photographs, Finis’s heart-warming biography will inspire you to love ballet that much more. Finis is a treasure in our industry. I absolutely loved this book!”—Michèle Assaf, founder and artistic director, World Dance Movement

“Bravo! This autobiographical recounting of Finis Jhung’s stellar life in dance is wonderfully personal, intimate, and engaging. He describes all the challenges, self-doubts, hard work, and triumphant exhilaration that he experienced as he developed his craft and artistry. The book makes the details of ballet technique accessible, interesting, and even exciting for the general reader. Finis’s extraordinary performances with the Harkness Ballet made an indelible impression on all who were lucky enough to witness them. It’s clear that his mindfulness as a lifelong learner, humility, humanity, spirituality, and appreciation of each individual’s unique gifts all powerfully informed his brilliant post-performance career as a preeminent professional ballet teacher. Generations of his students are grateful!”—Joan Finkelstein, executive director, The Harkness Foundation for Dance

“Not surprisingly, Finis writes in the same manner in which he teaches and lives: truthfully, insightfully, unapologetically. While most ballet instructors teach and pass on unchangeable systems of ballet technique, Finis insists on an ever-evolving application of empirical, demonstrable, kinetic truths. His is a profound simplicity distilled from years and years of keen observation and tireless application. Read his story and consider his insights. You’re sure to find yourself growing, both in and out of the studio.”—Lawrence Rosenberg, executive director of the Anaheim Ballet; dance faculty member, Chapman University

“From the very first photo of two-year-old Finis (ankles gently crossed in potential 5th position) until the last, I could not put down this inspiring, moving story of a life lived in service to dance. Finis offers abundant insights into his rich journey and his guiding Buddhist philosophy as he celebrates family, luminaries, and humble students alike. While placing each deeply described and illustrated memory into vivid historical context, he teaches and entertains—and we learn, laugh, and cry with him. I will return to this engrossing memoir again and again.”—Barbara Forbes, Feldenkrais® practitioner; dance faculty member, Sara Lawrence College

“Finis Jhung dreamed an impossible dream, but that didn’t stop him from reaching for the stars. In the process, he became the inspiration for many of us who did not fit into traditional dance molds. Every dancer felt welcomed among the throngs of ballet stars crowding his studio—all of us clamoring to sign in before the class filled up. Finis’s book reads like a dance history journal, full of iconic personalities spanning the worlds of ballet, Broadway, and film. Most touching are his frank descriptions of his own shortcomings, which, in time, informed his teaching. Perhaps the biggest takeaway is this: Above all else, one must remain inquisitive and discerning. This book is a must-read for all who love dance!”—Bonnie Oda Homsey, director, Los Angeles Dance Foundation; chair of dance, Princess Grace Foundation—U.S.A.

“This extraordinary book beautifully shows the connection between the past and the future, illustrated with a treasure trove of photography. I love all of it!”—Julie Caprio, artistic director, Ballet Technique and Hamilton Ballet Theatre

“*Ballet for Life: A Pictorial Memoir* proves that hard work and determination can overcome any obstacle. Through his teaching, Finis transformed how I see movement. I became a better student because of

his quest to understand how the movement ‘actually happens.’ Now my mentor Finis, who continually opens my eyes and inspires me, brings his unique voice and faith to the page. We will all learn from his journey.”—Beverly Spell, Leap ’N Learn

“Like my favorite choreography, *Ballet for Life: A Pictorial Memoir* flows easily, with frequent surprise twists and turns. We follow Finis’s journey from the adorable five-year-old in World War II Hawai’i (with the required gas mask around his neck!) to the man of wisdom and humor, whom the ballet world both reveres and adores. Finis’s memoir will touch every dancer’s heart. Be prepared to smile, groan, cheer, and tear up. Hesitate not. Read this book now!”—Marie Paquet-Nesson, author of *Ballet to the Corps*

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## DEDICATION

With loving gratitude to my stalwart and supportive son Jason Akira Jhung, who was the first to encourage me to write this memoir and who has stood by my side throughout the 13 months it took to complete it

And, to all of you who live to dance!

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# CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	xiii
Foreword	xvii
A Note from Finis Jhung	xx
1 Honolulu: 1931–1955	1
2 The University of Utah: 1955–1959	35
3 Broadway, <i>Flower Drum Song</i> : 1960	61
4 San Francisco Ballet, Hollywood: 1960–1962	73
5 Robert Joffrey Ballet: 1962–1964	87
6 Harkness Ballet: 1964–1969	113
7 Life Without Ballet: 1969–1972	189
8 Marriage, Family, and Divorce: 1972–1985	197
9 Return to Ballet: 1972–1982	217
10 Chamber Ballet U.S.A.: 1981–1986	231
11 Richard Ellner’s Broadway Dance Center: 1986–1994	315
12 Master Teacher, Artistic Entrepreneur, and <i>Billy Elliot</i> Days: 1994–Today	325
13 Life with a New Hip: 2017–Today	369
14 Reflections	409
Epilogue: The Jhung Family Today	465

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And last, but certainly not least, my massage therapist Gene Choi who, with each treatment, restores youthful vigor and energy to my body and mind and gives me hope for a strong and healthy future.

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## FOREWORD

Having grown up in the former USSR, where ballet is started early and done professionally to perfection (or else, only admired from a distance), I listen with an amused ear to my American rheumatologist's suggestion to "try ballet" for gaining musculoskeletal stability and strength. I would be a laughing stock in my Russian community! Yet, the idea—fallen on a fertile ground of countless childhood hours spent mesmerized, watching black-and-white reruns of *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *La Bayadère*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Giselle*, and *Spartacus* from the Kirov and Bolshoi—quickly gains the attention of my tired mind and a body aching for movement. I begin to contemplate the unthinkable: learning ballet, for the first time, at the age of 40.

Thus begins my journey into the world of the "adult ballerinas."

The preliminary search for a ballet studio reveals, perhaps unsurprisingly, that adults are not the primary target for ballet instruction. Classes are most plentiful for children and teenagers. Lessons for adult learners with previous experience in ballet are second in availability. But instruction for "absolute beginners," adults with no previous experience in ballet, is extremely difficult to find.

I count myself very lucky when I finally stumble upon a studio that caters to adult absolute beginners. From the first class, I am completely smitten. New awareness—from the top of my head to my toes and fingertips—graces the habitual drooping posture of an academic writer.

I begin to track down books, movies, and documentaries on ballet. I buy a ballet barre, start stretching, and attempt splits. I dream of dancing in an actual performance—even if only as a babushka in *The Nutcracker*. I want to practice ballet *every* day and become good enough to (gasp!) go *en pointe*. No longer merely the means to a utilitarian end—to strengthen my joints and ligaments in an attempt to forestall their autoimmune deterioration—I now want to study ballet . . . for the sake of ballet!

There is only one snag in my brilliant vision. The studio does not offer daily classes for adult beginners. I decide to supplement my in-person classes with DVD-based training at home.

A quick Amazon search reveals a dazzling array of ballet-related fitness routines, but only a handful that feature genuine ballet instruction for

adult beginners. Among them are the color-coded DVDs by Finis Jhung. This is our first encounter: I am duly impressed by the reviews of his work and by the quality of the production (the first-rate photography, beautiful musical score, and graceful demonstrations by actual ballet dancers). His work is deemed to be the gold standard for teaching adult ballet beginners and, according to some, a truly revolutionary approach to teaching ballet, period.

Unable to resist the allure of the mounting evidence, I purchase my first red DVD: *Ballet Barre for the Adult Absolute Beginner*. This proves to be a momentous decision for my study of ballet.

Now, having practiced ballet for about three years, my collection of the Finis Jhung Beginner Ballet DVDs continues to expand, and I keep returning to them for ongoing practice, reference, and inspiration. I have learned, in the realm of my own experience, that Finis's teaching for adult ballet beginners is truly in a category of its own.

Having danced professionally as a principal with the much-admired Harkness Ballet and having been a sought-after teacher to many professional dancers and teachers of ballet, in the later stages of his career Finis has turned his attention to adult absolute beginners—people from walks of life, ages, and body types not usually associated with classical ballet. Finis challenges himself to teach adult beginners because he believes that if he can bring about the line, positioning, quality of movement, and grace that are characteristic of a ballet dancer in a person who has never done ballet in his or her life, then he has “really understood” what it is to teach ballet.

That Finis succeeds so spectacularly in this uncommon undertaking should be attributed not only to his in-depth knowledge of ballet and his unique approach to technique, but also to his extraordinary pedagogical sensitivities. Having viewed and reflected on Finis's work not merely as his student, but as a fellow teacher (albeit from a very different field of study), I now see why people continue to refer to Finis's teaching as “magical.”

The magic of Finis's teaching rests on his ability to honor the fundamental principles of classical ballet, while making them accessible to people without specialized training. As such, Finis's work is not only a stimulus for the training of the body, but also a lasting source of inspiration, creativity, and delight for the soul.

Yet, the most powerful outcome of training with Finis is a realization of a profound connection between the disciplined artistry of ballet and the art of daily living. The discipline and persistence, the focus on the process rather than immediate results, the work of honoring the body and noticing the inner obstacles of the mind, the acceptance of change and impermanence, the commitment to be fully in the moment—these attitudes and skills involved in becoming good in ballet apply equally well to the highs and lows of daily living.

It is precisely because the connection between ballet and life emerges so naturally and organically in Finis's teaching that, sooner or later, the learner begins to ask questions not only about what Finis does as a professional dancer and teacher, but also about who Finis is as a person.

In this book, we are offered such a unique and precious chance. Using his memories and accompanying them with photographs from his personal archives and with images and narratives from the “greats” in the history of American ballet, Finis tells the story of his life. He shares with us the extraordinary journey of his personal becoming—from the little poor boy in Honolulu, who fell in love with dance, to his present state as one of the trailblazers of contemporary American ballet.

But make no mistake: The pictorial memoir of Finis Jhung is so much more than a book about Finis. Unfolding before us is a chronicle of hope, courage, and perseverance of the human spirit; of a life lived to the fullest; and of a life that, in so doing, has borne much fruit and become an offering to others.

—Natalia Shulgina



*Natalia Shulgina, a native of Russia, holds a M.Div. from the Theological Seminary of the Russia United Methodist Church as well as a Th.M. and Ph.D. from Emory University. When not impersonating an adult ballerina, she is involved in the teaching of pastoral care and religious education.—Photo by Mark G. Kunze*

## A NOTE FROM FINIS JHUNG

For years, people have been asking me to write my biography.

As a teacher, I am constantly looking for new ways to teach ballet—always focused on the present and the future.

I don't like looking backward.

But something happened when we shot *Self-Massage with Finis Jhung* in 2016 that made me reconsider. My son Jason, who was producing and directing the video, sat me down for what was supposed to be a short introduction segment. He asked me when I first discovered my love for ballet, and I ended up talking for 40 minutes—and more or less told the story of my life since I first began dancing at age nine.

Jason said he thought there was a book in that lengthy video interview. As I looked through my photo collection, spanning 71 years of loving ballet, I thought, “Why not a pictorial memoir? Not a biography with zillions of words, but more of a scrapbook of interesting photos and little stories about them.”

I spent most of the following January and February collecting all the photos I could find. Locating the photographers who took the photos in order to get their permission to publish was extremely time-consuming, frustrating, and rewarding. And as I have never kept diaries—and, in fact, threw out some incredible media when I left ballet for Buddhism—it has been challenging and sometimes confusing to try to remember specific events.

But at the same time, I am energized and re-inspired because, through this collection of photos and the memories they recall, I realize how fortunate I am to be who I am.

In Buddhism, we say the journey of a thousand miles begins with but a single step. I hope you will enjoy every step of this journey.



1938. Honolulu. Almost two years old, Finis Jhung is poised to spend the rest of his life with ankles crossed in fifth position and arms rounded.

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*Chapter 1*

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Honolulu

*1931-1955*

1931

My parents have just eloped, and neither has any money. He is 27 and dependent on his parents. She is 16 and just out of high school in Chicago.

My father, from Hawai'i, has been "on the mainland" (continental U.S.) for several years, working both as a traveling salesman for Wear-Ever Aluminum Cooking Utensils and as a business manager and banjo player with a Hawaiian musical troupe. Strange, but true . . .

My mother is Korean-Scottish-English—her father Korean and her mother Scottish-English. To my regret, I never learn the complete story of her life. She has intimated that she was abused as a youngster and consequently placed in foster homes. This may explain why she marries my father in great haste without her father's permission and appears to be very happily married to a gadabout whom she barely knows and who is without a solid profession or money.

For someone so young, Mom is remarkably adaptive, ready and willing to live comfortably among the Koreans in Honolulu. Although she looks like a *haole* (Caucasian), she can eat with chopsticks like any experienced Islander!





1931. Finis Jhung's newlywed parents, Walter and Caroline Jhung, on the boat to Honolulu

1931

My parents, Walter and Caroline Jhung, arrive in Honolulu and are greeted by his parents, Woon Sur Chung and Shin Sil Lee. Grandfather (*Halabeoji* is the Korean term, which we will use) and Grandmother (*Halmeoni*) have been living in Hawai'i since 1903.

My grandparents were brought from Korea to labor in what they thought was "The Land of Gold"—but which they find really means breaking your back working all day in the sugar cane and pineapple fields of Hawai'i.

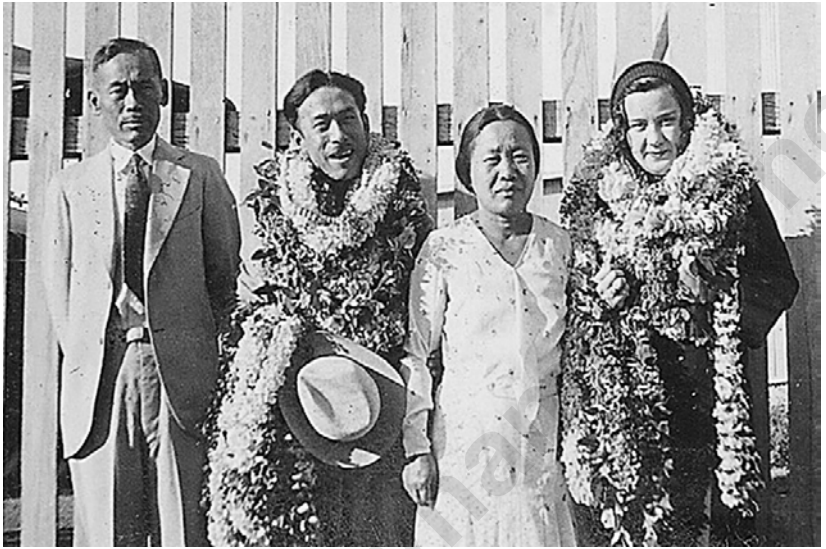
In 1907, tired of scrimping and subsisting on their meager earnings, they quit working on the plantations and decide to work for themselves in their own businesses: first, growing and selling flowers; and then, running a Korean rice cake shop. Despite working very hard at it, both attempts fail.

Halabeoji begins to find work at various military bases, slowly working his way up the ladder to better jobs: first, hauling bags of wet cement (which weigh almost as much as he does) up flights of stairs; then, laundering and pressing uniforms for the soldiers; and finally, after a time, owning and operating his own tailor and cleaning shop at one of the military bases.

While my father, Walter, is living in Chicago, Halabeoji sends him money and instructs him to take a course in military tailoring so he can work at the shop when he returns to Honolulu.

The prodigal son is to start life anew as a dutiful son, loving husband, caring father, and tailor for the armed forces.

My father will also change the spelling of the family name from "Chung" to "Jhung" so as to further distinguish us from others with the same name. And, it will make an excellent stage name for me!



1931. Honolulu. Woon Sur Chung (Walter's father), Walter Jhung, Shin Sil Lee Chung (Walter's mother), and Caroline Jhung

1939

My parents have three sons: Bryson (July 27, 1932), Grafton (September 30, 1935), and me—Finis (May 28, 1937).

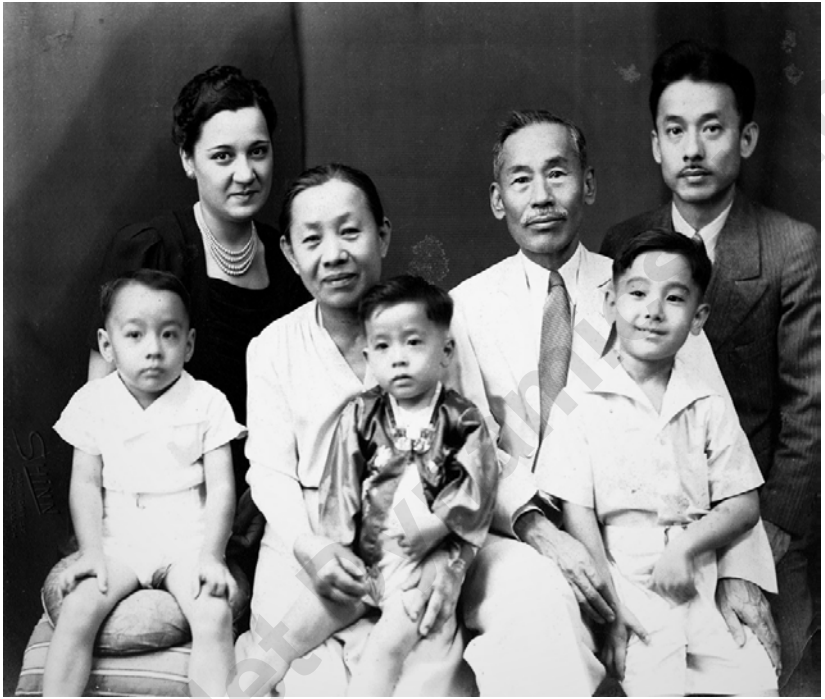
We are raised as Korean Methodists. We attend church every Sunday, are taught to obey our parents, and study hard in school. My father now works daily at our family-owned tailor shop at Hickam Air Force Base. He has a red leather strap hanging on his doorknob, which he does not hesitate to use when his sons disobey.

Halabeoji and Halmeoni are living with us. Halabeoji does all the household repairs and the yardwork. Halmeoni teaches Mom how to cook delicious Korean and Island dishes.

After high school and college, Bryson will join the U.S. Army. He will attend Airborne School and will become a paratrooper and a Ranger. He will be an infantry instructor, with two tours in Vietnam. After that, he will receive an M.B.A. from the University of Hawai'i and eventually become Comptroller, U.S. Army Western Command. He will retire as a full colonel.

Grafton will become the first American of Korean ancestry to attend West Point Military Academy. He will receive an M.B.A. from Harvard and become a prosperous and supportive brother, helping me through financial difficulties and offering advice on a range of other topics.

Because I am always fidgeting and can't sit still, everyone calls me *Keko*, which is the Hawaiian word for monkey. All this fidgeting and wanting to stand up and move portends my future. The monkey is going to become a dancer.



1939. Honolulu. Left to right: Grafton Chawold Jhung, Caroline Jhung, Shin Sil Lee Chung, Finis Jhung, Woon Sur Chung, Bryson Hawold Jhung, and Walter Jhung

1941

On December 7, just before 8:00 a.m., hundreds of Japanese fighter planes fly over the mountains of Oahu and attack the American naval base at Pearl Harbor. In just two hours, the Japanese destroy nearly 20 American naval vessels, including 8 enormous battleships, and 300 airplanes. More than 2,000 American soldiers and sailors are killed, and another 1,000 are wounded.

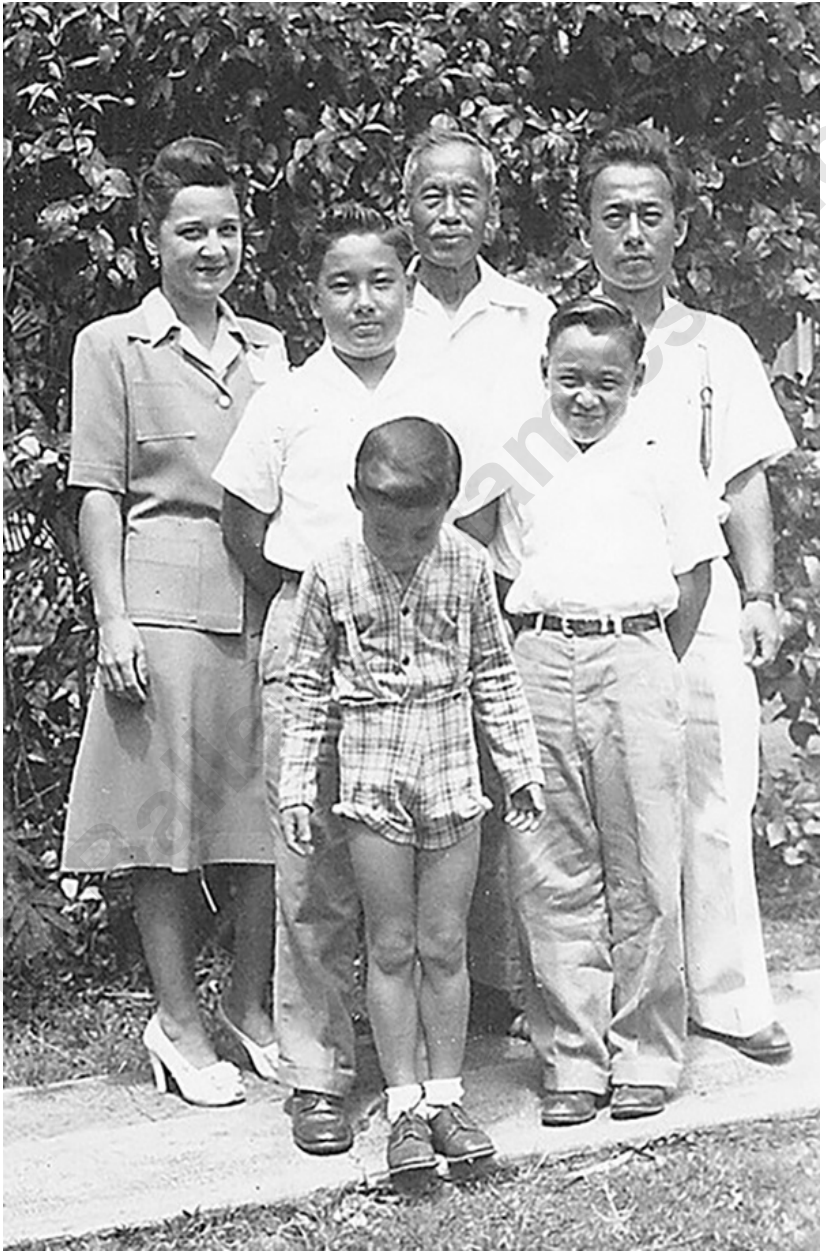
The next day, President Franklin D. Roosevelt asks Congress to declare war on Japan. Congress approves. America is at war with Japan. Three days later, Germany and Italy declare war on the U.S. America is at war with Japan, Germany, and Italy.

Luckily for our family, December 7 is a Sunday, and no one is working at our tailor shop at Hickam Air Force Base, one of Japan's primary targets during the attack on Pearl Harbor. Hickam suffers extensive damage, aircraft losses, and loss of life, with 189 people killed and 303 wounded. Our tailor shop is strafed, but operable.

Honolulu is now under martial law, and life changes for all of us there.

A curfew is established: We must all remain indoors between specified hours, especially at night. Blackouts are enforced. Gas masks are issued: We all gain an extra arm—the masks are kept in bags that hang from our shoulders and must be worn wherever we go. Halabeoji builds a bomb shelter in the backyard and stocks it with water, canned goods, pillows, blankets, dishes, and a kerosene lamp. During air raid drills, we sit in the shelter with bated breath until the all-clear sounds. We are also growing vegetables in our victory garden.

By 1943, I am already imagining I am going to be a ballet dancer. In the photo, I want everyone to see what nice legs I have for dancing in the movies and on Broadway. At this point, I can only dream about it since I haven't the courage to ask my parents to let me learn how to dance.



1943. Honolulu. Caroline Jhung, Bryson Jhung, Finis Jhung, Woon Sur Chung, Grafton Jhung, and Walter Jhung

1944

Since my parents work at Hickam Air Force Base altering the soldiers' uniforms, they are on friendly terms with some of the celebrated 7th Army Air Force major league baseball players, like Joe DiMaggio of the New York Yankees, Mike McCormick of the Cincinnati Reds, Dario Lodigiani of the Chicago White Sox, Walt Judnich of the St. Louis Browns, and Jerry Priddy of the Washington Senators.

Among the minor leaguers (on the way to the majors) are Ferris Fain (Philadelphia), Charlie Silvera (Yankees), and Bob Dillinger (Browns). All these baseball players are ground-based airmen without wings, who are in the Special Services section and receive special treatment, which includes no kitchen patrol.

They are housed in the barracks on the base and are a fun-loving gang that takes the Islands by storm. In their first game against players from the Navy, DiMaggio slams a home run over the left-center-field wall before a crowd of 20,000 at the Honolulu Stadium, and the crowd goes wild.

My parents hold parties for the baseball players, feeding them Halmeoni's Korean BBQ ribs and Mom's shrimp curry with mango chutney. The players arrive noisily in a big Army truck, tell us boys to get in, and take us on a full-throttled, hair-raising ride zooming up and down hilly streets. For a moment, we are the Islands' elite: We are the only kids in Honolulu riding in an Army truck with major league baseball players! Joe DiMaggio autographs a baseball and presents it to my older brother Bryson, who, 60 years later, will give it to my son, Jason.

Although they don't know it, these celebrated ballplayers have influenced my thinking: In sharp contrast to my father's Korean friends, who are quiet and retiring as local Asians tend to be, these ballplayers are outgoing, personable, and exude confidence. They are at the top of their game. When I grow up, I want to be just like them. How I'm going to do that will soon appear.





1944. Honolulu. Front row, left to right: Dario Lodigiani and Jerry Priddy. Back row, left to right: Walt Judnich, Mike McCormick, and Joe DiMaggio (Photo courtesy of Gary Bedingfield, *Baseball in Wartime*)

1945

The war is over, most of the soldiers have left Hickam and returned home, and the tailor shop is struggling. My father does not like this, so he packs up and leaves for the mainland. He moves first to California and then to New York, where he works on behalf of Korean immigrants. Eventually, he moves to Korea, where he becomes a special assistant to the prime minister and accompanies Korean athletes to the 1948 St. Moritz Winter Olympics.

Mom files for and receives an uncontested divorce. She is bequeathed the debt-ridden tailor shop; an old house that needs repairs; an aging grandfather; miscellaneous bills our extravagant father has amassed; and three young “Oriental” boys, who don’t look like they belong to her.

From now on, Mom is our be-all, the center of our lives. I love her dearly. I think she looks like a movie star (Linda Darnell?). On the weekends, she and some of her unmarried Korean girlfriends go to nightclubs where they are wine and dine by servicemen. Right now, she has a handsome live-in boyfriend named Dee Moore, a Marine who looks like Randolph Scott. He takes us to nice restaurants. I’d like him to be my new dad. But, it’s not going to happen.



1946. Honolulu. Caroline Jhung, 33 years old

1946

I am nine years old and announce to my mom, “When I grow up, I am going to be a famous dancer in New York and Hollywood.”

I’ve been going to the movies, and all the singing, dancing, and New York backstage dramas excite me. I want to do what I see on the big screen. Amazingly, Mom approves and finds a *haole* dance teacher from the mainland named Dorothy Hellis Moots to teach me dancing.

The studio is clean and airy, with windows on both sides and barres running along the walls. There is a large mirror and an upright Victrola, on which she plays large vinyl records.

Mrs. Moots is an elegant, well-dressed, well-mannered woman. She looks like a ballerina—hair up, always topped with a fragrant plumeria blossom. She wears a one-piece dance outfit with a short skirt. Her long, lovely legs are bare. She wears black ballet slippers or black tap shoes.

I join an ongoing class of older girls. There are no other boys or men. Each lesson is a little of this, a little of that: We dance to “The Blue Danube” waltz with ballet steps called “1-2-3 kick-land” (grand jeté entrelacé) and “perch-flat” (piqué-plié); put on tap shoes and waltz-clog to “School Days”; limber up with splits and backbends; and perform acrobatics where we hop, swing a leg backward, and kick the backs of our heads.

The class includes Eloise Orso, who will later become Wisa D’Orso and dance on Broadway and television. She is beautiful, drives an open jeep, and gives me rides home from class.

When Mom runs out of money, Mrs. Moots gives me free classes. She even gives me a pair of pointe shoes, which are meant to strengthen my feet.

Twenty years later, in 1966, Alvin Ailey will choreograph *Macumba* for the Harkness Ballet. On the steeply raked stage of the Gran Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona, he will have three of us male dancers perform piqué turns and strut on pointe while twirling parasols.

What goes around, comes around.



1949. Honolulu airport. Dorothy Hellis and Russell J. Moots

1946

Besides ballet, I am also studying the hula, along with Barry Yap. We are taking lessons from Louise Beamer, who is motherly and soft-spoken and considered to be an expert hula teacher. She lives just two blocks away and has a large studio in the basement of her house. In time, she will be recognized as a *kumu hula* (hula master.)

Her daughter, Winona Beamer, will become a songwriter, hula teacher, and Hawaiian cultural authority. Winona's sons, Keola and Kapono, will become famous as composers and slack-key guitarists.

We dance to popular Hawaiian songs, sometimes using hula instruments like the feathered gourd rattle with seeds in it (*'uli 'uli*); bamboo sticks with slits, which are either rattled or rustled or hit against each other (*pu'ilu*); and polished stones that are struck together like castanets (*'ili 'ili*).

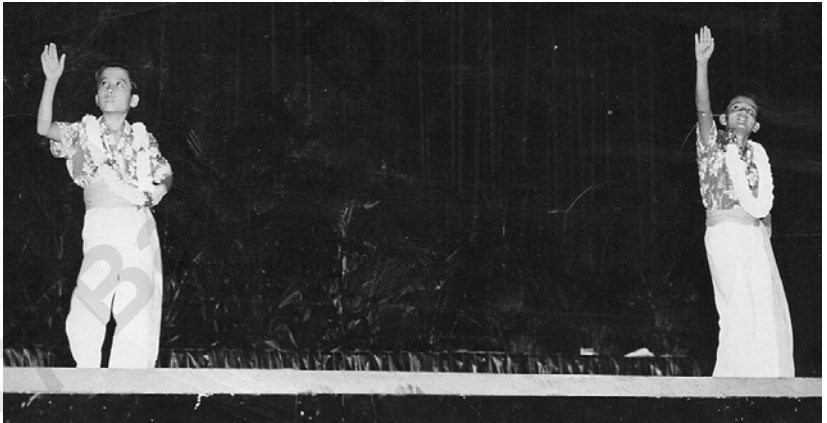
One of my favorite hulas is "Manuela Boy," which is about a poor homeless local boy who's down on his luck: "Manuela Boy, my dear boy, you no more *hila hila* (you have no shame), no more five cents (no money), no more poi (no food), go Aala Park and *hia moe* (so you sleep in the park at night)." Another favorite, "*Holo Holo Kaa*," is about trying to take your girlfriend on a romantic ride in a broken-down jalopy: "I worry about the clanking sound; Springs broken top to bottom . . . We are on the heights up here; But turn and go back; Sing your song my beloved; We go home; Breathing gasoline . . ."

Hula is fun, and it develops my musicality and performing skills. I am asked to hula at the opening of a new store on Waikiki Beach. At the end of each number, the crowd claps and throws money my way.

It's the first time I've been paid to dance. I'm a very happy little boy.



1947. Honolulu. Finis Jhung, Barry Yap, and hula students of Louise Beamer



1947. Honolulu. Finis Jhung and Barry Yap

1947

I am ten, and Carol Ohta is seven. As you can see, we are having the time of our lives. She's not quite on her toe, but she has lovely hands, can hold her leg up, and is very expressive.

Mrs. Moots has made Carol and me partners and has choreographed Weber's Invitation to the Dance, which we will perform at several venues, including a beauty contest at the University of Hawai'i.

We have lots of different poses to strike, and this is one of our favorites.

We laugh a lot as we learn to do simple lifts. Mrs. Moots is very patient with us and never gets angry. She has beautiful *port de bras*—the carriage of her arms—and creates steps that seem to go perfectly with the music.

The swan dive takes a lot of practice and involves a lot of giggling. I lift Carol off the floor; she extends both legs with ankles crossed, arches her back, and reaches both arms forward with wrists crossed; and then, holding her at the waist, I tilt her downward to the floor and lift her back up and put her on her feet.

We are the precocious child ballet stars who are in the newspapers of Honolulu, 1947.

At the beauty contest, as soon as I make my grand leap onstage to that stupendous music that accompanied Nijinsky's famed leap, all the lights go out. The house is pitch black. The audience gasps. I totter and almost fall off the stage.

But then, the lights come on, and we begin again. Far from being unnerved, I am energized and emboldened.

I am a dancer and can do anything!





1947. Honolulu. Carol Ohta and Finis Jhung, Honolulu's youngest ballet stars (Photo by Bob Brooks, University of Hawai'i)

1948

I am dancing at a party in our rented house up on Pacific Heights Road. Up here, it is windy, rainy, and chilly—hence, the un-hula-like long-sleeved shirt and long pants. Older brother Bryson is standing in the hall, probably wondering why his young brother likes to do the hula.

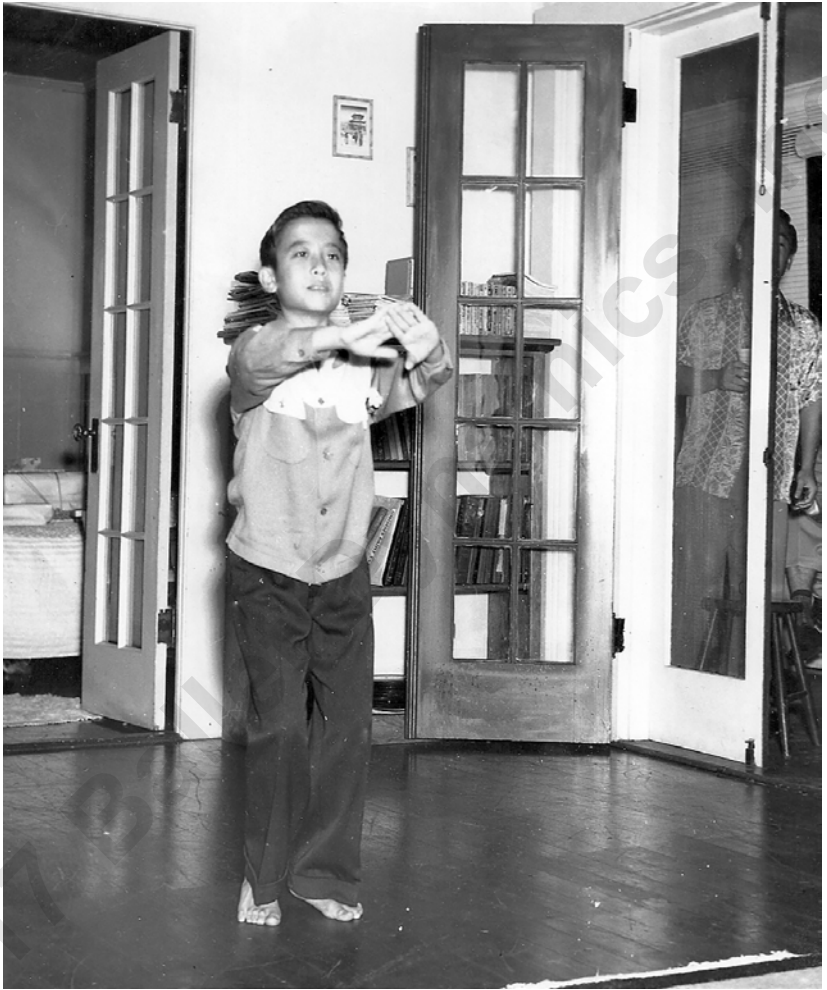
If you look through the doorway behind me, you can see a wrapped gift on the bed. Could we be celebrating my mom's wedding? This is the year she marries Matsuo Higuchi, a Japanese man from Pearl City (next to Pearl Harbor), who fought in Europe with the famed 442nd Regimental Combat Team. (Their famous motto was "Go for Broke!")

Matsuo is known as "Lefty" because he is an amateur baseball player (more baseball in our lives!) and pitches with his left hand. He works at the gas station near Mom's tailor shop at Hickam, which is how they met. Bryson, behind the door, is also a baseball player, so he and Lefty get along especially well.

Each night, Mom (with Lefty helping) lugs home bundles of uniforms that must be ripped apart for altering the next day. Mom takes on this extra work because, since the war, she has few customers and has lost her seamstresses, who would normally have done this work. Lefty helps.

Each night, after dinner, they sit, have a drink, listen to the radio, and rip open the seams of the uniforms, which will be sewn the next day.

We three boys are being taught to be responsible and to work hard when it's needed.



1948. Honolulu. Finis Jhung practicing hula at home

1948

Mrs. Moots takes me to see Alicia Markova and Anton Dolin, the world's greatest exponents of classical ballet. Their repertoire includes "The Dying Swan," excerpts from *Les Sylphides*, the pas de deux from *Don Quixote*, the pas de deux from *The Nutcracker*, and several solos and duets choreographed by Mr. Dolin.

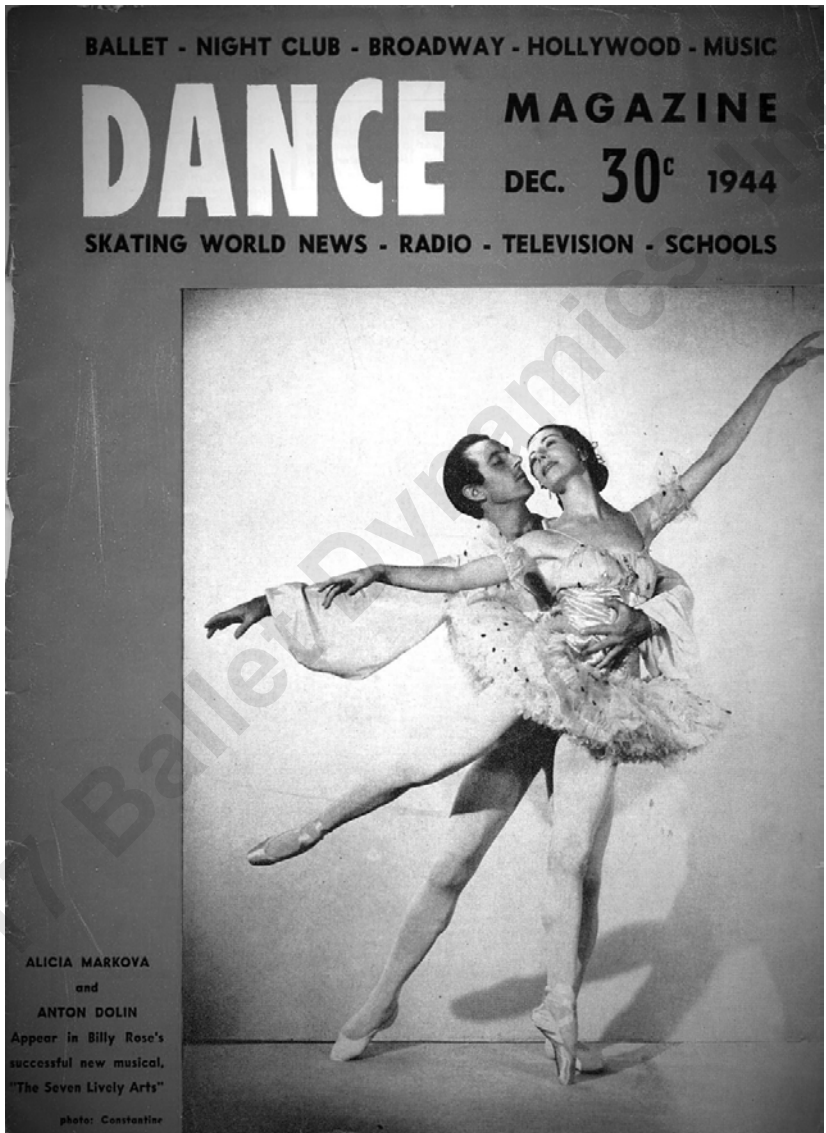
In 1955, when I am studying with Mr. C (Willam F. Christensen) at The University of Utah, he tells us that "Markova used to do a barre that would kill a horse." He also tells us her dancing always appeared effortless when she was with a partner because it was. She would strike a beautiful pose with arms softly moving and not budge an inch—her partner had to lift her as dead weight.

Dolin performs "Hymn to the Sun" to the music of Rimsky-Korsakov. The program note reads: " 'Hymn to the Sun' is an adagio, an unusual dance for a man; but one of a strange beauty that today has been acclaimed all over the U.S. as it has been all over Europe."

This is the first time I see a male dancer perform a ballet adagio. Bare-chested and bare-legged, Dolin is wearing gold metallic shorts. Months later, I choreograph my own adagio to Liszt's *Liebenstraum*, which I perform when asked to dance at parties. First, I do the ballet adagio wearing a white blouse, white shorts, a black sash, and black shoes. Then, I change into an aloha shirt and long white pants, put on a lei, and do a hula, with the feathered gourd and bamboo sticks. The audiences "ooh and ah" and love it.

Mrs. Moots arranges an audition for me with Dolin at the theater. I show him my arabesque and some turns and leaps. He says, "Come and see me when you grow up."

Nineteen years later, in 1967, Dolin will come to see me—in New York. I am a newly made principal of the Harkness Ballet. He stages *Variations for Four*, his famous quartet for male dancers. He gives me the third variation, which has big pas de chats that hang in the air. Fred Fehl takes a photograph of me in performance, which he publishes in his book, *Stars of Ballet and Dance*. This photo is included in my chapter on the Harkness Ballet.



December, 1944. Alicia Markova and Anton Dolin, *Dance Magazine* cover (Reprinted with permission from *Dance Magazine*)

1948

This is Reiko Takakuwa at the Dorothy Hellis Moots Dance Studio. She is the first local dancer I meet who has gone to New York (Barnard College), and she informs me that, in New York, dancers take ballet class every day. I am astounded, since I am taking only one class a week.

One class a week—no wonder it takes months for Mrs. Moots to choreograph our dances!

Reiko will never be a professional dancer, but she will become a trailblazer for dance in Hawai'i. She founds the Oda Ballet School (1957-2001), applying core values of confidence, discipline, motivation, and enjoyment.

Through the years, each time I visit Honolulu, first as a performer and then as a teacher, Reiko arranges classes for me to teach, both at her studio and at the University of Hawai'i. She will connect me with the local powers-that-be, who will secure funding from the legislature so that my Chamber Ballet U.S.A. can perform in the Hawaiian Islands in 1985.

In her twenty-fifth year of teaching, Reiko writes: "One weekly dance lesson will not produce a dancer, but this lesson can be an enriching experience physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, and spiritually."

Reiko becomes a founding member and executive board member of the Hawai'i State Dance Council, founding member of the State Foundation of Culture and the Arts, regional correspondent for *Dance Magazine*, and founding member of the Hawai'i Chapter of Dance Masters of America. She also launches the Artists-in-the-Schools Project for the Department of Education and initiates an injury prevention ballet class for the University of Hawai'i's football team.

Reiko's oldest daughter, Bonnie Oda Homsey, will graduate from Juilliard and will become a principal with the Martha Graham Dance Company, director of the Los Angeles Dance Foundation, and chair of dance for the Princess Grace Foundation—USA.



1948. Honolulu. Reiko Takakuwa Oda

1948

I'm at the beach, but my mind is elsewhere. I have just seen *The Red Shoes*. It is the most beautiful film I have ever seen—and will ever see. I can't stop thinking about it. How will it be possible for me ever to reach the level of professionalism and live the glamorous life the dancers portray in the film?

As the critic Roger Ebert describes it on January 1, 2005, "The film is voluptuous in its beauty and passionate in its storytelling. You don't watch it, you bathe in it. . . . It's the Hans Christian Andersen fable about a young girl who puts on a pair of red slippers that will not allow her to stop dancing; she must dance and dance, in a grotesque mockery of happiness, until she is dead."

Further, Mr. Ebert says, "No film had ever interrupted its story for an extended ballet before *The Red Shoes*, although its success made that a fashion. . . . None ever looked as fantastical as the one in *The Red Shoes*, where the little shoemaker puts the fatal slippers on the girl. The physical stage is seamlessly transformed into a surreal space, where Shearer glides and flies, enters unreal landscapes and even does a pas de deux with a newspaper that takes the form of a dancer, turns into the dancer, and then into a newspaper again."

I'm only 11, but I take the movie to heart. I must do as Vicki does in the film: dedicate myself to my art and work as hard as I can. Unfortunately, the financially limited circumstances of our family, coupled with the lack of recognition of ballet as a valid part of cultural life in Honolulu, leaves me more of a dreamer than a doer. All I can do for now is take my weekly free class with Mrs. Moots, hope for more inspiration from seeing professional ballet dancers perform when they pass through town, and dance around the house when no one is there to watch.

Twenty years from now, I will be living and working in Monte Carlo, performing on the very stage where the fantasy ballet scene in the movie takes place—the Grand Theatre de Monte Carlo—and sunning on the casino balcony where Vicki Page leaps to her death in *The Red Shoes*.





1948. Honolulu. Finis Jhung looking to the future

1950

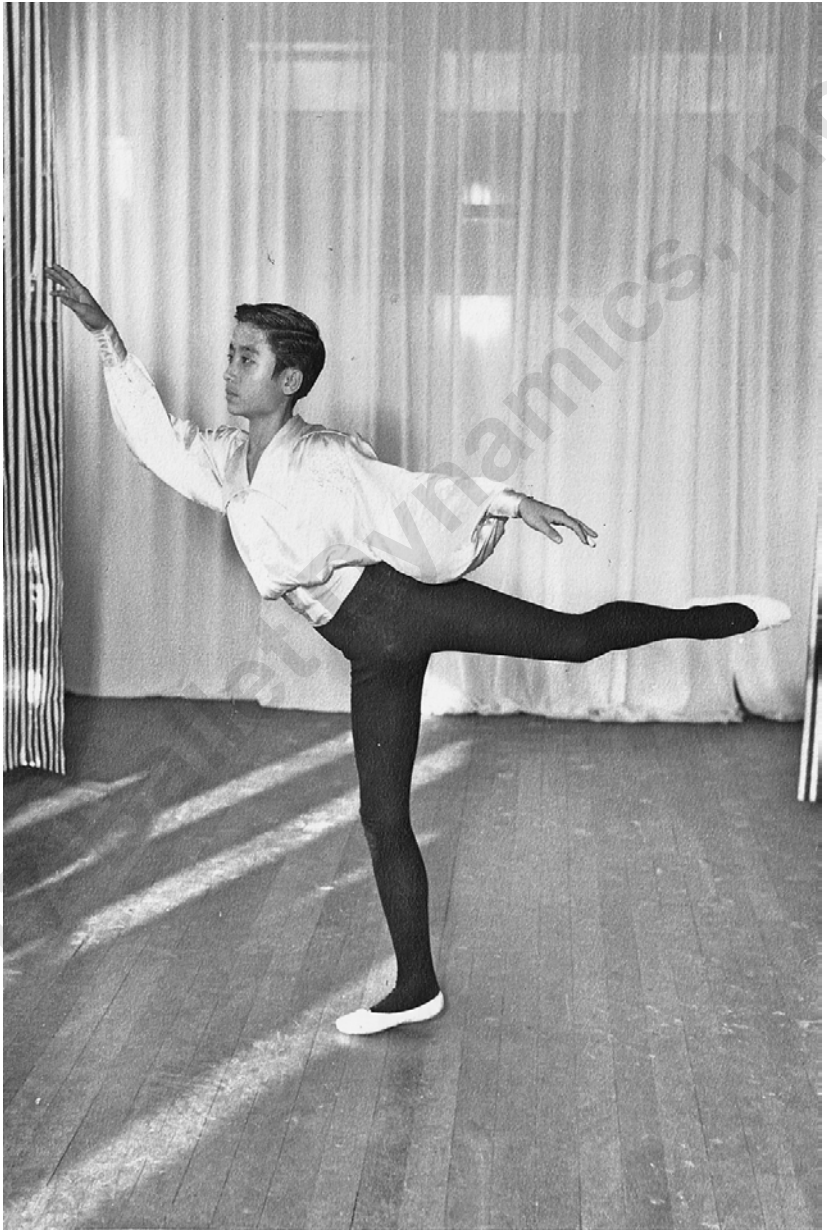
I've just danced a duet with Carol Ohta in Mrs. Moots's studio. During my intermediate and high school years, ballet class with Mrs. Moots—about 45 minutes long—consists of a very short, rapid warm-up for me and then dancing with Carol to music from *Gaîté Parisienne* or *The Story of Three Loves*.

My warm-up is to do a couple of grand pliés at the barre; then, grasp an ankle and lift that leg as high as possible in second position; and then, holding the leg up, hop across the room on one foot. I repeat it to the other side.

Mom is still struggling and working hard at the tailor shop. Since Lefty is a veteran, he is entitled to live in low-income housing. We move from the city to Manana Housing, which is in Pearl City (next to Pearl Harbor).

Our apartment is in a long, two-storied wooden building, which was formerly a military barracks. It's cheaply made, with walls and ceilings made of canec, a building material made from the remnants of sugar cane processing. You can easily punch a hole in it. Mom and Lefty sleep downstairs in the living room. Upstairs is the bathroom and a small bedroom for each of us boys.

On most days, when I return from school, I am the only one home since Grafton has swimming practice, Bryson has baseball, and Mom and Lefty are working. These are my *Billy Elliot* days: I play records of *Swan Lake* and *Rhapsody in Blue* and dance for hours without stopping. Fifty-eight years later, I will teach and coach the young boys who play Billy on Broadway in *Billy Elliot, the Musical*. In the show, there is a dream ballet where the young Billy dances with the older Billy he will grow up to be; he flies high above the stage to the same music from *Swan Lake* that now inspires me to dance through our apartment. More on this later . . .



1950. Honolulu. Finis Jhung striving for a beautiful arabesque

1953

Mom takes me to see Darvas and Julia, the sensational acrobatic dance team, who are performing in a nightclub. He is exceptionally strong—as you see in the photo—while she is an acrobatic daredevil.

The climax of their acrobatic dance act takes place on a platform about 15 inches higher than the dance floor. Standing on it, he swings her up above his head, where she poses upside down in a handstand on his hands, which are high above his head. The platform slowly revolves; then, as they release hands, he throws her up in the air. She flips herself upright and lands down on the dance floor in a split. From Darvas and Julia, I learn that, if you want to become a star, you must learn how to do what has never been done before.

We are still living in Pearl City. The Pearl City Tavern has a restaurant, a monkey bar, and a nightclub. The nightclub features talent from the mainland (a female band, a singer, and a comic) and Japan (the Moshi-Moshi Girls, who perform both as traditional Japanese dancers and as Broadway babes in feathers, spangles, and tap shoes).

The owners allow me to sneak into the nightclub and watch the shows. Their beautiful daughter Mae is my age and loves to dance. We are allowed on the dance floor with the adults, and we swing, boogie-woogie, and Lindy Hop like crazy. We are probably the only Asian teens in Hawai'i who spend weekend nights dancing in a nightclub to live music. Living in the country has its moments.

I am starting to think about what I will do after I graduate from high school. Am I good enough to be a professional ballet dancer? I plan to find a university that offers ballet, journalism, and art. Commercial art and journalism will be my fallbacks should I find that ballet is an impossible dream. I aim for The University of Utah because its dance program is directed by William F. Christensen, the founder of the San Francisco Ballet. I apply to The University of Utah.

I don't realize it now, but this is a momentous decision that will affect the rest of my life.



1953. Darvas and Julia (Photo by Walter Saunders, courtesy of Arts Centre Melbourne)

1954–1955

Mom and Lefty divorce. She is on her own, without financial help from him.

We move back to Honolulu. She still has the tailor shop, and each night continues to bring home bundles of uniforms to be ripped apart for alternations.

During the summer, I work on Saturdays inserting supplements into the newspapers as they come off the presses at the printing plant of the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*.

Money is still very tight—so much so that we are unable to pay my \$14 high school registration fee when it is due.

In May of 1955, I graduate from Roosevelt High School with High Honors and as one of the editors of the school newspaper. I have been accepted to The University of Utah, with reduced tuition and a \$160 scholarship from The Samuel Rosenfeld Memorial Fund.

How am I going to get there, and how will we pay for my room and board? Mom says she will find the money to pay for my flight. It will be up to me to find a job that will pay for my room and board.

From June to September, I am a temporary reporter in the News Department of the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*. I receive my first weekly paychecks. I even get my first front-page byline for my interview with the man who plays Tonto on *The Lone Ranger*. The opening sentence is: “The Lone Ranger’s right-hand man is more than an Indian who grunts.” I get a second byline for another front-page story about a cat that swims.

In the photo, I’m with Mom at the Honolulu airport. I’m about ready to board the Pan American clipper that will take me to the mainland for college. Many teachers and classmates have come to see me off, which is why I’m wearing so many leis. Underneath those leis, I am wearing a suit, complete with tie and cufflinks.

I won’t see Mom for another three years.



1955, Honolulu airport. Finis Jhung and Caroline Jhung