

USA International Ballet Competition - Finis Jhung

Finis Fine-Tunes Ballet: Master Teacher Talks about Teaching and His Career

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Tell us about your background – where you're from, how you got started in ballet. Then we'd like to focus on your teaching...why, how, and your philosophy.

I was born and raised in Hawaii and am of Korean-Scottish-English descent. I started dancing at the age of six, as I liked the wonderful old black-and-white Hollywood musical movies that we used to see and decided that was what I wanted to do. I began at a neighborhood school but never learned a proper barre that I can recall.

Then only real ballet I ever saw were the Markova/Dolin and Slavenska/Franklin troupes. I remember Dolin doing an adagio solo, "Hymn to the Sun."



Finis Jhung, Age 11, with Diana Damon in Honolulu 1948
Photo courtesy Finis Jhung

I also learned the Hula, which equipped me to dance in public, ranging from dancing the hula at a store opening on Waikiki Beach, to almost falling off the stage when the lights went out at a beauty pageant where I did a pas de trois to "Invitation to the Dance," to dancing both the hula and a ballet solo at night club parties. At home, by myself, I'd put on "Swan Lake" music and I'd dance around the house for hours. I quit ballet in junior high because of peer pressure but started back again in high school, just a 45-minute class that was once a week and began with hopping across the floor holding my leg up in second and then dancing duets that included a little bit of everything. The experience was frustrating as I couldn't really talk to anybody about my dancing (for fear of being teased) and the training was limited. By my junior year in high school, I knew that I wanted to go to the Mainland (leave Hawaii) and in order to do so, I had to find a university that offered ballet and financial aid. I had never done a full class up to this point.

I got a small scholarship (\$160) from the Exchange Club in Salt Lake to attend the University of Utah's ballet program. What a gift this program was for me – I got to see and take class with Michael Smuin and Kent Stowell. I wasn't good enough to be in the "Nutcracker" and can still remember sitting in the audience eating my heart out. But within a few months, I was performing. Because we were financially strapped, I was forced to stay in Utah and didn't see my Mom for three years. However, these were the most wonderful years – the combination of academics and ballet and performing was heaven for me. Mr. C (William Christensen) and Barbara Barrie (she was English) were my teachers. Each summer we danced in



Finis Jhung
Photo: Andrew Terzes

an opera and a musical. Michael Smuin and I took a 7:00 a.m. ballet class with Miss Barrie, and then earned money by painting University buildings in the hot Utah sun. I loved Mr. C – he was great for men – always had such great gusto and charisma.

I auditioned for Los Angeles Ballet at the Greek Theatre in Griffith Park and didn't get in, but got to meet Eddie Villella for the first time. After graduating with a BFA, I went into the National Guard and became a PT demonstrator. I ended up in Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri (Little Korea) as a clerk/typist. I was the fastest they'd ever had! While there, I received a telegram from Rodgers and Hammerstein because they needed an Asian dancer who could do double tours in "Flower Drum Song" on Broadway. I quickly got in shape, flew to NYC for a weekend audition, got the job, returned to the Army to complete a few more months of service, and the day I was out of the Army, flew back to NYC. I learned the dance on Saturday and was put into the show the following Monday. The show ran for a few months, February through May and then went on the road.

When the show played San Francisco, I was reunited with Smuin and Stowell, who were dancing with The San Francisco Ballet. I auditioned for the company, and was hired, and went right into Lew Christensen's "Nutcracker." I stayed at SFB for a year and a half. At first, dancing there was difficult due to changes I had made with my technique and dancing. I had been studying with Valentina Pereyaslavceva (a famous teacher from the Ukraine). I loved her in classes in New York – they were so inspiring, but she demanded textbook positions and finally completely "took me out of my body" and suddenly I couldn't move. Things, like double tours, that I didn't even have to think about doing before, became hard. I joined the SFB a technical mess. When I did the Ribbon Dance in "Nutcracker" with Smuin, I just couldn't balance my air turns. It was terrifying to bounce all over the Opera House stage! [laughs] I gradually got it back. I found Harold and Lew to be very dry compared to Bill (Willam). Coincidentally, "Flower Drum Song" was being shot in Hollywood and I was asked to be in it. I got to work with the legendary movie choreographer Hermes Pan and this was another childhood dream coming true – to go to Hollywood and be in a movie.

In 1962, some of us San Francisco dancers (Smuin and his wife, Paula Tracey, and Stowell) felt it was time to move on. James DeBolt, whom I had danced with at Utah, was in New York and knew Bob Joffrey, and told him that I was very interested in joining his company. I left SFB in Seattle, and Bob Joffrey told me to stay there because he was going to be doing "Aida" in Seattle and if he liked me he would use me. I had to wait a week – at a dumpy motel in Seattle – with very limited funds, which was scary, but it worked out and Bob put me into the opera ballet along with Helgi (Tomasson), Vicente Nebrada, Nels Jorgensen, and Jerry (Arpino), and a very young Francesca Corkle. Mr. Joffrey liked me and asked me to join The Joffrey Ballet in New York.

This was the beginning of their Harkness relationship. One of the first pieces I was cast for was Ailey's "Feast of Ashes" and also Brian Macdonald's "Time out of Mind." All of us were into Joffrey's mindset of hard work. It was a great time at the Joffrey. Stanley Williams taught us and we toured to Portugal, Russia, the Near East, Afghanistan, Iran, and India. I want to put to rest the story that Rebecca Harkness "stole" the company away from Joffrey. Mr. Joffrey was very picky and wanted everything very square and could be confining. He had to know everything about everyone and



Alexandra Danilova coaching Hegi Tomasson, Lawrence Rhodes and Finis Jhung in "Coppelia" for the Harkness Ballet
Photo courtesy Finis Jhung

control everything. Well, we had a small revolution of our own while on tour to Russia, and lots of people left. Jeannot Cerroni, the company manager, told Mr. Joffrey we were leaving, so it was not a surprise. Harkness was willing to make a company for us, which included Helgi, Vicente, Larry Rhodes, Lone Isaaksen, Brunilda Ruiz, Marlene Rizzo, Suzanne Hammonds and others.

Erik Bruhn was a guest with us and he was my mentor. I learned how to properly do makeup from him, and I watched how he warmed up for each show. He was incredible, and he has informed my teaching. Later, when I taught in Denmark, I learned why Bournonville choreographed the way he did – the Danes had only a small stage and there was no place for them to go! We had the good fortune of working with choreographers like John Butler, George Skibine, and Ben Harkarvy, but ultimately didn't have enough good repertory. I danced with the Harkness Ballet from 1964 to 1969, and I served as the company's "exotic" but really wanted to dance "white tights roles" too. Smuin told me in 1956 that that would never happen because I was short, bow-legged, and Asian. However, on tour to Barcelona in 1966, during a shiatsu treatment, the masseuse told me that my wishes could come true if I started practicing Buddhism. So I did, reciting a mantra every morning and evening. I started to feel better and this became some sort of a turning point. *Dance Magazine* did a biography on me and gradually things got better at Harkness Ballet. I went to Mrs. Harkness and asked to be promoted to principal dancer and got it! Anton Dolin gave me a break too, by giving me the pas de chat variation in "Variations for Four."

In 1967, David Howard was brought to the U.S. to learn the Joanna Kneeland Technique. David's RAD background allowed him to translate her work, and make it acceptable to us. We did a therapeutic barre and started to learn her movement principles including spiraling and opposition. While in Monte Carlo, David became our company teacher. I also got to take a private class with him every day – and he would come back after performances and give me notes. I was so lucky, because with David I rediscovered my own body. During this period, I was a devout Buddhist and thought I should devote my life to world peace and stop dancing. So, in 1969, after our New York season, I quit dancing, and worked as assistant to a private investor, taking and typing letters. In order to test my faith and prove that I could be happy being just an ordinary person, I burned all of my stuff from my old life, including films of Bruhn dancing that I had taken. I was happy to do so, because I felt I was doing something useful -- devoting my life to world peace.



In 1972, I had to get another job, as the business person I was working for closed his office. My Buddhist leader suggested I teach, so I contacted Wilson Morelli, who had a studio downtown. I found I had to re-learn ballet from books, as I couldn't remember the names of steps! I started off with four students. Then dancers from Paul Taylor and the Joffrey started coming, and others like Billy Forsythe and Martine Van Hamel, and the numbers grew. Two years later, I moved the studio to 72nd Street. At that time, only David and Maggie Black had their own studios; there was no "Steps." Gelsey Kirkland tried my class, and soon many ABT and City Ballet dancers were coming over. I took over Maggie's old space, which is where Steps is now located. And then I made a final move to a beautiful loft on Broadway and 77th. This space relates to the IBC, as it turns out it was originally Thalia Mara's New York studio. Her daughter told me this. They used to make tutus in there, and now I understand why, during classes there, pins would stick up between the old boards and prick the dancers' feet! The '70s were good years. I married a Japanese woman who was also Buddhist. Our first child died in infancy, and our second — who is now 30 years old, Jason — today works in the production department at Major League Baseball.

Finis Jhung

Photo: Michael Avedon for the Harkness Ballet

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In the '80s, feeling flush with the success of my studio, I began a chamber ballet company which lasted from 1982-86 and I put \$100K of my own money into it. The best thing I can say about this experience is that three couples from the group got married, and are still married – children included! Our final performances were of “Napoli,” “Sunflowers,” and “Flames of Paris,” and new choreography by my company members. The mid-'80s were harder. I was divorced, my ballet company had to fold, and my studio rent kept increasing. I was fortunate that Richard Ellner, the owner of Broadway Dance Center, invited me to join the faculty. This turned out to be a good move. The “Jerome Robbins on Broadway” show came out at this time, and so many people showed up to take classes, they had to take a number!

How would you characterize your teaching and style?

I believe that everyone has potential, that there is an answer to every problem, and that the teacher's job is to give people the key to change themselves. A great part of my teaching is all about working correctly with the standing/supporting leg, and using the supporting side of the body to initiate movement. I encourage students to become more confident by better understanding how their bodies work and how bodies move in space. In my instructional videos, we work on things in slow motion sometimes and use the concept of spiraling for teaching pirouettes. I also encourage students to look at steps, not in isolation, but rather as one continuous motion.

At the same time, life is getting faster – we must learn to dance faster in order to keep the public's interest. Balanchine was right; we must dance faster – and bigger. Dancers (and the audience) need the exhilaration of moving rapidly through space. I have spent hours studying Misha (Mikhail Baryshnikov) in slow motion video, and he never stays static – he's constantly spiraling, constantly moving. I thought, “Why not teach this way?” Everything in ballet is truly en dehors; all movement is equal and opposite. As long as you have a left side to equal a right side, you will never lose your balance and fall. I believe that if dancers learn the preparations, the right one will execute the position. I also like to think in terms of verbs, of the action. To me, the word plié is not a static position, but rather it means to bend your knees. So, when working on turns, I always say to push down on turns. If you recall the way a toy top is set spinning, they turn when you push down on them. So it's pushing, spiraling, turning. By revealing the truth of the action, I hope to enable dancers to develop technique that is beyond emotion. They can dance with freedom because they have trained their muscles correctly; it doesn't depend on how they feel, they will dance well in spite of themselves!

I was pleasantly surprised to be asked to conduct the Teachers' Workshop here at the USA IBC. I'm not a keeper of the flame – not a Cecchetti or Vaganova syllabus teacher. I look outside the box. We know how bodies move in space – placement and learning all the preparatory movements are two of the biggest things I focus on. I've found that most teachers are too nit-picky about the wrong things. And some have axes to grind; none of which has anything to do with their students. We all need to look for the big picture. They need to take my workshop! [laughs]

What are some of your hobbies and interests?

I like Broadway Theatre – I enjoy watching great actors. Dancers need to go see Ralph Fiennes onstage! I very much like to read, particularly about people who do things and who solve problems. I go to museums. And I have a 30 year-old adult child who is a great friend and helper. And special friends who are lovely to be with.



**What words of wisdom and advice
might you give to teachers or to those
who are considering teaching?**

You need to be an enabler. Proceed organically. Look at what you have, and work with it. Don't inhibit your students. Don't be afraid to think outside the box. Be constructive. Do lots of port de bras in class to get the body moving. Above all, remember that ugly ducklings do become beautiful swans. Don't be afraid to let your students be ugly as they experience the movement. "The journey of a thousand miles begins with but a single step" is one of my favorite Buddhist sayings. Also, "let us begin from this moment on."