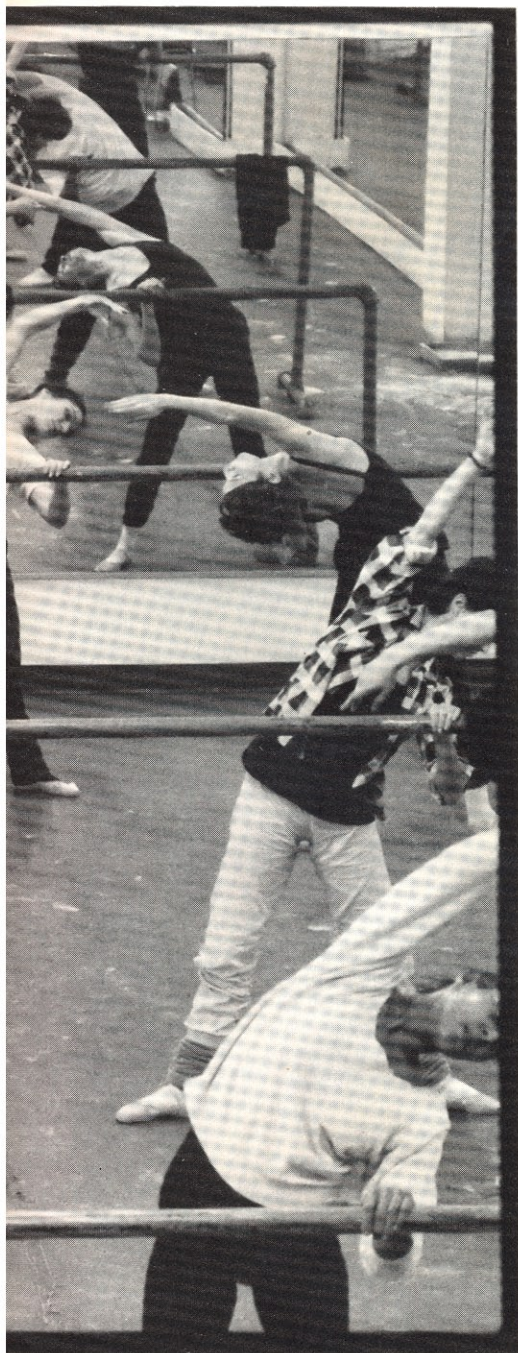


GUIDING LIGHT

FINIS JHUNG COLORS HIS TEACHING OF THE WESTERN CLASSICAL TRADITION WITH EASTERN WISDOM

BY VALERIE BROOKS



A slender man in a sun-yellow running suit, an Oriental cast to his eyes, crouches over a boldly colored toy top, presses down on the spindle and makes it twirl into a rainbow. Forty men and women in leotards, tights, parachute pants and sweatshirts look on intently. "That's how I want you to pirouette," says Finis Jhung, once a fast-spinning star of the Harkness Ballet, a dancer Clive Barnes called a nimble, elegant dazzler. "You see, no arms coming out the sides, nothing flapping around, nothing horizontal, all vertical." He smiles. "Try it that way."

On the walls of his large, high-ceilinged studio hang pictures of dancers from his company, Chamber Ballet U.S.A., and posters of the Paul Taylor company, *A Chorus Line* and *Dancin'*. It's a cheerful place to work. Even Jhung's six-and-one-half-year-old son, Jason, who often dangles from the staircase to the second landing, seems to find it a good place to hang out after a hard day at the Collegiate School across the street.

Now some of the students place themselves in the center while the less confident stand near the barres that face Broadway and 77th Street. Trucks unload groceries at the supermarket just below, and pigeons swoop by the windows. On the small landing that overlooks the studio, pianist Bill Brown, producer of some of the sweetest music to be heard in any Manhattan classroom, begins to play. The dancers try to turn into tops.

"Finis is wonderful to work for," says Brown, who has been teaching, studying and playing the piano in New York for five years. "He is the most musical teacher I know. He counts exact rhythms. I can even tell from his voice what he wants. When I started he told me he didn't want any ballet music—no Tchaikovsky, no



Instructor Jhung (top left) leads students in an adagio exercise from a fourth position tendu, and (left) stands as the still point observing stretches at the barre in his spacious studios

"Most dancers grow up in an atmosphere of tension..."

Chopin—so I make up everything as I go along—it's all original. I have notebooks full of the music I've composed for Finis."

What makes Jhung special is that everything he does is original and, at the same time, based on strong traditions. This is plain from his own dance career, his teaching and his formation of a chamber ballet company. From the start, East and West meshed. His mother was Scotch-English and his father Korean—Finis is an Irish name, Jhung is Korean. He grew up in Honolulu, where he took

of *Flower Drum Song*, was a soloist with San Francisco Ballet and then joined the Joffrey Ballet in 1962. At the time the company boasted Helgi Tomasson, Francesca Corkle, Lawrence Rhodes, Dennis Wayne and Lisa Bradley. Some left to join the Harkness Ballet in 1965, and Jhung, who went with them, was a soloist in the new company until he quit in 1968.

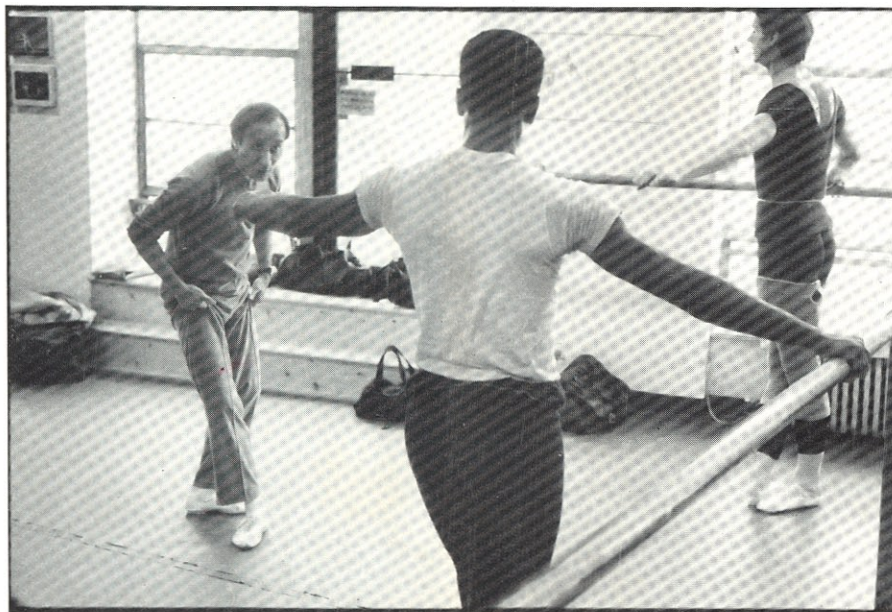
"The teacher who influenced me more than any other—even more than Vera Volkova, Erik Bruhn, Rosella Hightower, Valentina Pereyaslavets, Stanley

he combines with them. The class begins gently, with emphasis on learning how to breathe and relax. In the center, Jhung—as well as the other ballet teachers at the school—such as Liane Plane, Barbara Forbes and Salli Silliman—stresses the principles of correct body alignment, balance, placement and correct physical preparation. Jhung's combinations are not just steps strung together—they give the student the feeling of dancing. He points out that the drama and feeling of ballet derive from the movements that link the major steps. One of the great pleasures of attending his classes is watching Jhung demonstrate. He is still a wonderful dancer who, it appears, can pirouette without preparation. When he was dancing professionally, critics said he had "guts, vigor and brilliance." He still has.

A few years ago Jhung developed polyps on his lungs from the strain of giving class. During that period he often would stand on the landing and use a horn. Some dancers who started at his school thought he was playing God—something anyone who knows him knows is impossible. Speaking of that time, Jhung says, "I had a wonderful pathologist, Dr. Carol Block, who taught me how to use my breath. It was the same principle I used in ballet. I realized how hard it is to change a habit. It took time, but I was able to."

"Finis is one of the most creative teachers in the country," says Liane Plane, who, after a twenty-year career with Ballet Theatre, the Ballet Russe, television and two children, started taking classes from him in 1970. "His idea is that anybody can improve and go on. Like most dancers, I grew up in an atmosphere of tension. Finis is so different. A lot of it has to do with his Buddhism. I think—and hope—he will revolutionize dance."

Since Jhung is such a reserved and modest man, it is amazing how his following has grown. Last summer the Australian Ballet asked him to be a guest teacher and wants him back again next year, and he's given master classes at the Boston Ballet, the San Francisco Ballet and the University of Hawaii. When he stopped dancing, both Robert Joffrey and the San Francisco Ballet's Michael Smuin asked him to teach at their schools. However, he wanted to be free to work at what he believed and not have to support the ideas of a particular company or artistic director. For the last two summers, he has taught at the Colorado Dance Festival in Boulder. Says Marda Kirn, director of



dance classes almost randomly—tap, ballet, acrobatics, even a little hula. When Alicia Markova and Anton Dolin performed in Hawaii, Jhung, then only in his teens, auditioned for Dolin, who kindly suggested he come to see him when he grew up. He didn't have a chance to take ballet seriously until he got to the University of Utah. There he studied with William Christensen and, to make up for lost time, took three classes a day. While in college, he danced in *The King and I*, *Carousel*, *Damn Yankees*, *Coppélia* and the *Nutcracker*.

After graduating with high honors, Jhung spent a brief time in the army. "That's where I learned to type," he says. "I'm the fastest typist. When I stopped dancing, and before I started teaching—between 1969 and 1972—I went into a period of soul-searching and became a Buddhist. I was also working in a law office as a secretary."

When Jhung came out of the army, he danced in the Broadway and film versions

Williams and Bill Christensen—was Joanna Kneeland, who Rebekah Harkness brought into her school in 1966. Pereyaslavets gave me a love of movement, a sense of the drama of dance, but Kneeland talked about dance in terms of anatomy and physics, the whole concept of opposition. David Howard arrived to learn and teach her techniques at Harkness. He passed on to us his basic classical training from the Royal Ballet, plus Kneeland's theories. It was good finally to be given reasons why certain things worked and others didn't. Most teachers I'd had would just demand to see the step, and if I couldn't do it, say, 'Well, I guess he's not a turner,' or 'I guess he's not a jumper'—never stopping to explain how to do the step."

The fact that Jhung does explain, is calm and careful in his corrections, contributes to his popularity. He gives an uncomplicated, straightforward barre directed toward correcting body alignment both through the steps and the stretching

Jhung demonstrating in class . . .

... Finis is so different. A lot of it has to do with his Buddhism."

the festival: "As soon as I took one of Finis' classes, I wanted him to come out and work with us. He is so clear in terms of explaining principles. I'd taken a lot of classes in my life but I had never learned to breathe properly and stop gripping. He taught me how to relax while pulled up. Not only were his classes packed in Boulder, but so were the lectures he gave with videotapes. It's terrific that he's started a course in his own studio with video analysis of famous dancers so students can see what makes the differences."

Besides four levels of ballet classes, Jhung's school offers yoga and stretch taught by Eric Beeler and a course in music theory for dancers taught by Bill Brown. It is an illustration of his approach that he would want to give his students a total education in movement—technique, dance history, musical understanding and spiritual insight. He is writing a book on dance that will cover all these aspects.

When Jhung is not teaching one of his three daily classes, he is probably in his spacious rent-controlled apartment on Columbus Avenue, working on ways to keep his small ballet company in business. Chamber Ballet U.S.A. now has a board and Columbia Artists as its manager. Jhung started the group of experienced soloists in the summer of 1981 but has had to disband twice because of lack of funds. Richard Daniels, his executive director, sits in a small office across from the main living quarters, writing letters and phoning all who might help. The lively and bright Jason roams from his room to the kitchen and back, followed by his babysitter, in search of food and drinks and a few pats from his father.

In late April Chamber Ballet had its second season in New York at Symphony Space, followed by a two-week tour in Jhung's native Hawaii. The company presented five ballets, with the highlight Helgi Tomasson's *Contradances* to music of Beethoven. The program also included *Libido*, a study of sexual energy to the third movement of Mahler's Seventh Symphony, choreographed by Jhung himself, that owes as much to modern dance as to ballet. He would like to do more choreography, but for the time being, organization of the company, rehearsals and teaching take up almost all of his time.

Jhung's Japanese wife, Yuriko, to whom he's been married since 1972, is manager of the Japanese television company Two-One International. Their

home is serene and warm. In the living room is a Buddhist shrine plus a television set and VCR where Jhung watches cassettes of great ballets and tapes he has made with his dancers.

"My wife and I are serious Buddhists," says Jhung. "That means we believe in energy as the basis of everything, the basis of life without beginning or end." He laughs and his eyes light up. "The belief that each day is a new day has helped me as a teacher and founder of a company. There's a real need for a company like

dancers as time goes by. He has the ability to persevere with his ideas. The way he helped me was by leaving me alone. He gave me the freedom to find out things myself and inspired me to take hold alone."

Bill Soleau, who has danced with Jhung's company for two years and with Joyce Trisler's for eight, started taking classes from Jhung around the time he joined his company. "Finis is really an incredibly rare teacher," says Soleau. "I'd been a modern dancer but always wanted to do ballet. He turned me into a ballet



ours—classically trained yet modern. Among the choreographers I've used are Gail Kachadurian, John Butler, Lois Bewley, Luk de Layress, and I'm planning to get works from Ben Harkarvy. I hope eventually to have a repertoire that includes Paul Taylor's *Big Bertha*, Jerome Robbins' *Afternoon of a Faun*, José Limón's *The Moor's Pavane*. I'd like to add something earthy to ballet and get away from the cold, skinny, old-fashioned ballet type—you know, pull up and suffer. Besides letting my people know what a frappé is for, I want them to really move. An example of the kind of dancer I mean to develop is Ellen Troy, who is with my company, and Salli Silliman, who teaches at my school."

Although Silliman doesn't dance professionally anymore, she is as lithe as if she were on the stage yesterday. She clearly has the flexible torso that Jhung tries to develop. "I've studied with Finis for ten years," says Silliman, "and I've seen how attuned he is to what is right for

dancer by means of his respect for both disciplines. Mainly, that happened because Finis helped me find my center. One of the most enjoyable times of my life was having him coach me in *Libido*. He's special. I hope his company gets to the point where it can show his vision. Chamber Ballet U.S.A. might just show what dance should be."

Jhung's hope for the future, after his company becomes established, is to combine it with the school. Then he could start children's classes that would have a goal in sight. Every time he brings out the toy bow and arrow to show his students the need for spring and direction, it's easy to imagine that this serene Buddhist New York City ballet teacher is also demonstrating his direction and energy in pursuit of his artistic ideals. □

Ms. Brooks' book about Balanchine's choreographing of Mozartiana, written with New York City Ballet soloist Robert Maizano, will be published this winter by Freundlich.

... and relaxing at home in front of Buddhist shrine