

FINIS JHUNG

by Otis Stuart

photos by John Pregulman

Finis Jhung was born and raised in Honolulu and is of Korean and Scotch-Irish descent. His serious dance study began under William Christensen at the University of Utah. He danced in the Broadway and film versions of "Flower Drum Song" and was a soloist with the San Francisco Ballet before joining the Joffrey Ballet in 1962. He joined the Harkness Ballet in 1965 and was a soloist with that company until 1968. He began teaching in 1972 and opened his own studio in 1975. His dance company, Chamber Ballet U.S.A., made its New York debut in 1982.

Classroom. Saturday, January 19. The Finis Jhung studio.

It's a funny thing about ballet classes. Until they actually begin to move, they all look alike. Descriptive adjectives, finally, are arbitrary and, more often than not, those generally applied to any given classroom—vague, innocuous terms like "open," "sunny," "lively," "confined," "regimented"—really tell more about the teacher than the class. Students and teachers adapt themselves to liabilities and assets of their immediate and inevitable environment—each according to their abilities.

So the popular Finis Jhung studio on Broadway and 77th Street on this particular and particularly cold January morning could really be any studio jammed with the paraphernalia of preparation for Saturday noon class. Dance gear of every conceivable color and combination charge the atmosphere with contrast. Even the windows are sweaty with the warm-up of over forty bodies readying for work.

And people are in the unlikely positions. Stretching herself against one of the portable barres which fill the center of the room, Lucy Bowen's pink ballet slippers momentarily parallel her mane of bright red hair as she reaches the height of an extension into second. Liane Plane, a former featured soloist with Ballet Theatre and a long-time teacher at the Jhung studio, carefully

examines her instep in the sheet of mirrors which define the east wall of the studio. Thomas MacMannis, an alumnus of ABT II and currently a member of Jhung's company, Chamber Ballet U.S.A., chats animatedly with another boy sprawled over the barre near the bank of windows overlooking Broadway. Your correspondent, in the original pair of leg warmers, pretends that he knows what he is doing. It's business as usual at ballet class.

Enter the teacher.

Finis Jhung is diminutive and direct and dressed properly for class. His clothes are clean and co-ordinated. He proceeds straight to one of the center barres, smiles broadly, and demonstrates a preliminary stretching exercise. The class has begun to move and is instantly distinguished. Ballet class traditionally begins with the big stretch of grand plies in at least four of the five ballet positions—whether bodies are ready for them or not. This first little stretch prior to plies identifies Jhung's distinctive approach to instruction. His class is careful and considered and cumulative. The preliminary stretch prepares his students, mentally as well as physically, for the bigger work that is to come.

As the class proceeds, this deliberateness of approach provides a direction for the strenuous work that is a ballet class. His class proceeds slowly

and, because it does, bad habits, instinctive inaccuracies intended to approximate the rigorous classical positions, become immediately obvious. For example, over-turnout—twisting the body past its natural, individual limitations in order to achieve an outward appearance of the turnout requisite for ballet—is a common and dangerous overcompensation many dancers develop. It cannot be maintained in Jhung's class. Inaccurate alignment of feet and knees is impossible with such simple and carefully constructed barrework done at the steady, sustained tempo Jhung exacts from his pianist. Jhung espouses realistic placement. His exercises demand it. If you are going to make it to the end of the class, your body must do only what it can do and with the means available. Jhung teaches dancers to know their bodies.

The barre is finished. The portable barres are piled up against the walls and Jhung allows a short period for the dancers to stretch themselves individually. Jhung's regular students—and it is soon apparent that the majority of this crowded class are regular to the point of faithful—know exactly what they must do for themselves.

Jhung returns to the center of the classroom and demonstrates the first center exercise, a distinctive combination of adagio and big turns. He

demonstrates the exercise, a distinctive combination of adagio and big turns. He demonstrates the exercise himself—full out. The dancers hear the key phrases—"Work the floor." "Keep pushing out." "Just keep flowing."—and they see them as well. Jhung is his own audio-visual aid.

As the students attempt the exercise, a key element in the process and construction of the class becomes manifest. At the barre, rhythms, like real technique, were sublimated to invisibility. Those same rhythms, transferred to the center of the room and away from the physical support of the barre, integrate into an internal system of support. The dancers dance.

The progression of center exercises is traditional. The development within those exercises is traditional only in the purest sense. Each exercise is rhythmically steady and secure, although filled with sudden starts and stops. Changes of direction within any given exercise virtually define the quadrants of the room. But the individual dancer must accommodate the individual body to those challenges by learning how to use his or her body most efficiently and most clearly within the exercise. There is simply no other way to do that many turns, to find that many different directions, and still fill out the music. And still remain vertical. Jhung summarizes.

"Use muscle, not momentum. Put it in your muscles and remember it that way."

The class is long and satisfying.

The applause at its conclusion is long and satisfied.

Conversation. Sunday, January 20. A crowded upper West side restaurant.

Finis gets specific.

"I think from the inside out. Western philosophy places man against nature. Eastern philosophy sees man and nature as one. Life is energy. Energy flows. Everything has life. In Eastern philosophy, everything flows out of you. You are a part of what surrounds you because everything is part of life. Translate that into classroom terms and you use the floor. You don't superimpose. You don't work in pieces. It is a total.

"So much of ballet—because it is a Western art form—has always been taught in isolation. I went through so many years of frustration because I was a student at a time when you were only taught vocabulary...but you were not taught how to dance. When you think of how many people dance—just how many dancers there are—ask yourself how many of them are really exciting to watch. Just think of the number of professional dancers around and then think about the number of people you consider to be artists. There's a big discrepancy and it's not because those people haven't had the opportunity to

develop. I ask myself why this is and I have to think that dancers have to be freed. We must make them believe in themselves. We must make them confident.

"If you learn to feel more comfortable as a dancer, your ability to move will increase—particularly when you are not straining yourself into a position you physically cannot find. For years as a dancer, I was imprisoned by this idea of the ideal dancer—which I simply was not. But I still had something valid to offer...as do many dancers. But they are never allowed to develop that potential because they are forced to fit into a mold which is inappropriate to them.

"What I am trying to give people is...Well, let's just look at what you've got and we'll work with these basic rules of anatomy, these physical laws and, as long as you're going in that direction, work with a genuine store of energy, trying to stretch your feet and your legs to a degree, really working the rotation and really working from the center of your body...well, you're going to get better!"

"I mean, I think that fifth position is something that you pass through. Most dancing is actually done on one leg. Fifth position happens, but the basic issue is movement and movement happens on one leg. And you learn that in the classroom. I say the same thing everyday when we start at that barre. You must turn out, yes, but it is not in your feet and it is not in the position. It is what is coming out of your center and that stretch in your legs and in your toes and in your flexibility. I want to teach people how to ballet.

"These are the things I've tried to develop with my company. I want to help my dancers find a technique that does not thwart them, but will strengthen them and will help them to realize their individual potential...to actually mold dancers who utilize the personality...the person. That's what I like to see on the stage and it is what I would like to present on the stage.

"Another element I am concerned with is the intimacy of dance. I think that seeing dance up close is very exciting and a great deal of excitement is always lost when the theatre is enormous and the company is enormous. That's why I like the idea of the chamber ballet. Small. Intimate. Personal.

"And—if you'll pardon the expression—I don't make a company for the critics. I make a company for the people in this restaurant. They may not be people who are into ballet every night, but I am going for the thrill of the movement, for the speed, for the sense of daring. I work on the sense of space. Some of the ballets are very difficult...very fast. But I am always concerned with movement that is very natural. I try to get to the basic, gut

feeling of the movement—not break it down into a specific combination of highly defined steps. I see images and go for those. I am really concerned with the art of movement which is why I made a chamber company. I like looking at one person dance."

Company. Monday, January 28. The Ballet Center at Lincoln Square.

The Jhung company, Chamber Ballet, U.S.A., is preparing for a spring tour. Today, the eight-member troupe is rehearsing a new ballet Jhung has been preparing to the ballet music from Rossini's *La Favorita*. Jhung has worked out the individual sections of the ballet and today is the first time the dancers see them in some semblance of order. I arrive at the rehearsal space (located, thoughtfully, above the bagel store on the corner of Broadway and 80th Street and dubbed the Bagel Ballet) just in time to see Bill Soleau, a tall, strapping dancer whose very promising choreography Jhung has been encouraging and currently includes in the company repertory, soloist Salli Silliman, a longtime student of Jhung's who has only recently returned to dancing and to his company, into a popo lift (the one in which the ballerina more or less sits in the male dancer's hand for him to haul her directly over his head). Popo lifts always invite comment and the conspiracy of smiles in this room suggests that these people maintain a sense of proportion about their work. An aspect of Jhung's choreography is immediately obvious, harkening back to our conversation in the restaurant. He does not shy away from the big terms in the classical vocabulary and he uses them as he sees fit.

The atmosphere is relaxed. Jhung calmly watches the proceedings with his assistant Barbara Forbes, a tall, elegant dancer and teacher at the Jhung school who speaks only when it is necessary and misses nothing. The company members are scattered about the room, simultaneously relaxed and attentive. Christine Redpath, Balanchine alumnae, wears jeans, pink turtleneck, and point shoes. Seung-Hae Joo and Mark Spradling are curled up on the floor. Thomas MacMannis sits cross-legged on an impromptu bench, inhaling his lunch. The dancers are comfortable and confident. The intimation is that they can be. This is obviously a mutual effort.

Soleau and Silliman are working out the pas de deux. Two things are instantly clear and confirm that Jhung is a man who practices what he preaches.

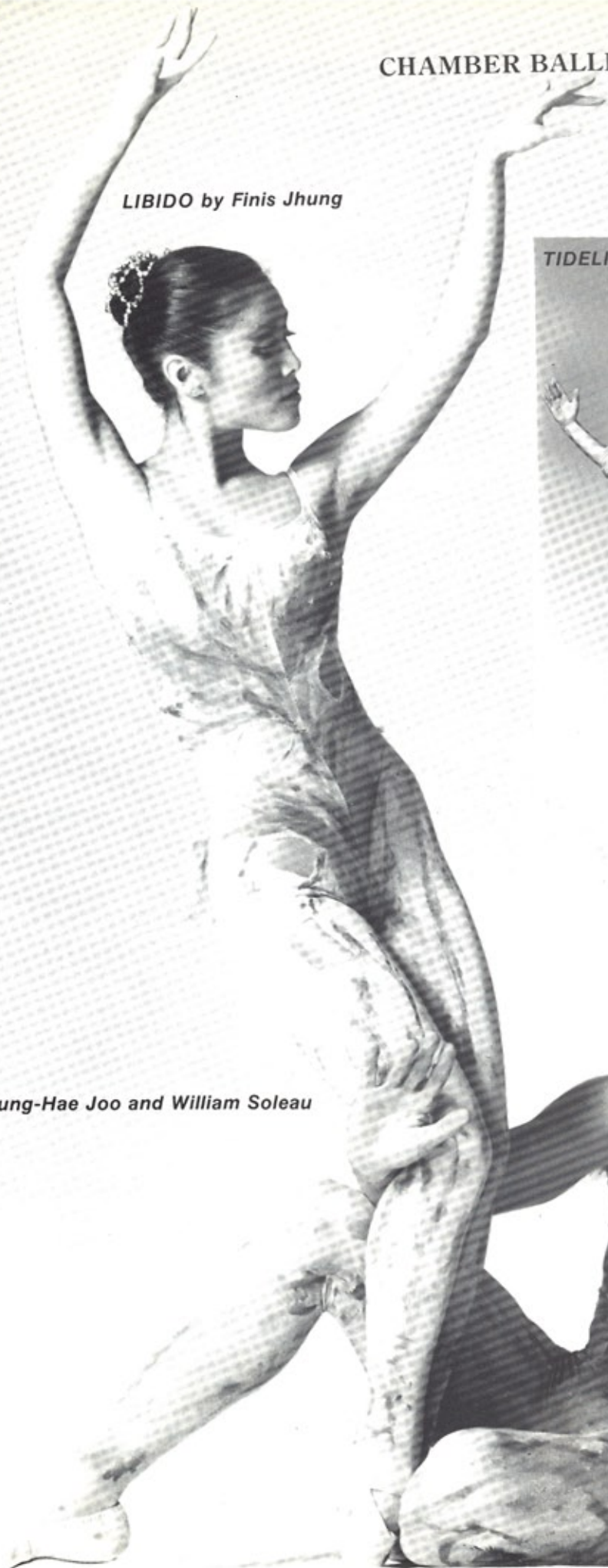
This choreography is emphatically classical, virtually every step straight from the classical canon. But the arrangement is uninhibited by dogma. Everything has been opened and is unrestrained. Silliman is almost constantly on her points, but the work is



CHAMBER BALLET USA displays its fine array of repertory works.

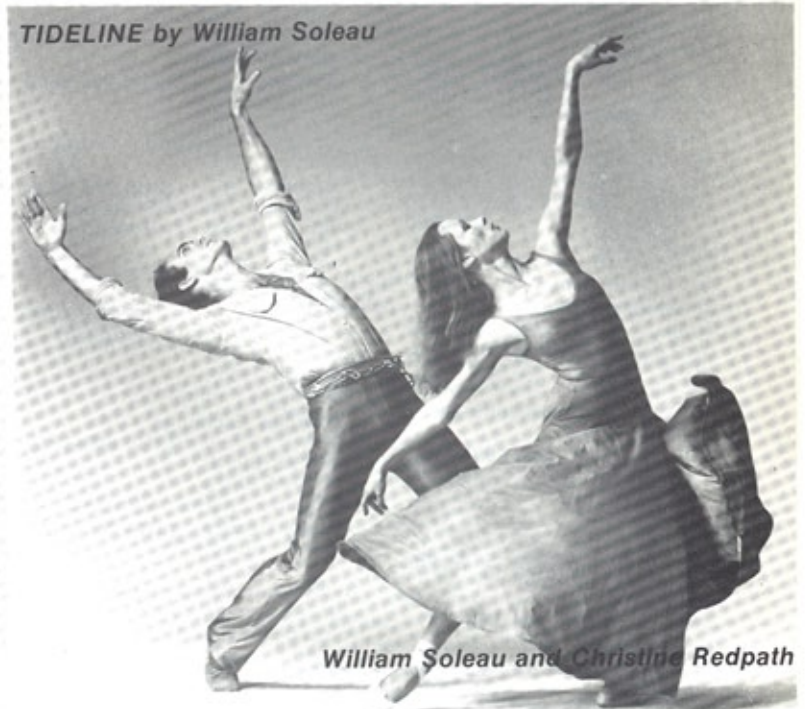
photos by John Pregulman

LIBIDO by Finis Jhung



Seung-Hae Joo and William Soleau

TIDELINE by William Soleau



William Soleau and Christine Redpath



FINIS JHUNG

Continued

apparently as much about fall as it is about recovery. Someone is experimenting. She knows that her partner is always there for her, but not in a passive, I'll-call-you-when-I-need-you kind of way. The dancers are equals and this pas is definitely de deux. Jhung has melded the classical and the contemporary.

Even a cursory glance about the room confirms that this company is definitely a community, with Jhung as the focal point of an association of creative equals. In rehearsing the pas de deux, Soleau is bothered by an awkward passage of partnering. The two bodies don't quite mesh. The section is repeated. Suggestions are proffered from all quarters—from Jhung, from Forbes, from Soleau, from Silliman. They try it again. The dancers find what can be done. The creative unit is the point.

Silliman rehearses her variation and it is fast and it is hard and it demands both precision and personality. She stumbles on a series of fouettes. She tries again and stumbles again. Jhung suggests a slight alteration. The difference does not diminish the difficulty. It just allows her more room. She is not pressured from above. She is supported from all around.

Now the dancers fling themselves into their variations. Spradling, long and lean and well over six feet tall, is all big jumps and turns and stretches into an infinity of arabesque. MacMannis is small and quicksilver and the room seems to expand to accommodate the breadth of his bounding allegro. Seung-Hae Joo is a turner and turn she does, not for display but to cumulative effect. The dancers seem to be doing what they do best. Maybe they are and maybe they aren't. It's hard to be categorical about artists who are this comfortable.

Helgi Tomasson arrives to see the dancers who will be new to the roles in the ballet he created for the company.

Contredances. Jhung is certainly not running a one-man show. Tomasson, until his retirement the very night before one of the great classical dancers in the world and now very securely one of the world's most promising choreographers, is surely both inspiration and challenge. He does not enter the room as a visiting celebrity and that is a statement on all concerned. This is a place where work gets done. □



John Prequilman