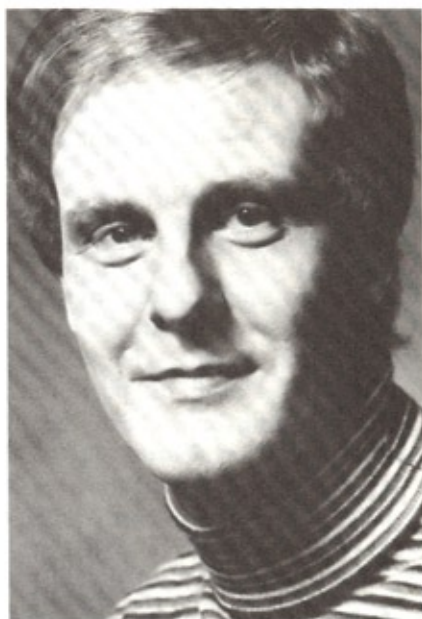


TWO BALLET TEACHERS: Finis Jhung & David Howard

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Finis Jhung. Photo by Paul Kolnik.



David Howard. Photo by Jack Mitchell.

I have often alluded to an aphorism of Henry Adams, "A good teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops." It is an expression of that metaphor of a stone tossed into a lake which sends a ripple speeding into the distance where the eye can no longer follow. This statement affected me profoundly as I continued interviewing dance teachers in company-connected and independent schools. [See *Dance Scope* Volume 14/Number 1.]

Talking at length with David Howard and Finis Jhung, two teachers who each have their own schools, and watching them conduct classes, brought into sharp focus the differences between past and current methods of dance education. Classes in these independent schools are enormous: from forty-five to as many as seventy-five students. The mass of faces and limbs overwhelmed me at first. We seem to be spawning great numbers of technical "whiz kids," but at the loss of something precious—warmth, expressiveness, heart.

Both Howard and Jhung talk of being influenced by Rebekah Harkness' teacher-training program that included elements of anatomy, kinesiol-

ogy and nutrition—all of which were certainly as important as the transmission of technical prowess. Jhung tells us how Harkness brought in Joanna Kneeland, with whom David Howard prepared for his own teaching career, utilizing among other things Kneeland's principles of physics and anatomy. Howard in turn passed his knowledge along to his students which included Jhung and here we have the opportunity of observing that "ripple" effect, a teacher "affecting eternity."

FINIS JHUNG

Finis Jhung's studio is large, white-washed, broadly windowed, mirrored floor-to-ceiling front and sides. With its hanging greenery replacing the usual curtains, it is in all respects a very pleasant atmosphere for work.

The students start at the barre, not with the standard demi-plié, plié, but with deep breathing exercises and cautiously progressive stretches. Jhung is intoning: "Rise on toes on 'in', down toes on 'out.'" Repeated, Repeated. Then on to a simple tendu, stretch to the side, demi-plié, flex ankle—all performed very slowly as Jhung, microphone in hand, paces the studio, gimlet-eyed, missing nothing. The group advances to two demi and one full plié, first position, second, full port de bras, relevé, arms curving the head, hold, step into fourth, repeat, fifth, repeat. As the students work, I hear: "Remember what I've told you—in plié, don't just drop your body down. Lift the chest. It is opposites. Keep the back straight. That doesn't mean ramrod stiff. Don't let it round. If you are doing it correctly, you should be able to breathe quite naturally as you hold that pose."

His hand reaches out to re-position an arm or leg, to press against an abdomen, to adjust a head. Progress is consistently slow and steady. Jhung's voice comes through again: "I don't want you looking at someone else to find out what to do next. You must concentrate so that when I give you the combination and go over the patterns with you, you then can move on your own." And, "You are just doing one step after the other without thinking, without meaning. You must dance. Your body must make a statement—always—not just on stage, but here. If you can't do it in class, you won't on stage."

The one "showoff" that practically every class seems to harbor, is spinning through some frenzied multiple turns. Is he listening to Jhung? No, he's intent on his mirror image, without realizing that his turns are narcissistic and deteriorating into sheer sloppiness. Jhung catches him and delivers a polite but very firm rebuke. "You are looking in the mirror, yet you don't see what you're doing, and you certainly aren't paying attention to me. If you insist on pirouetting instead of listening, at least do them correctly. Momentum without control and balance equals nothing." Still, the majority are hanging on his words; they seem to be eagerly swallowing them. Some students are professionals I recognize from various companies, which points up yet again that even the finished dancer remains a student, learning and assimilating

throughout his performing life.

Jhung, who retains the slimness and shape of a teenager, is relaxed as we talk. He was born, he tells me, in Hawaii of a Korean father and a Scotch-English mother. I don't probe in any exact or chronological order because he needs very little guiding. He is intelligent, certainly articulate; the give-and-take is spirited.

LFR/ What difference, if any, do you think there is between teaching in a school which serves as a gateway to a specific company and teaching in an independent school such as yours?

FJ/ Let me answer this way. When Michael Smuin returned to the San Francisco Ballet, he asked me to come along and direct his school. I'd also been asked to teach at the Joffrey. I refused both offers because teaching in my own studio, I'm free to work at what I believe. I don't have to support the ideas of a particular company or the personal approach of its artistic director. To me that is paramount. As you can see from having observed a number of my classes, my teaching is not strictly orthodox, although the results, I hope, are perhaps better.

LFR/ In what way do you feel you depart from orthodoxy?

FJ/ Well, we don't start with the usual pliés, but with breathing exercises, as you saw. I've studied with Mme. Volkova, Stanley Williams, Mme. Pereyaslavac and Bill Christensen. Most of my students are more modern than classical. I also have some adults who have been incorrectly or inadequately trained. It's necessary to give them a sense of correct body alignment, to instill the idea that they must learn to attain the limits of their own bodies and not strive to imitate someone else, perhaps someone they admire. So I begin by letting them breathe and relax and go gently into the class, reinforcing the concept of turning out in the hips and holding the body square. We progress slowly; our barre encompasses alignment, balance, proper use of the plié. I'm concerned with *how* a person moves and *why*.

LFR/ What about class sizes? Does that affect the kind of individual attention even the best of teachers can give each student?

FJ/ It's a problem, yes. I do have some very large classes. But, you see, a commercial school is an open school. We don't have semesters. We are here to accommodate people according to their schedules: those struggling to have a career; white collar and blue collar workers who show up after a day's work; those who work in restaurants, offices, etc. They are trying to survive and come when and as they can. Sometimes classes are smaller.

LFR/ How can you catch all the details, things that need correction? You are very conscientious, but—

FJ/ Generally, I agree with you, but it works for me. People keep returning to me. I've been teaching now for about eight years. The studio runs steadily; I must assume my message is getting across, that we're performing a valuable service. You must have noticed, I rarely stand in front at the mir-

rors. I go to all corners, center, side, front, back—everywhere.

During the barre, I can look at the person's silhouette for correct alignment, whether the feet or ankles roll. I look at the hand on the barre, whether it's clutching and tense, whether a shoulder is up. The body should be quiet, balanced, with relaxed shoulders. I check the length of the arms, the breadth of the chest. I even look at faces—yes, down to relaxation of the eyebrows. Correct placement follows when the right supporting muscles are used. Then the person can execute most of the exercises easily, gracefully. In the center work we constantly stress principles: correct body alignment, balance, placement, correct physical preparation to perform a movement. I aim at giving center combinations that are more than steps strung together. I want them to feel they are dancing. Posing, *per se*, is static, uninteresting, and just going through a series of steps is nothing on its own.

LFR/ In an "open" class, is there a way to screen out those who may love dance but are either along in years or simply not cut out for dance, or do the demands of a commercial school preclude your saying to someone, "Look, I'm sorry, you're welcome to attend our adult beginner's class, but you are way out of your depth here."?

FJ/ I do indeed say that, but I can't until I've identified them. We make rare exceptions with people who really love dance. Why deprive them? Dance is for everyone, in some form or other, but in most cases, apart from these rare exceptions, I will and do insist and I have no hesitancy. I am not mercenary, so provided they know how to work and not interfere with the others, it's all right.

LFR/ Let me digress a moment and ask a personal question. Why did you stop dancing so young?

FJ/ I stopped dancing in 1969. I'd been with Harkness, had a wonderful time travelling, performing for seven years, but ended up not even having an apartment to call my own. After all this, going all over the world to perform, I just wanted, needed something deeper in my life, although I didn't know just what. At this point I became quite religious, involved in practicing Buddhism. Yes, it took courage to quit when I was at my peak, but I had to stop for my own peace of mind and soul. Spiritually and mentally I needed to find myself, search my own inner core. I hope that doesn't sound pretentious, but it's true.

I had to clear my mind. I'd been dancing since I was six, not always under the best circumstances. It felt good, I was relieved not to have to bother with it, to let down from a rigorous schedule of class, rehearsal, performance—no time for any personal life. It's the strain any professional dancer experiences, but we all react differently. For me, a change was a must and I didn't feel I had to continue dancing in order to be someone, to have an identity.

One day, some years later, a friend suggested I consider teaching, reminded me I'd been leading a monastic existence, hadn't even been taking class. Well, now, who'd want to study with me? But I did start [teaching] at Wilson Morelli's studio and made up my mind I would teach the way I wish

I'd been taught in my early years. I didn't want to perpetuate the errors committed on me. When I was learning, taking class in the beginning, I was seldom corrected and never given a "why." Now I see images when I teach, the benefits I got from Mme. Pereyaslavec who gave me a wonderful feeling about dance, a love for movement, a sense of the drama of dance. When I went to the University of Utah, Bill Christensen was the first to give me a real ballet foundation. I graduated in '59—Mike Smuin and Kent Stowell were there, too.

Then I joined the San Francisco Ballet, but candidly, I found Lew Christensen rather sterile. The company too seemed so cold, so intellectual, without heart. I started inquiring, made an appointment with Bob Joffrey and auditioned for him. He was working on *Aida*. Helgi Tomasson was dancing there and Francesca Corkle, just a little girl then. Joffrey accepted me and I came to the company which was under the aegis of Rebekah Harkness. Larry Rhodes was there, later Dennis Wayne, Lone Isaksen, Paul Sutherland, Lisa Bradley, Elizabeth Carroll, all wonderful dancers. This was '62, '63, '64. Then we became the Harkness Ballet in the split, from '65 through '68.

LFR/ All right, now, let's focus on your friend's suggestion that you teach.

FJ/ As I said, I began with Morelli, but very shortly decided to be on my own so I could divest myself of other interests and concentrate on being a good teacher.

LFR/ In your classes, you not only start with breathing and stretching; I see you close that way as well.

FJ/ Right. I always try to keep alive the idea that everyone is a person, an individual, hopefully with potential. Everyone has the right to experience at least some of the pleasures of dancing. As I already told you, breathing and stretching help—it's a time to quiet down. You are in a studio, about to start your lesson; you are paying your hard-earned money. You must push all else from your mind. The point is that dancing is natural and you must stand tall, concentrated, balancing, ready to work.

About the breathing? The body rises and when you exhale. Think of a rocket leaving the ground. It pushes—if you want to leave the ground, you must push to go up. So many people have been taught to suck in a huge gulp of air. Then of course you create tension in the arms, shoulders and neck. They hold their breath. Wrong! Actually it is in releasing, when you need to breathe—when gravity is pulling on your body in a downward movement that you need to have the breath and stretch. So many dancers have trouble; they collapse in the downward movement and try to pull on the upward movement. At the top of a jump, there should be no air left in the body. It's entirely without—which is what gives that stretch to the body.

LFR/ Well, when you prepare for your classes, do you have an overall concept of the progression of the barre and the center work, or do you base it on particular needs or deficiencies noted in the previous class? Does an open class, the number of people and new faces influence the way you work at a given time?

FJ/ Generally speaking, yes, but you see, here there is a certain flow to the school by now. Each class has its basic grouping, more or less, that determines the level of each class. I keep cards — red, yellow, blue, green, for various notations. For me the best way is to write things down, suggestions for improvement and so on, but I use the cards for guidance only; it's not a rigid adherence. I can and do substitute, depending on the needs of the moment. The students must be challenged but sometimes if it's too complicated, sophisticated, it requires rapid, consecutive changes of direction, changes of legs, it might confuse them. They may not be ready and I'll take it out. That doesn't occur often because I know my students. When it's a matter of a little encouragement to accomplish a particular combination, I won't discard it, but I'll help them and they make it. It's a matter of challenging without discouraging. And if they fall, they must understand why. When I used to fall, nobody told me why. I don't think my teachers knew. If I went for a pique balance and fell off, nobody could explain, show me what I'd done wrong, how to avoid it in future.

In the old days, you had jumpers or balancers or turners. People have definite abilities, but everybody isn't a dance genius. We have a Cynthia [Gregory], a Misha [Baryshnikov], and a Fernando [Bujones]: these are special people with special gifts. The average good and even excellent dancer possesses a less spectacular ability and needs help to sort things out. When they get the help, they do well, live up to their individual potentials. That's my approach. I know only too well the fear and frustration of having to do something you're not sure you'll be able to do, with nobody to help you.

I plan to start videotaping classes as an adjunct teaching tool. I'll show the tapes to my students and we'll discuss it. It's a marvelous implementation. You can observe yourself in a pirouette, start to finish. At any time the tape can be stopped and inadequacies discussed and corrected.

Now, let me point up something, if I may. Rebekah Harkness in 1966 brought in Joanna Kneeland. There was a lot of controversy over what she was doing, but her theories have proved correct. She had worked with a physicist and explained things from the standpoint of physical laws—how you turn, how you jump, push down to go up, the concept of opposition—she was one of the first to talk about all that. Initially we didn't know where she was coming from, like off the wall. Gradually I realized she was right. Then David Howard was brought in to learn and then teach her technique at Harkness. David's basic classical training at the Royal Ballet plus this knowledge he obtained by the utilization of her principles of physics and anatomy, he passed on to us and I began to understand the why and how. In time we were all working with less tension, less restraint, less fear and less misdirected energy.

You must remember there is always opposition or reluctance to accepting new ideas, new ways; you tend to stay in a rut, the familiar pattern in which you as teacher feel most comfortable. This is wrong. Any teacher worth his salt must try and discard things, learn new approaches, always strive to improve his teaching techniques. Otherwise, teaching becomes drudgery, colorless, non-productive.

Also, I'm sorry to say, there is among some dancers a very negative

competitiveness. There is room for everybody. I don't approve of keeping secrets; this destroys people as people.

LFR/ You made a number of significant comments in class, laying great stress on the groin. You also stated: "In plié, you don't just drop the body down. The body must make a statement." and "don't just do steps without meaning. Dance." At one point, while sitting up front on a stool, you said: "I'm sitting on this stool. I must do something to push myself up or I can't go anywhere." Today, you spoke about an automobile under control, having a destination. These were good graphic examples that should reach, penetrate. Please enlarge on that: What is the importance of the groin? How is used? What of the plié?

FJ/ Since ballet is movement, something must be the center from which you can relate to the other parts of the body. It makes sense that the pelvis, the groin, should be that center. It's where the legs stem from and above, where the ribs, arms, head are—so by identifying that, by finding the muscles used when you exhale fully and the muscles contract—the ribs, the upper and lower abdominal muscles—that contraction of those muscles is the centering of that square body which dancers don't always have. But if you're doing it right, if you operate from that center, everything will be in place. What I teach is what people do naturally—despite the fact that ballet itself is a so-called "unnatural" dance art.

I'm not giving away arcane knowledge. Whatever I teach is just a clarification and explanation of what dancing is—understanding the anatomical structure, the placement, identifying the center you start with. Then you must establish ideas. What is turnout? Where does it come from? Too many try to turn out their legs from the ankles or knees instead of learning that turnout comes from the gradual rotation of the thigh bone in its socket. And we teach everyone the same basics, professionals and non-professionals.

LFR/ As between ballet and modern dance, does a modern dancer have the same need for turnout as a ballet student?

FJ/ Choreography today generally demands more of both. This will be even truer in future: ballet will utilize more modern; modern will use more ballet technique, and ballet is justifiably acknowledged as the most important technique for your basics.

As for the plié, its dynamics, most movements tend to begin and end with pliés. People don't dance with straight legs for any appreciable time unless they have a role as a mechanical doll or a toy soldier. Many injuries come in elevation work—jumping and landing and so on. First of all, the greatest problem seems to be the knee rolling forward, the loss of alignment of the knee over the toes which structurally you must have for your joints and muscles. Also, since the plié has to be a position that holds potential energy, it is going to send you up and is also going to receive you when you come down from jumping—because the leg is bent, bone is not resting on bone. Therefore, there must be muscle strength. If you don't have this in mind at the barre, there's trouble. Too many dancers think a plié is merely a stretch and bend and it's often done too flaccidly, loosely, sitting back, perhaps with a

nice arm and head, but if you look, they are clutching the barre and if they ever let go, they'd fall over.

LFR/ What then should you do in executing a plié?

FJ/ Remember, gravity is pulling your body down to begin with. If you don't resist, use energy in an upward direction, if you don't lift your head, your chest, hold the body correctly, you just drop forward. Your pelvis drops down and back. When your pelvis goes back, your thighs roll forward and you turn in. I'm not talking about tucking under. You'll notice I never use the words "pull up", which seems to be rather traditional in ballet. Instead, I say "stretch up, lift your head and chest, stretch the arms." Also you must listen to the music. "Press the feet, press your knees." Pressing already implies you must work, right? "Press the knees, stretch the thighs." I talk of plié as a movement from the hips—stretching out of the hips, moving the body out from the hip, stretching the thigh—then that plié is balanced. Otherwise you get a picture of a parachute which is full of air as you descend. When you reach the ground, it flops down and collapses little by little. You see that when some people dance. They're having a hard time on stage. The head and chest have dropped forward. The plié is brittle and misaligned.

The plié is like home base. You come home to plié each time. What you do in that plié will determine what'll happen to your next movement. Too many dancers try for the pretty picture up there and then, it's too late. They are already off balance and the more they try to work up, the further off goes the plié. In turns, pirouettes, they seem to be lifting up, away from the floor. As long as you are going to balance in turning, you must be rooted, connected to the floor. You must exert a pressure on the floor. You can't do anything that weakens that support. If you watch Baryshnikov, you see a pelvis, a thigh—they are so rooted. You know he won't fall over. Cynthia through that strong leg—it's like a tree—you sense it. The legs are also rooted and yet so flexible, graceful, natural. Otherwise you also get stiffness in the back, an unmistakable rigidity.

You noticed, I'm sure, with the pirouettes, I said "easy, steady, smooth, slow, stretch it before you go into the turn." You must know how to use yourself and with intelligence and honesty, you can get there. Else, pushing all the time, you just kill yourself. Many have such great anxiety. They feel time is against them, competition is great, so they push, push, push. That's another reason for my approach—"stand with your feet parallel breathe in-out-in-out"—work without the wrong, constant pressure, slowly, steadily, consistently. That doesn't mean you are working less hard, but you are ridding yourself of negative tension.

LFR/ I've watched: from the breathing and stretching, class is a slow progression with an overlapping of certain steps from one exercise to the next. I'm aware too that class tempo was increasing along with the increasingly difficult combinations. I felt, though, that if they progressed methodically, as you wanted them to, they wouldn't be frustrated by later difficulties; they would have warmed up gradually and built up their ability to perform the more taxing movements.

FJ/ You've pinpointed just what I'm aiming for. Those who work correctly, can follow and understand. Again, the class is on every day. When I teach, believe me, I'm not just thinking or planning "this is what I'll do today." No, I watch carefully to see whether my instructions are being followed, taken to heart. I know my students and their problems and I constantly review myself as well. I am continually learning from them and, I hope, they're learning from me. If they have tensions in my classes, they'll have it elsewhere; it won't disappear magically. If they're not on top of it here, they won't be somewhere else, either, on stage or in rehearsal.

In class, I insist my students "perform" because if you can't do well in class, no magic will enable you to dance well and interestingly on stage, relying on an audience to inspire you. An audience inspires a prepared dancer and vice versa. It's technique and confidence. I'm not a "method" teacher; I don't believe in "method" acting or "method" teaching or "method" dancing—oh, a certain amount of tension can put you on your mettle, yes. That's positive and healthy. However, it shouldn't be frantic, yet it is if you are unprepared.

Now, I must admit to you, there is an overall good feeling in my studio and I'm proud of it. My people must work hard with me, but they don't feel intimidated. It is a no-nonsense school, yet the studio offers optimum conditions for correcting errors, for learning. Anything less than that is unacceptable—not only physically and technically but also in projecting to the audience. Santa Claus or The Good Fairy will not give you a technique you didn't work for in class. On the other hand, good dancers even tend at times to overwork, to use too much energy, all because of nerves, anxiety. Instead of trusting the body, they overpush. Progress comes from working consistently every day, not too much one day and nothing or little the next.

You asked if I have any advice for a young dancer. It's an age of instant gratification of every whim and desire without earning it. License is equated with freedom, no restraints whatever. Kids want what others have immediately and many parents give in, seeking the easy way as against a firm, loving discipline. Did you see the two youngsters cleaning up the studio after class, as we've been talking up here? I don't believe in scholarships, free lessons. Those two boys can't afford to pay. Well, I won't hand them lessons on a platter. They work, keeping the floor clean, polishing the mirrors, sweeping, and so on. If they want lessons badly enough, they'll work for them, either here, or washing dishes in a restaurant or baby-sitting, whatever. That way, they get their lessons and whether they realize it yet or not, they retain their dignity and integrity, a feeling of self worth.

Now, ideas are changing all the time, but in understanding your body and the basic laws of movement, you are also embracing the laws of the universe.

LFR/ Has trying to know yourself emotionally and intellectually had an effect on you as a dancer and now as teacher—your own sense of identity?

FJ/ It has to. Socrates said "know thyself." This has been the universal question since man first stood upright and started thinking. To know yourself, accept what you can do, your goals in life and not make yourself un-

necessarily unhappy or envious of what you don't have—yes, I think I have a pragmatic yet philosophical approach to people, to life. It's worked for me; maybe it can for others.

To young students I say: Make the most of your assets. Life itself is like a single breath. It is learning and discovery, a never-ending journey until you've lived out your three score and ten. Don't waste time; don't waste the years; use them positively and productively. This is happiness.