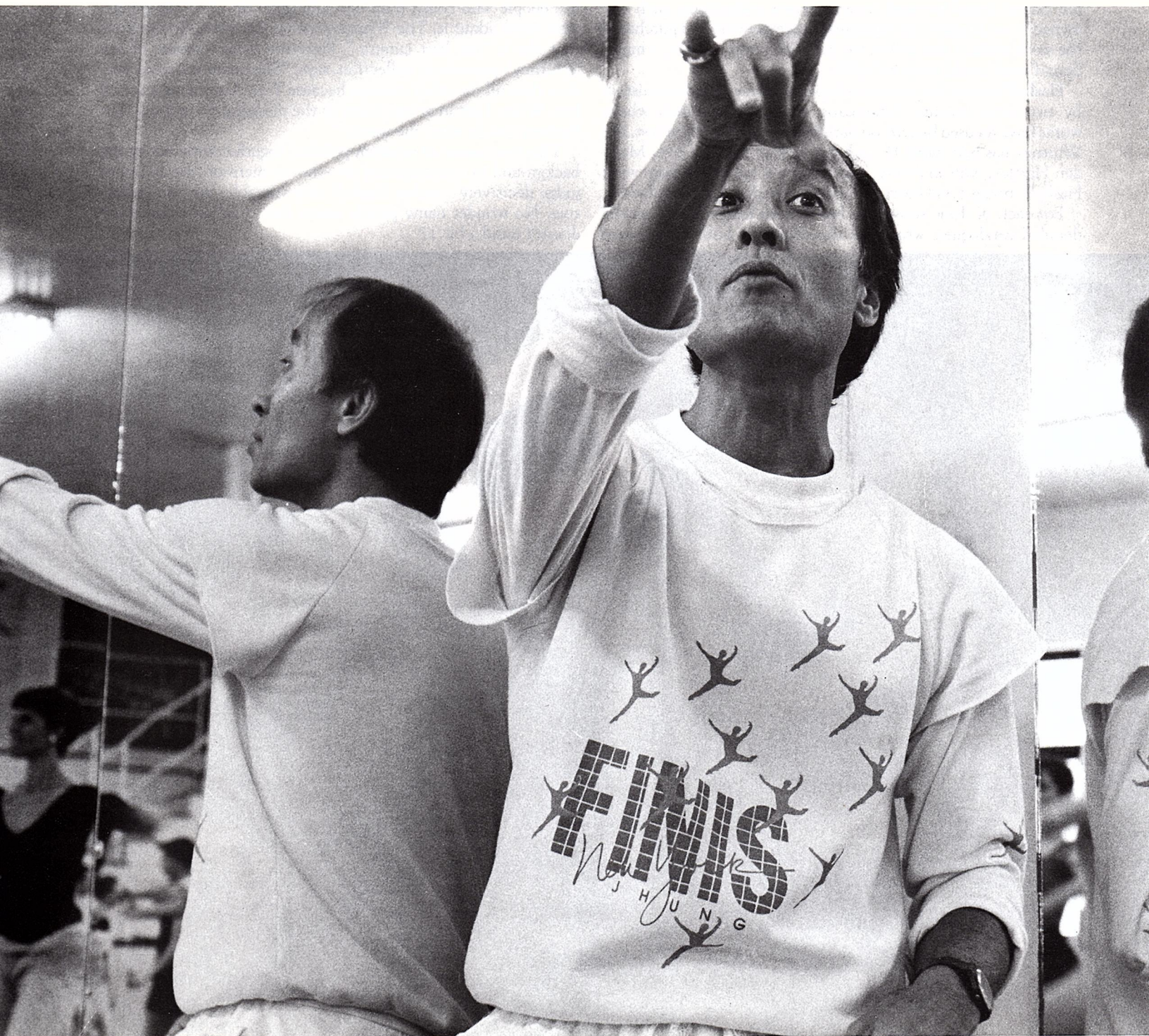


WHY HOPEFUL DANCERS FLOCK TO FINIS JHUNG BY VALERIE GLADSTONE

Nothing stills the dreams of dancers. Every day, inspired by heroes from Pavlova to Baryshnikov, the lean, scrubbed kids arrive in New York—still the dance capital of the world—hoping to make a career in professional dance. A grapevine extending from Seattle to New Orleans, Butte to Savannah, has told them the hard facts: if they are not with companies, like New York City Ballet and the Joffrey, which are

dominated by dancers who have trained in their own schools, they should find an instructor who will help them become better dancers. Some of the most fortunate, or discerning, begin to study with Finis Jhung.

Finis Jhung is first of all a mentor. He is serene and self-effacing, and, perhaps because of this, he draws dancers of all kinds, from Broadway, the Eliot Feld Ballet, the Joffrey, the Dance



Theatre of Harlem, Martha Graham. All of them are not only looking for someone who will make them into extraordinary dancers; they also want an oasis, an area of calm where they can refine their talents. "We migrate unconsciously to his quiet positiveness," says Christine Redpath, who works with Jerome Robbins. "With other teachers you often get tantrums, yelling, sarcasm, or total indifference."

Jhung never plays the guru, but everything about his mien and manner would permit him to. Slight, soft-spoken, Oriental, he seems every inch the Zen master. He was born forty-eight years ago, the son of a Korean father and a Korean-Scottish-English mother. He grew up in Hawaii as a Methodist but credits Buddhism, to which he was drawn over twenty years ago, with giving him a special energy and calm and an insight into the basic elements of life.

"My studio is a place for people who want to learn," says Jhung as he sits cross-legged on the floor of his large apartment off Columbus Avenue. A Buddhist shrine, framed by two large, leafy plants, dominates the room. Against one wall is a bookshelf stacked with videotapes of ballets. Jhung studies the tapes alone or with dancers who want to examine brilliant dancing close up.

As a soloist with the Joffrey and San Francisco ballets and principal dancer with the Harkness, Jhung learned the difficulties of the dancer's life. For this reason, although he never coddles his dancers, his sympathy is implicit. He knows that most dancers spend more time waitressing, typing, and working in health clubs than they will ever spend onstage. Even when they are in companies, they receive far too little direction and support.

"When I went to take class at the University of Utah in 1955," says Jhung, "Michael Smuin, a choreographer with the San Francisco Ballet, told me I'd never make it. He said, 'You're bowlegged and Oriental and can't look right wearing white tights.'" As it happened, he wound up in Smuin's company in 1960 and was on his way. "Still, I got sick of getting character roles, with lots of makeup and a jewel in my navel. With very little confidence, I left and joined the Harkness Ballet. Buddhism restored me. Three years later I

was dancing 'white tights' roles, the romantic roles no one could have believed I could do. It proved to me that for years one's potential can lie dormant."

Jhung is known for his infinite patience with mistakes and his lack of it for moodiness. "My students have to give of themselves completely," he says. "Great dancers always take risks—in that lies their purity. There is a religious element that makes the routine of a ballet class almost sacred. Some feel it; others don't."

To show what greatness is, Jhung switches on the tape of Makarova and Baryshnikov dancing Jerome Robbins's *Other Dances*. "I can't think of any other ballet or dancers that so exemplify the beauty of American dance," says Jhung, smiling with pleasure. "Although both of them are Russian, they have a fluidity and plasticity that they could have learned only here. And their instinctive sense of drama. You feel her vulnerability, his power, and their tremendous belief and involvement in what they are doing." He slows the tape to show each, perfect step of Makarova's as she arches back in absolute abandon. "In every frame she is so giving, so fearless that she makes you love her."

Helgi Tomasson, who is artistic director of the San Francisco Ballet and a former New York City Ballet soloist, is one of many in the business who keep a close eye on Jhung's students. "Finis's dancers are totally professional, very hard workers, and receptive to everything choreographically," he says.

Jhung teaches up to fifty people per class and charges them seven dollars, with day and evening rates for professional dancers. During class, he walks around his large, bright studio, hands folded behind his back, head down, examining the feet, legs, stomachs, and shoulders of his students, like a gardener examining his flowers. Sometimes he might gently put his hand on a dancer's spine to indicate better placement, or point to a place on the floor where a toe was meant to stretch.

Every dancer in the studio has a different reason for studying with Jhung. "He ends up teaching you as much about life as about dancing," says Valerie Bergman, who is with the Nina Wiener Dancers. "Only once in the ten years I have been with him did I see him lose his temper. A sixteen-year-old ballerina would do half the exercises, then give up, do half a combination, then give up. Suddenly Finis rushed up to her and said, 'Do you realize that you've wasted a minute of your life? Do you realize that you are a minute closer to death?'"

Jhung's passionate feelings about life and dance are contagious. Two years ago Leslie Browne, a principal dancer with American Ballet Theatre and a star of the film *The Turning Point*, left ballet. "I thought it was so boring, just a bunch of meaningless steps," says Browne. "But after six months with Finis, I was back at ABT, with a sense of control I had never had before."

Marc Spradling, a student of Jhung's, was asked to join the San Francisco Ballet this year, and he gives Jhung much of the credit. "All I'd kept saying to myself, as Finis always did, was 'Keep your chest up and keep stretching,'" says Spradling. "It worked."

Repeatedly, Jhung's students talk of his spiritual quality, but an insistence on reality also infuses his classes. This is the precious key he gives dancers willing to move beyond their first dreams and become professionals. "I'll never forget the day," says the dancer Lucy Bowen, "when he said to us, in his usual, deadpan way, 'You're going to do just one pirouette? Don't you think that with people going to the moon, you might be able to turn twice?' It was such a sensible statement that we burst out laughing. When the music started again, we turned and turned and turned." □

Valerie Brooks Gladstone is the coauthor of Balanchine's *Mozartiana*: The Making of a Masterpiece.

