

ROBERT JOFFREY

b. December 24, 1930

d. March 25, 1988

DANCER & CHOREOGRAPHER

He was a world-renowned choreographer and founder of the Joffrey Ballet.

“To me, dance is everything that’s good. Everything that’s beautiful, everything that’s difficult.”

Robert Joffrey was a world-renowned ballet dancer, instructor, and choreographer. His acclaimed Joffrey Ballet company introduced the art form to scores of Americans.

Born Abdullah Jaffa Anver Bey Khan to an Afghan Muslim father and an Italian mother, Joffrey grew up in Seattle, determined to culturally assimilate despite his father’s wishes. Dance became his refuge.

A small, bowlegged, asthmatic child, Joffrey was an unconventional candidate for classical dance. He began his training early with the ballet master Ivan Novikoff. At 11, he earned a nondancing role in the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo’s “Petrushka,” sparking his ambition to one day lead a dance company.

In 1945, Joffrey met Gerald Arpino, a Coast Guard veteran from Staten Island, and they began a lifelong romantic and professional partnership. Joffrey convinced Arpino to study dance with him under Mary Ann Wells in Seattle. Wells encouraged her students to study choreography and helped Joffrey make the best of his atypical physique.

At 18, Joffrey moved to New York with Arpino and studied under George Balanchine. After performing in Europe, he began teaching in 1950 at the High School of Performing Arts (NYC), where he trained several dancers who joined the original Joffrey Ballet.

Joffrey started his ballet school in 1953, after a calf injury derailed his performing career. With Arpino, he founded the Joffrey Ballet in 1954 at New York’s 92nd Street YMCA. They launched a modest national tour in 1956 with six dancers in a borrowed station wagon.

In 1962, Joffrey met Rebekah Harkness, who financed performances that earned the company international acclaim. Their partnership ended bitterly in 1964 over creative differences, and recurring financial struggles followed.

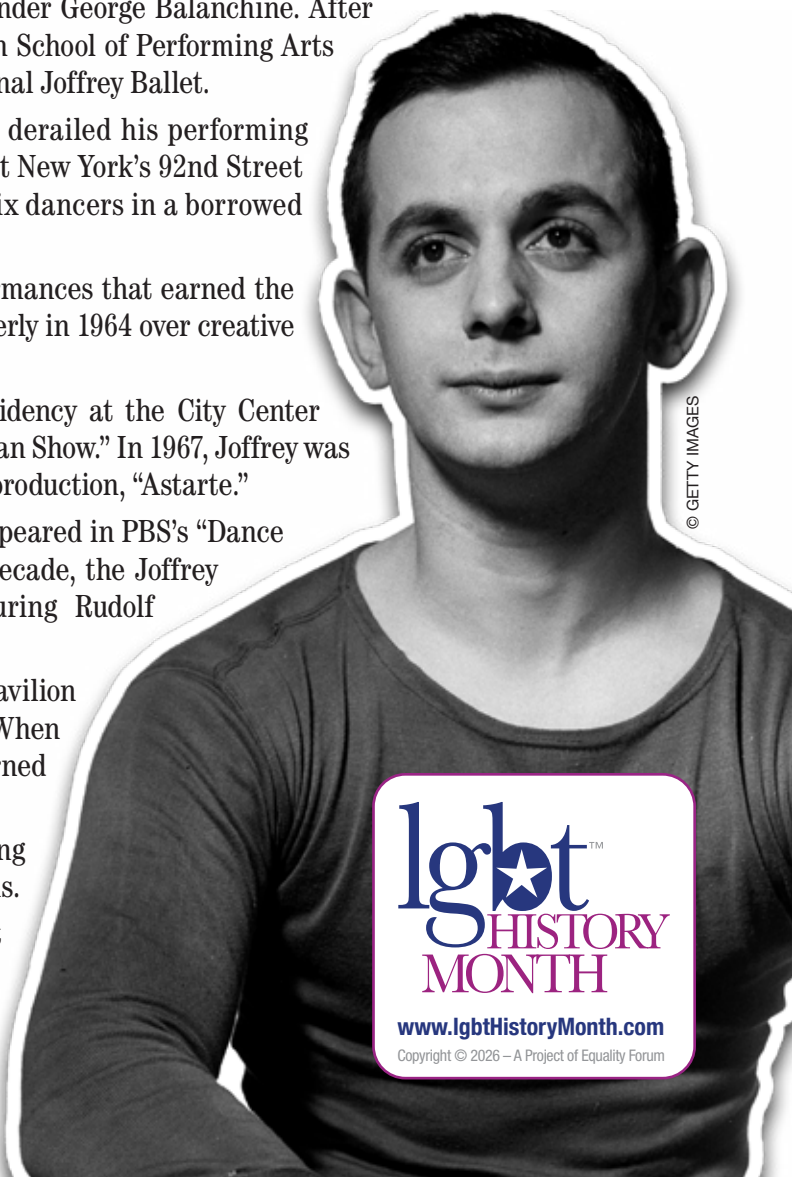
Joffrey’s company gained wide recognition with a 1965 residency at the City Center Theater in New York and a 1966 appearance on “The Ed Sullivan Show.” In 1967, Joffrey was the first to feature a rock score in a ballet in his multimedia production, “Astarte.”

By 1970, the troupe had grown to 37 dancers. In 1976, they appeared in PBS’s “Dance in America,” reaching millions of viewers. Throughout the decade, the Joffrey Ballet performed exuberant, groundbreaking works, featuring Rudolf Nureyev and other internationally celebrated dancers.

In 1981, the Joffrey Ballet moved to the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in Los Angeles with support from First Lady Nancy Reagan. When the arrangement ended a few years later, the company returned to New York.

Robert Joffrey premiered his final ballets in 1987, attending both in a wheelchair. He died a year later of AIDS complications.

The Joffrey Ballet moved to Chicago in 1995, where it thrives today.



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