A Dance Story

Capturing the Joffrey's Eddie Stierle in mid-flight

October 1, 1994 By Michael Grumet

In *A Dance Against Time: The Brief, Brilliant Life of a Joffrey Dancer*, author Diane Solway follows the life of Eddie Stierle from his blue-collar beginnings to his extraordinarily quick rise to stardom as a Joffrey dancer and through his fight against AIDS. It is Solway's not-so-easy accomplishment that she manages to give us non-balletomanes a very clear understanding of the dedication, sacrifices and types of training necessary to dance professionally. She accomplishes this with the ease of a writer extremely familiar with the environs and history of dance.

Stierle grew up in a working-class Catholic family in Florida. He was the youngest of eight children and favorite child of his mother, who saw him as the most talented of her children and the one most likely to fulfill her own dreams. Stierle had to endure the estrangement of his brother and sisters that his early achievements as a gifted dancer and his special relationship with his mother brought him. Stierle never lost sight of his goals and did whatever he and his teachers thought was necessary to achieve them.

Stierle became a member of the Joffrey Ballet at the age of 18, an amazing feat for a short, stocky man -- not the physical build usually associated with ballet dancers. Due to his amazing talent and overwhelming desire to succeed, within a year Stierle was dancing lead roles. At the age of 19 he tested positive for HIV. He died at the age of 23, shortly after the New York City premiere of two works Stierle choreographed.

This book is not only Stierle's story. It is very much the story of the inner workings of the Joffrey Ballet and of their celebrated dancers and choreographers who made up the troupe. It tells the tale of Robert Joffrey's last few years as he succumbed to AIDS and highlights how our thinking about AIDS has developed over time. When Joffrey was in the final stages of the disease, only his closest associates knew the exact nature of his illness. The word AIDS was never spoken aloud.

The author's most striking feat is to show Stierle's life in the context of his times. By chronicling the dancer's life, Solway follows events we all remember -- the first reports of unusual illness striking gay men, the isolation of HIV, the experimental drugs that failed and the New Age treatment developed in response -- are all contained within this volume, in the context of Stierle's life.

Solway echoes near-universal condemnation of the Reagan-Bush administration for its early inaction against AIDS and the media for its original reticence to report on the pandemic. The power of her argument is magnified as Solway shows how these inactions led to the death of Eddie Stierle at such an early age. Ultimately, this is a book about triumphs. Stierle triumphs as a dancer, as a choreographer and as a young person refusing to let a deadly disease alter his vision of the life he wanted. And Diane Solway triumphs in presenting this life to us in this eminently readable, well-researched and touching book.

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