

DANCE

Alphonso Figueroa -- a late bloomer

by Valerie Restivo

I didn't recognize Alphonso Figueroa in person, after seeing him onstage. He was in rehearsal clothes and glasses hid his face a surprisingly gentle look. I was treated to a brief rehearsal preview of his new ballet, which will premiere at the Aquarius Theatre Feb. 10. Figueroa's first full-length work is titled *Thoroughfare*, and is based on Stravinsky's "Concerto for Piano and Wind Orchestra."

The short segment I saw was tantalizing—there was an energetic capturing, in dance form, of the sense of constant motion in the Stravinsky piece. There are no solos in the piece. The "Pas de Deux" in the Second Movement will be danced by husband-wife team, Elaine Bauer and David Brown.

Tracing the career of Alphonso Figueroa is like rewriting a Horatio Alger story, with Spanish personae. The young dancer, at 29, has seen only 10 years of dance training with no preparation at all before his 19th year. He spoke of how it all started with a sense of not entirely understanding it himself. "I always had an interest in the theater started doing summer stock. I always leaned toward movement."

But how does interest in theater develop without exposure to theater? "It was a freak accident. I saw movies a lot; some of them were musicals. 'West Side Story' really inspired me. It was a coincidence that Eliot Feld did the solos in that, and I did my first important dancing with his company." (Figueroa was soloist with Feld's American Ballet for the short life of the company.)

Surely there was some body training during those first 19 years—unlike many late-

blooming male dancers, Figueroa didn't start as an athlete. "I didn't play any games—I couldn't see the ball!" He began his professional career as an accountant. Unsuccessful attempts to get scholarships for theatre-dance studies led to three years at the Boston Conservatory.

After the first semester he finally won a scholarship. Then he apprenticed with the Boston Ballet for a year and danced for a second year with the company before leaving for New York to join Eliot Feld's new company. He came back to Boston, left again, spent several years dancing, doing solo work with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, Pearl Lang and finally, returning to the Boston Ballet.

"It's better now," he said. "I kept leaving and coming back and leaving . . . it's the way I am . . . I didn't like the system." What he likes now is a better organized system,

which gives dancers more of the "right" kind of opportunities. He didn't go into detail about that, but he explained that "I always got principal roles whether I was ready for them or not." He felt pushed too hard, used too much. There seems to be more of a balance now between offering opportunities to solo, to train and to choreograph.

I asked about the Aquarius Theatre, with its nice atmosphere and somewhat small stage. "It's fine. A little small but nice. You know all of these theatres they're tearing down . . . any one of them is nicer than theatres in New York . . . including that robot they call Lincoln Center."

With all the solo work, Figueroa says "dancing was a means to choreograph. I always wanted to choreograph. I knew that somebody had to put these dances together . . ." Fortunately, he danced with leading choreographers; he acknowledges especially the influence of Ailey, Feld

and Lang. His orientation is not strictly to ballet. "I used to do musical comedy. It's mostly effects, doesn't rely on the dancer's ability."

The first movement of "Thoroughfare" was presented last summer at Jacob's Pillow, as a work in progress. The Stravinsky concerto was suggested by Sam Kurkjian, the Boston Ballet's resident choreographer. "I won't dance in this ballet," Figueroa explained. "I don't believe in choreographing on myself. It becomes self indulgent; you work for things that look good on you, instead of for sound design."

"I'll put myself into it on the road . . . but not till it's done." The piece avoids putting the women en pointe, although the dancers wear shoes. The choreographer rejects definitions such as "classical" or "modern," asserting his right to present dance simply as dance. He is working on two other ballets, one for the Boston Ballet and

another for Movement Lab, done to electronic music.

His favorite roles to dance include the melancholy movement in Balanchine's "The Four Temperaments" and works by Ailey. He'll probably continue to dance, but the career of Alphonso Figueroa is probably as unpredictable as was its beginning. The kid from Spanish Harlem has already gotten from accounting to summer-stock theatre to ballet to choreography. Where his creative instincts go from here is anybody's guess.

On the program with Stravinsky work is the full-length version of "Coppelia." Swanilda will be danced by Edra Toth and Jerilyn Dana, on alternate nights, and Warren Lynch and Anthony Williams will dance the role of Franz. Samuel Kurkjian is Dr. Coppélius, creator of the doll Coppelia whom Swanilda imitates to win back her lost love. Other soloists will include Bonnie Alexis Wyckoff and Alphonso Figueroa.