**Robbins, Jerome (b. 11 October 1918, New York City—d. 29 July 1998, New York**

**City)**

Jerome Robbins was one of the master choreographers of the twentieth century who transformed musical theatre and ballet. Beginning with *Fancy Free* (1944), Robbins left his mark on both disciplines by his use of humour and character and by his ability to combine movement originating in multiple idioms. This auspicious beginning led to more ballets – *Interplay* (1945), *Afternoon of a Faun* (1953) and *The Concert* (1956) – as well as a number of hit Broadway shows – *On the Town* (1945) to *West Side Story* (1957), *Gypsy* (1959) and *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964). He traversed different genres with ease, moving from Broadway to ballet, from dancing to choreographing, and then to directing plays, films and television programmes. Although he made his earliest ballets for Ballet Theatre (now American Ballet Theatre), his longest affiliation was with the New York City Ballet, where he was appointed Associate Artistic Director in 1949, and to which, after a hiatus of more than a decade, he returned in 1969 to choreograph some of his most acclaimed ballets, including *Dances at a Gathering* (1969) and *The Goldberg Variations* (1971). Robbins’ work often defined the historic moment, marrying music, movement and expression with such quality and intensity that his works have endured as historical and artistic landmarks.

**Training**

Robbins began his dance training at the studio of Senia Gluck-Sandor in Manhattan. Gluck-Sandor introduced Robbins to a variety of dance forms, from the innovative ballet of Michel Fokine to Mary Wigman’s expressionism and the emerging American modern dance. Gluck-Sandor impressed the importance of theatricality on the young

Robbins, and his first performances reflected that emphasis such as his small role as a villager in *The Brothers Ashkenazi* (1937) at the Yiddish Art Theatre. He studied ballet with Ella Daganova and enrolled at the politically-engaged New Dance Group, where he learned various modern dance techniques and took a course in composition with Bessie Schönberg. Robbins created some of his first dances at Camp Tamiment, a left-wing resort in the Poconos, where he performed in revues for four summers. Back in New

York, he danced in Broadway choruses until he made his debut with Ballet Theatre (later American Ballet Theatre) in 1940. Here he came under the influence of Fokine (who cast the young American in the title role of *Petrouchka*) and the English choreographer

Antony Tudor and worked side-by-side with young American choreographers such as

Agnes de Mille and Eugene Loring.

**Contributions to the Field and to Modernism**

Robbins began thinking about a work for Ballet Theatre while on tour in 1943, and he sought out a similarly young and ambitious artist, the composer Leonard Bernstein, to write the score. *Fancy Free* (1944) marked the beginning of a lifelong collaboration, signalled the emergence of new musical and dance talents, and revealed characteristics that would define a number of their works together. A story of three sailors on leave in

New York City during the Second World War, *Fancy Free* employed humour and narrative to create a jaunty picture of the contemporary moment. Robbins utilised his eclectic dance background to assimilate vernacular gesture, acrobatics and movements from popular social dances like the rumba into the choreography. This approach made particular ways of moving convey the personalities of the three sailors; Robbins’ own character moved swiftly, suddenly and with intensity. The choreography also drew from everyday life and proclaimed a distinctly American – and populist – style of classical music and ballet. In an article published in *The New York Times Magazine* in October 1945, the choreographer wrote that ballet had put on ‘dungarees’.

Robbins went on to develop and refine these characteristics in both ballet and musical theatre. *Fancy Free* morphed into *On the Town* (1944) on the Broadway stage, and he used Morton Gould’s *American Concertette* for his next ballet, *Interplay*, which abstracted further the play at the heart of *Fancy Free*. He introduced darker topics into some of his ballets, such as *Age of Anxiety* (1950), inspired by the poem by W. H. Auden and choreographed to music by Bernstein, and *The Cage* (1951), to music by Igor Stravinsky. Both ballets expressed strong emotions – anxiety, fear, anger, revenge – and portrayed relationships of power: *The Cage* depicted a band of man-hating insect Amazons on the prowl for innocent male victims. Charged with displaying misogyny, Robbins countered by comparing the ballet to the second act of *Giselle*, when evil female spirits attack first Hilarion and then Albrecht as prey. But the change from spirits to insects revealed the strained gender relations of the postwar period and Robbins’ own difficulties with women.

*The Cage* may also have resulted from the increasing anxiety Robbins experienced in the late 1940s and early 1950s as his earlier affiliation with the Communist Party became a threat to his career with the rise of McCarthyism. Like a number of artists and musicians, a left-wing sensibility infused many of Robbins’ projects both in ballet and on Broadway, known in conservative circles as the ‘Great Red Way’. By 1950 he was blacklisted on television and feared, that his leftist politics might also prevent him from working in

Hollywood. In 1953 he testified before the House Committee on Un-American Activities

(HUAC) and ‘named names’, something he subsequently refused to comment on, but clearly suffered guilt about.

In the midst of these worries, Robbins choreographed one of his most beloved pieces, *Afternoon of a Faun*. The ballet presented a new version of Vaslav Nijinsky’s *L’Après-midi d’un Faune* (1912) to music by Claude Debussy. Robbins dropped the angularity of Nijinksy’s version and replaced his faun and nymphs with a simple pair of dancers rehearsing in a studio, falling in love. The piece conveys the quiet reverie of marking movement as exploration and expression, of oneself and in relation to another – and the mirror. It reveals the work of the studio, the attendant necessary absorption and occasional narcissism, only broken by a tentative kiss between the two dancers.

As with *Afternoon of a Faun*, Robbins succeeded best when tilting a perceived idea rather than turning it upside down. On stage and screen, *West Side Story* (which had a book by Arthur Laurents and another score by Bernstein) re-shaped Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* into a contemporary commentary on the wrongs and damages of prejudice and discrimination. Robbins’ mix of vernacular and formal dance movement transformed the warring clans of Shakespeare’s play into gangs of Jets and Sharks engaged in a desperate battle over New York social and cultural turf. With its fusion of music, dance and narrative, *West Side Story* – like *Gypsy* and *Fiddler on the Roof* – exemplified the ‘integrated musical’ of Broadway’s Golden Age. In the creation of a complete, enclosed world, Robbins – like de Mille before him – brought a ballet sensibility to musical theatre, creating unexpected dramas by merging story, song and dance. A Robbins dancer was an all-around performer, a singer with training in Method acting and a dancer who could do everything from jazz to ballet and mambo.

Robbins revealed this same ability to fuse theatrical elements with contrasting movement forms in the only company he began and ran, Ballets: USA. The company featured dancers from both ballet and musical theatre backgrounds and was racially diverse. *N.Y.*

*Export: Opus Jazz* (1958) took the youthful energy and defiance of *West Side Story* and melded it with jazz music and movement. A black man (John Jones) and white woman

(Wilma Curley) performed a key pas de deux – an edgy, challenging statement in the

1950s. Robbins also created one of his more formal experiments, *Moves* (1959), a dance without music, for Ballets: USA. The company toured abroad to rave reviews under the auspices of the U.S. State Department but disbanded in 1961.

Robbins continually searched for new artistic challenges and his interest in emotion and character had often led him to acting. In the 1960s, he directed Bertolt Brecht’s play *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1963) and founded the American Theatre

Laboratory. ATL was aptly named, serving as a place of experimentation and improvisation without the burden of having to produce a finished work. It ended as informally as it began, with no apparent results, and in 1969 Robbins rejoined New York

City Ballet.

However, the attention to relations among people prompted by the ATL experience became the foundation of one of his greatest ballets, *Dances at a Gathering*, set to music by Frédéric Chopin. As members of a community, the dancers here move in steps that could be folk dancing – feet stamping, heels clicking, arms reaching to each other’s shoulders – but are joined with classical steps by graceful transitions which do not differentiate between movements, show little effort and display a fluidity that comes from harmonious relations. Unlike most of Robbins’ previous works, *Dances at a Gathering* did not tell a story or strive to convey strong emotions; it depicted dancers on stage dancing together, being together. He had explored character and emotion to come back, more purely, to dance. *Dances* also revealed Robbins’ renewed interest in Chopin, to whose music he soon choreographed *In the Night* (1970) and *Other Dances* (1976).

Robbins followed *Dances at a Gathering* with other ballets which looked at the more formal properties of dance. *The Goldberg Variations* examined the geometry in movement which Bach had explored in his music. Robbins delved into the emerging theatre avant-garde, epitomised by the work of Robert Wilson, in *Watermill* (1972). The piece drew upon Noh drama and slowed time and movement so that it was barely perceptible as a piece of choreography. Although Robbins would continue to seek out the music of new composers, such as Philip Glass for *Glass Pieces* (1983) and Steve Reich for *Octet* (1985), he resisted avant-garde experimentation and turned towards more conventional movement and structure. He created sensuous movement in *In G Major* (1975), a tender elegy *In Memory of…* (1985), and a haunting sense of time passing in *Ives, Songs* (1988). His final ballets, including *Brandenburg* (1997), returned to Bach, revealing yet again his mastery at moving groups in fluid patterns.

After *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964) Robbins occasionally toyed with returning to

Broadway, but did so only in 1989, when he staged *Jerome Robbins’ Broadway*, a compilation of numbers, many unseen for decades, from his career in musical theatre.

During the 1980s and 1990s he was particularly caught up in trying to write and direct

*The Poppa Piece*, a largely autobiographical work that dealt with both his Jewish roots and his decision to appear before the House on Un-American Activities. He never finished it.

**Legacy**

Robbins’ contributions to ballet and musical theatre will long outlive him. He modified the structure of musicals by using dance and music to heighten the drama of the narrative rather than stand apart from it. Other Broadway choreographers such as Bob Fosse and

Michael Bennett would absorb Robbins’ choreographic blend of vernacular and formal movement. In ballet, Robbins’ work offered a contrast to the neoclassicism of

Balanchine; he made ballets that revealed relations between people, creating emotional bonds through physical movement. He transformed ballet and musical theatre without substantially altering their basic form. Instead, he worked from inside their traditions, pushing technique, narrative and character to meet the moment. He also created the

Jerome Robbins Foundation, which awards grants to performing artists in both dance and theatre and has generously funded social causes such as AIDS. Long a beneficiary of the choreographer’s largesse, the Jerome Robbins Dance Division of the New York Public

Library for the Performing Arts now houses his multiple collections.

**Selected List of Works**

*Fancy Free* (1944)

*On the Town* (1944)

*Interplay* (1945)

*Billion Dollar Baby* (1945)

*The Guests* (1949)

*Age of Anxiety* (1950)

*The King and I* (1951)

*The Cage* (1951)

*Afternoon of a Faun* (1953)

*The Tender Land* (1954)

*Peter Pan* (1954)

*The Concert* (1956)

*West Side Story* (1957; 1961)

*N.Y. Export: Opus Jazz* (1958)

*Gypsy* (1959)

*Moves* (1959)

*Mother Courage and Her Children* (1963)

*Fiddler on the Roof* (1964)

*Les Noces* (*The Wedding*, 1965)

*Dances at a Gathering* (1969)

*Firebird* (1970)

*The Goldberg Variations* (1971)

*Watermill* (1972)

*Dybbuk* (1974)

*In G Major* (1975)

*Other Dances* (1976)

*The Four Seasons* (1979)

*Glass Pieces* (1983)

*Antique Epigraphs* (1984)

*In Memory of…* (1985)

*Quiet City* (1986)

*Ives, Songs* (1988)

*Jerome Robbins’ Broadway* (1989)

*Brandenburg* (1997)

**Reference and Further Reading**

Conrad, C. (2000) *Jerome Robbins: That Broadway Man, That Ballet Man*, London:

Booth-Clibborn Editions. (A personal account by a longtime friend of Robbins, with many rare images, including family snapshots, rehearsal and backstage shots and production photographs)

Conrad, C. (2012) *Watermill Revisited*, self-published. (An inside view of the making of one of Robbins’ most controversial ballets)

Jowitt, D. (2004) *Jerome Robbins: His Life, His Theater, His Dance*, New York: Simon & Schuster. (Incisive analysis of Robbins’ choreography by a longtime New York critic)

Lawrence, G. (2001) *Dance with Demons: The Life of Jerome Robbins*, New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons. (Features a large number of interviews with family members, friends and dancers in Robbins’ ballet and musical theatre works)

Reynolds, N. (1977) *Repertory in Review: 40 Years of the New York City Ballet*, New York: Dial Press. (Documents Robbins’ works for the New York City Ballet up to 1977)

Robbins, J. (1945) ‘The Ballet Puts on Dungarees’, *The New York Times Sunday*

*Magazine*, 14 October: 9. (Article by Robbins noting how modern ballet had divested itself of its European elements)

Vaill, A. (2006) *Somewhere: The Life of Jerome Robbins*, New York: Broadway. (Vaill had unprecedented access to Robbins’ personal papers, enabling her to examine the interconnection of his personal and professional lives.)

**Websites**

The Jerome Robbins Foundation and Robbins Rights Trust. (Includes a short biography and appreciation of Robbins, a catalogue of his works, links to commercially available

DVDs of his work, along with general information about the Foundation’s activities)

<http://jeromerobbins.org/foundation>

The New York City Ballet (Includes a full list of Robbins’ ballets for the company, some photographs and music excerpts, along with information about current performances)

[www.nycballet.com](http://www.nycballet.com)

**Moving Image Material**

The Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing

Arts, houses a vast collection of moving image material of Robbins’ work, including full recordings of his musicals and ballets, many in multiple versions and with multiple casts.

**Commercially Available Recordings**

*Tribute to Jerome Robbins: Paris Opéra Ballet* (2011). Produced by François Duplat and

Antoine Perset. (Includes performances by the Paris Opéra Ballet of *In G Major*, *In the*

*Night* and *The Concert*)

*Jerome Robbins’ ‘N. Y. Export: Opus Jazz’* (2010) Conceived and produced by Ellen Bar and Sean Suozzi. DVD. (A compelling re-imagining of Robbins’ 1958 ballet filmed on locations in New York City)

*Jerome Robbins: Something to Dance About* (2009) PBS/American Masters. (A documentary with excerpts from all of Robbins’ major works)

*Jacques d’Amboise, Portrait of a Great American Dancer* (2006) Radio-Canada Television (2006). DVD (Includes a definitive interpretation of *Afternoon of a Faun* with d’Amboise and Tanaquil Le Clercq recorded in 1955)

*Peter Pan* (2000) A&E Network. (A recording of the stage musical with Cathy Rigby in the starring role)

*Fiddler on the Roof* (1971) MGM. (A film version of the musical)

*West Side Story* (1961) MGM. (A film version of the musical)

*The King and I* (1956) Twentieth-Century Fox. (Includes ‘The Little House of Uncle

Tom’ choreographed by Robbins)

**Photographs**

The New York Public Library has digitized a few images of Robbins’ work including *The Cage*, *Fancy Free* and *West Side Story*.

<http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/>

**Archives**

New York City Ballet Archives

<http://www.nycballet.com/researchers/archive/access.html>

The Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing

Arts. (Robbins left his vast collection of papers, graphic works and photographs to

NYPL.) Below are the links:

Robbins, Jerome, Graphic Works, 193?-1998

<http://www.nypl.org/ead/834>

Robbins, Jerome, Papers, 1930-2001

<http://www.nypl.org/archives/756>

Robbins, Jerome, Personal Papers, 1923-2000 (permission required)

<http://www.nypl.org/archives/877>

Robbins, Jerome, Photographs ca. 1890-1990

<http://www.nypl.org/ead/755>

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