**Fosse, Bob (b. June 23, 1927, Chicago, Illinois, USA; d. September 23, 1987, Washington, DC, USA)**

**Summary**

Bob Fosse greatly influenced commercial screen dance and musical theatre stages in the latter part of the twentieth century as a choreographer and director in the USA. In a career that spanned over thirty years, Fosse choreographed sixteen Broadway musicals and seven films, and directed five feature films and made numerous TV specials. Fosse broke with established conventions in thematic, musical, and editing choices, but never diverted his focus from the entertainment goals of his productions. His work aimed to create a complete dance-theatre experience, which would resonate with audiences. As interdisciplinary projects, Fosse’s directorial and choreographic works used minimalism, irony and artifice, and social engagement.

**Training**

Fosse began studying tap, ballet and acrobatic dancing at the age of nine in his native Chicago. He made his professional debut at the age of thirteen in nightclubs, which served as his training ground for performance, choreography, and stagecraft skills. Fosse’s influences included Jack Cole, Jerome Robbins, Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, and the Nicholas Brothers, as well as vaudeville performance more generally. Along with Charles Grass, Fosse formed the dance team The Riff Brothers in the early 1940s, and they performed at burlesque clubs. During this period, Fosse developed an interest in choreography. After serving in the Second World War, Fosse formed a new duo act with his first wife, Mary Ann Miles. In 1953 he made his acting debut in Hollywood, but after a series of small roles, his focus turned to choreography and to New York City. Fosse’s most famous musicals include *Pajama Game* (1954), *Damn Yankees* (1955), *Redhead* (1959), *Sweet Charity* (1966), and *Chicago* (1975). These led to an artistic, professional, and personal relationship with Gwen Verdon, a Broadway dance star who eventually became a symbol of Fosse’s unique style.

**Contribution to the Field and to Modernism**

Fosse’s distinct style was clear from his earliest works, such as the quick duet ‘From This Moment On’ in *Kiss Me Kate* (1953) and ‘Steam Heat’ in the film *Pajama Game* (1957). Overall his choreography was characterised by a strong music and movement connection that at times included treating the dancers’ body as a percussive surface. It was also highly stylised, technically demanding, precise and controlled. His movement was permeated with isolations, exaggerations, and angularity as well as moments of high contrast, repetition, and stillness. Fosse’s style was often positioned as an antithesis to ballet, exemplified by the use of turned in legs and feet, hunched shoulders and head protruding forward, allegedly inspired by Fosse’s own posture. Yet, in many ways, Fosse’s signature moves were a stylization of jazz dancing, a practice pioneered by African-American dancers since the early twentieth century, that he would have seen in nightclubs, movie houses, and vaudeville theatres while growing up in Chicago. Fosse’s choreography was furthered by the camera and editing techniques when he shifted his attention to dance on screen. Fragmentation of the body via movement choices, such as isolations, could be magnified and aided with the way that the body was captured on film.

Fosse built upon standard dance filming practices established by Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly in the 1940s and 1950s. They used long-shots in order to capture the choreography and dancing body in full. Instead, Fosse introduced camera work directly into the choreography, which isolated and fragmented the body and its rhythms. In his films, the dancing was controlled by and dependent on the camera much more so than before. Eventually Fosse occupied a specialised choreographer/director position, which afforded him greater control over the filming of his choreography and thus the opportunity to create a more complex way to film dance. In particular, he innovated through his positioning of the camera, use of the lateral and jump-shot, and editing that directly corresponded to the needs of the dance and music.

Fosse’s directorial debut was his screen adaption of the successful Broadway musical *Sweet Charity* (1966). The film medium allowed him more freedom and creativity as he could integrate camera work into his choreographic concept.

Perhaps, the most celebrated of Fosse’s works is his 1972 film *Cabaret*, starring Liza Minelli. In this movie, he tried to break the conventions of the stage and present a realistic, yet alternate, world of Nazi Germany based on Expressionist films.

Fosse’s fictionalised biographical film *All That Jazz* (1980) features expressive elements of song and dance as crucial aspects of the narrative structure and an extension of film narrative. The film draws on the cinematic technique of a non-linear, collage narrative. It alternates between surreal and realistic representations and characters, which ultimately questions the transformation of life into performance.

Through the musical genre, Fosse chose to use show business to comment on society, including its body politics, social history, gender roles, and treatment of sexuality. *All That Jazz* critiqued the capitalist mechanisms of Broadway musical production. His musical *Chicago* (1975) centred on corruption, media, and fame, as well as the sexual and social freedoms of the 1920s. Its choreography, as well as Fosse’s subsequent works, highlighted the power of the body as a sex symbol. Famous Broadway dancer Gwen Verdon remarked after his death that one of Fosse’s main contributions was that he brought sensuality on stage—a ‘real eroticism’ (1990, PBS)—therefore transforming presentations of sexuality on popular stages and screens.

**Legacy**

Bob Fosse’s impact is clearly evident in screen dance practices from the 1980s to today. Besides influencing dance in stage musicals, he has also had an impact on choreography and filming techniques for both film and TV, especially music videos by early pioneers like Paula Abdul and Prince. In particular, Michael Jackson’s 1982 video *Billie Jean* very closely resembled Bob Fosse’s choreography and performance in the 1974 film *Little Prince*. Most recently, Beyoncé’s highly successful videos *Got me Bodied* (2006) and *Single Ladies* (2008) were modelled on Fosse’s dance and visual aesthetic.

**Dara Milovanovic**

**List of Selected Works**

Broadway

*The Pajama Game* (1954) (choreographer)

*Damn Yankees* (1955) (choreographer and director)

*New Girl in Town* (1956) (choreographer)

*Redhead* (1959) (choreographer and director)

*How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying* (1961) (choreographer)

*Sweet Charity* (1966) (choreographer and director)

*Pippin* (1972) (choreographer and director)

*Chicago* (1975) (choreographer and director)

*Dancin’* (1978) (choreographer and director)

*Big* *Deal* (1986) (choreographer and director)

Filmography

*Kiss Me Kate* (1953) (choreographer)

*My Sister Eileen* (1955) (choreographer)

*The Pajama Game* (1957) (choreographer)

*Damn Yankees!* (1958) (choreographer)

*Sweet Charity* (1969) (choreographer/director)

*Cabaret* (1972) (choreographer/director)

*Liza with a Z: A Concert for Television* (1973) (choreographer/director)

*The Little Prince* (1974) (choreographer)

*Lenny* (1974) (director)

*All That Jazz* (1979) (choreographer/director)

*Star 80* (1983) (director)

**References** **and Further Reading**

Delamater, J. (1988) *Dance in the Hollywood Musical*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Grubb, K. (1989) *Razzle Dazzle: The Life and Work of Bob Fosse*. New York: St. Martin’s Press.

Tellote, J.P. (1983) All That Jazz: Expression on Its Own Terms. *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 11(3), pp. 104 – 113.

**Motion Picture Material**

*Bob Fosse: Steam Heat* (1990) VHS. PBS.

**Paratextual Material**

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