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| Robbins, Jerome (1918-1998) |
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| 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), *West Side Story* (1957), *Gypsy* (1959), and *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964). He traversed different genres with ease, moving from Broadway to ballet, dance to choreography, and then to directing plays, films, and television programmes. Although he made his earliest ballets for Ballet Theatre (now the 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. |
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Gluck-Sandor impressed the importance of theatricality on the young Robbins, and his first performances reflected that emphasis, such as in 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 in 1940. Here, he came under the influence of Fokine (who cast him in the title role of *Petrouchka*) and the English choreographer Antony Tudor. Robbins also 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 the composer Leonard Bernstein — a similarly young and ambitious artist — 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 (such as 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, Robbins wrote that modern ballet had put on ‘dungarees,’ referring to how the art form had divested itself of European elements (9).  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 further abstracted 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), which was set 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, matriarchal insects on the prowl for innocent male victims. Charged with displaying misogyny, Robbins countered by comparing the ballet to the second act of *Giselle*, wherein evil female spirits attack Hilarion and Albrecht as prey. However, the change from spirits to insects revealed the strained gender relations of the postwar period as well as 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 — known in conservative circles as the ‘Great Red Way’ — infused many of Robbins’ projects, both in ballet and on Broadway. By 1950, he was blacklisted on television and he 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 quiet reverie, marking movement as a form of personal expression, as well as an exploration of oneself in relation to another, and to the mirror. It explores the necessary self-absorption and occasional narcissism involved in studio work, producing a tension that is 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 completely upside down. On stage and screen, the musical *West Side Story* (which had a book by Arthur Laurents and 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 the gangs of the Jets and Sharks, who were engaged in a desperate battle over New York’s 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 dancer for Robbins was an all-around performer: a singer with training in method acting, and someone who could do everything from jazz to ballet to mambo.  Robbins revealed this same ability to fuse theatrical elements with contrasting movement forms in Ballets: USA — the only company he began and ran. The company was racially diverse and featured dancers from both ballet and musical theatre backgrounds. *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 a white woman(Wilma Curley) performed a key *pas de deux* – which was an edgy, challenging statement in the1950s. 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 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). ATL was aptly named, as it served 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 re-joined the New York City Ballet.  The ATL experience gave Robbins a heightened attention to the relationships between people, and as a result, prompted one of his greatest ballets, *Dances at a Gathering*, which was set to music by Frédéric Chopin. As members of a community, the dancers move in steps that could be perceived as 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 simply depicted dancers on stage dancing and being together. He had explored character and emotion only 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 that looked at the more formal properties of dance. *The Goldberg Variations* examined the geometry of movement that Bach had explored in his music. Robbins delved into emerging avant-garde theatre, 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) deriving 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 having those elements 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. List of Selected 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) |
| Further reading:  (Conrad)  (Conrad, Watermill Revisited)  (Jowitt)  (Lawrence)  (Reynolds)  (Robbins)  (Vaill) Websites: (The Jerome Robbins Foundation and Robbins Rights Trust)  (The New York City Ballet) Moving Image Material: The Jerome Robbins Dance Division of 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: (Ballet)  (Jacques d’Amboise, Portrait of a Great American Dancer )  (Jerome Robbins’ ‘N. Y. Export: Opus Jazz’)  (Jerome Robbins: Something to Dance About)  (Peter Pan)  (Fiddler on the Roof)  (The King and I)  (West Side Story) Photographs: The New York Public Library has digitised 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 of 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> |