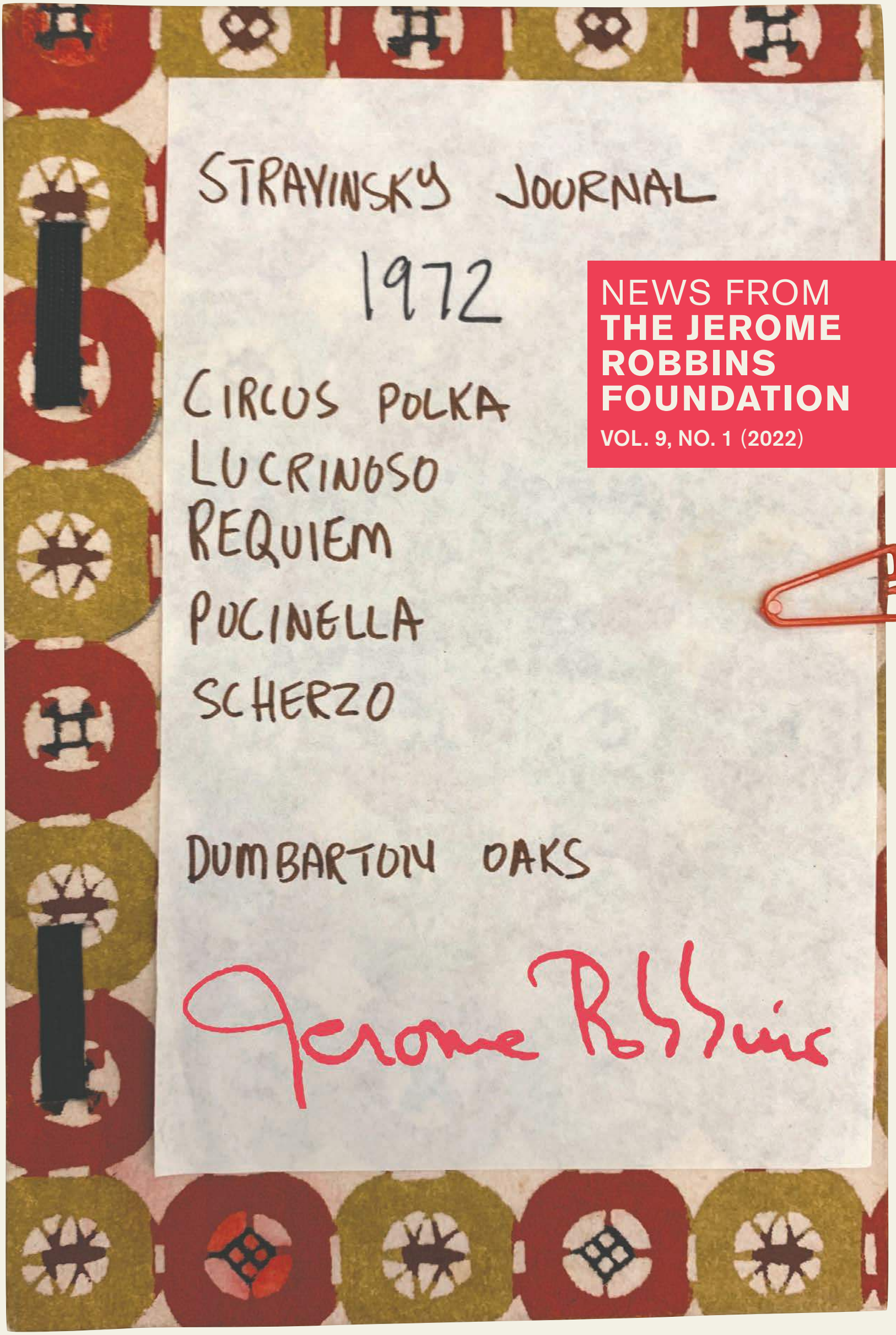


NEWS FROM
THE JEROME ROBBINS FOUNDATION
VOL. 9, NO. 1 (2022)

Lincoln Kirstein and George Balanchine toast to the memory of Igor Stravinsky with a shot of vodka at the New York City Ballet Stravinsky Festival, 1972. Photo by Martha Swope.

Stravinsky Festival Semicentennial

A Scrapbook

by Gregory Victor

1972 was a vintage year at New York City Ballet, especially for Jerome Robbins. After having premiered his haunting ritual ballet *Watermill* in the winter season, that spring Robbins created four new ballets, co-choreographed one more, and oversaw the return of two previously staged ballets as part of New York City Ballet's astonishing Stravinsky Festival. The Festival, brought to the stage by George Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein from June 18 to 25, 1972, became a landmark of twentieth-century music and dance. Dance critic Clive Barnes wrote in the *New York Times*, "There has never been as creative an outburst as this in the history of ballet… What the week did was to focus attention—nationally and internationally—upon the City Ballet as a creative force, and to draw attention once more to the scope and range of the genius of three men, Igor Stravinsky, George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins."

In 1971, following Stravinsky's passing, Balanchine proposed the idea of a festival in Stravinsky's name. The seven-performance festival consisted of 31 ballets, 21 of which were premieres, and four musical works that were not danced. The choreographers of the ballets were George Balanchine, Jerome Robbins, John Taras, Todd Bolender, John Clifford, Richard Tanner, and Lorca Massine. Guest musicians invited to appear with the Company were Robert Craft (Stravinsky's longtime associate who conducted four programs); Walter Hendl (who conducted the program that included *Ebony Concerto*, whose premiere was conducted by him in 1946); Madeleine Malraux, the French pianist who performed on two programs; Joseph Silverstein, concertmaster of the Boston Symphony Orchestra (who played the "Violin Concerto"); and vocal soloists Frances Bible, Elaine Bonazzi, Robert White, and William Metcalf. ■

Stravinsky Festival programs

Sunday evening, June 18, 1972 (benefit gala)

FANFARE FOR A NEW THEATER [Orchestra]
["Fanfare For a New Theater," dedicated to George Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein, had been written by the composer to mark New York City Ballet's move from its previous home, the City Center Theater, to the New York State Theater in 1964. In 1972, the "Fanfare" was trumpeted from a terrace overlooking the promenade of the New York State Theater before each performance as a prelude and invitation to The Festival.]

GREETING PRELUDE (HAPPY BIRTHDAY) [Orchestra]
[Mr. Balanchine chose to open the festival as a "birthday" celebration to the composer, who would have been 90 years old the preceding day.]

FIREWORKS [Orchestra]

*SONATA [Balanchine]

*SCHERZO FANTASTIQUE [Robbins]

*SYMPHONY IN THREE MOVEMENTS [Balanchine]

*VIOLIN CONCERTO [Balanchine]

FIREBIRD [Balanchine/Robbins]

Tuesday evening, June 20, 1972

*SYMPHONY IN E FLAT [Clifford]

THE CAGE [Robbins]

*CONCERTO FOR PIANO AND WINDS [Taras]

DANSES CONCERTANTES [Balanchine]

Wednesday evening, June 21, 1972

*OCTUOR [Tanner]

*SERENADE IN A [Bolender]

THE FAUN AND THE SHEPHERDESS [Mezzo-soprano and Orchestra]

*DIVERTIMENTO FROM "LE BAISER DE LA FEE" [Balanchine]

EBONY CONCERTO [Taras]

*SCHERZO À LA RUSSE [Balanchine]

*CIRCUS POLKA [Robbins]

Allegra Kent, Anthony Blum, and dancers of New York City Ballet in Jerome Robbins' *Dumbarton Oaks*, 1972. Photo by Martha Swope.

Thursday evening, June 22, 1972

*SCÈNES DE BALLET [Taras]

*DUO CONCERTANT [Balanchine]

*THE SONG OF THE NIGHTINGALE [Taras]

CAPRICCIO ("Rubies" from "Jewels") [Balanchine]

Friday evening, June 23, 1972

CONCERTO FOR TWO SOLO PIANOS [Tanner]

*PIANO-RAG-MUSIC [Bolender]

*ODE [Massine]

*DUMBARTON OAKS [Robbins]

*PULCINELLA [Balanchine/Robbins]

Saturday evening, June 24, 1972

APOLLO [Balanchine]

ORPHEUS [Balanchine]

AGON [Balanchine]

Sunday evening, June 25, 1972

[To mark the festival's closing performance, Mr. Balanchine had 40 crates of vodka delivered to the New York State Theater, for free distribution to the public when he proposed a customary Russian toast celebrating "Igor Fedorovitch, friend of ours, Stravinsky."]

*Choral Variations on BACH'S "VOM HIMMEL HOCH" [Balanchine]

MONUMENTUM PRO GESUALDO [Balanchine]

MOVEMENTS FOR PIANO AND ORCHESTRA [Balanchine]

*REQUIEM CANTICLES [Robbins]

*SYMPHONY OF PSALMS [Orchestra and chorus,
with dancers assembled onstage]
[A chorus of 70 was used for "Requiem Canticles" and "Symphony of Psalms."]

** indicates a world premiere*

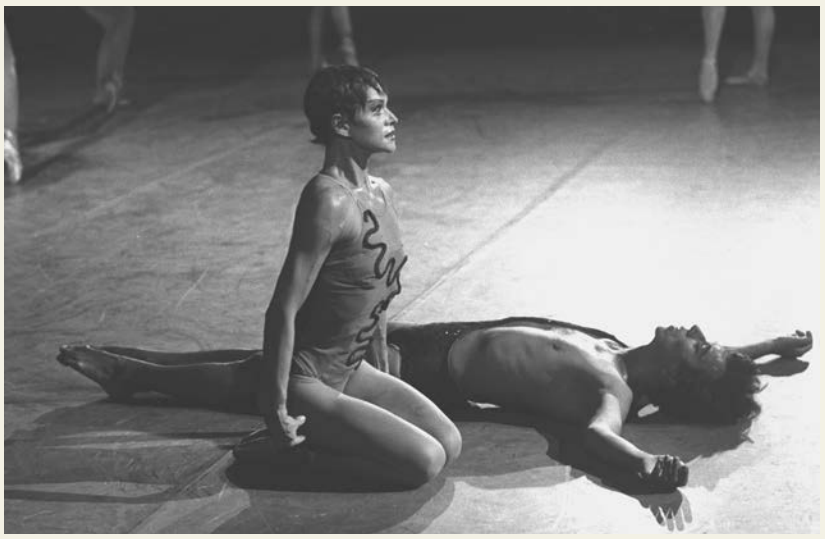
Linda Yourth, rehearsing *Danses Concertantes* with choreographer George Balanchine at New York City Ballet, in preparation for the Stravinsky Festival, 1972. Photo by Martha Swope.

The choreographers of New York City Ballet's Stravinsky Festival, on the terrace of the New York State Theater in 1972: George Balanchine [front]; and [from left] Todd Bolender, John Clifford, Lorca Massine, Richard Tanner, Jerome Robbins, and John Taras. Photo by Martha Swope.

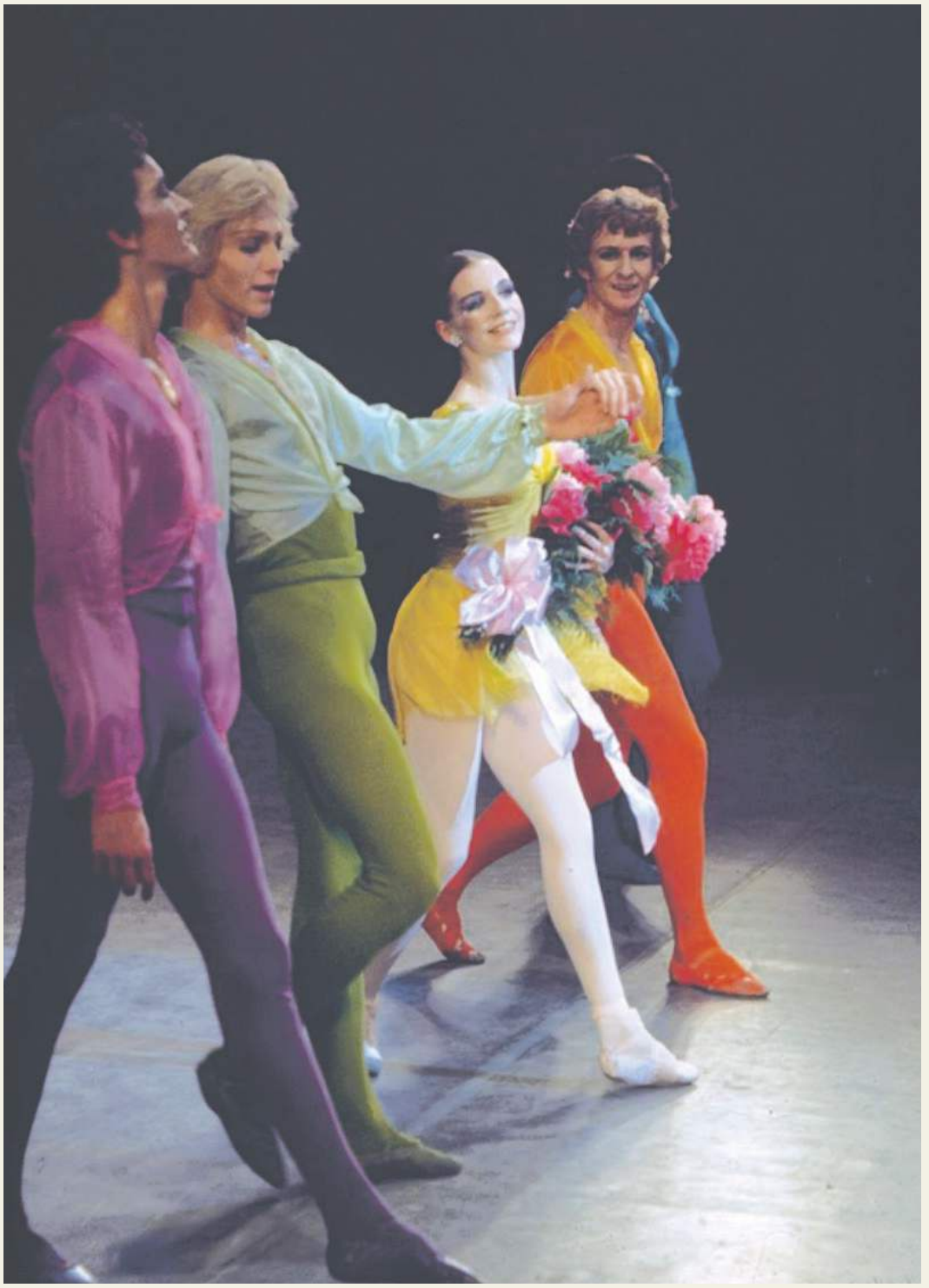
"One of the things that appeals to me tremendously about Stravinsky is what I call the motor. There's a pulse that is attractive to me to dance to, to compose to. There's sort of an inner motor going, that almost carries you. It sort of takes you along with it and it's almost irresistible."
—Jerome Robbins

Jerome Robbins and George Balanchine, performing in the ballet they co-choreographed, *Pulcinella*, at New York City Ballet, 1972. Photo by Martha Swope.

Requiem Canticles, choreographed by Jerome Robbins, at New York City Ballet, 1972. Photo by Martha Swope.



Melissa Hayden and Nicholas Magallanes in Jerome Robbins' *The Cage* at New York City Ballet, 1972. Photo by Martha Swope.



Victor Castelli, Bryan Pitts, Gelsey Kirkland, Bart Cook, and Steven Caras bow after the premiere of Jerome Robbins' *Scherzo Fantastique* at New York City Ballet, 1972. Photo by Martha Swope.

Jerome Robbins' Stravinsky Festival journal

Select entries from the journal Jerome Robbins kept during rehearsals preparing for the Stravinsky Festival in 1972:

Wednesday, March 15
I feel like a short order cook for Stravinsky: 1 Scherzo for a few people for 1st program coming up—+ 1 Requiem for last program. 1/2 an order of Pulcinella.

Wednesday, March 22
Requiem is turning—it's becoming a bit too literal + scroungy. Must try to cool it—classical + pure.

Wednesday, March 29
Spoke to Lincoln about using photos of Stravinsky on front curtain + set. Having different picture each week—+ building the excitement week to week. Watched Dances Concertantes—very good.

Friday, March 31
Scherzo. Ran thru for George—taking out some running around + re-did ending. Will again. What a moment after I ran it for George—our eyes turned to each other's + we searched for 3 seconds—me asking + he asking too—his eyes were old + veined—then later I could laugh at it… O.K. Did it fast + it looks it—+ it is an opener.

FRI SAT SUN MON
OFF. Sick—enough.

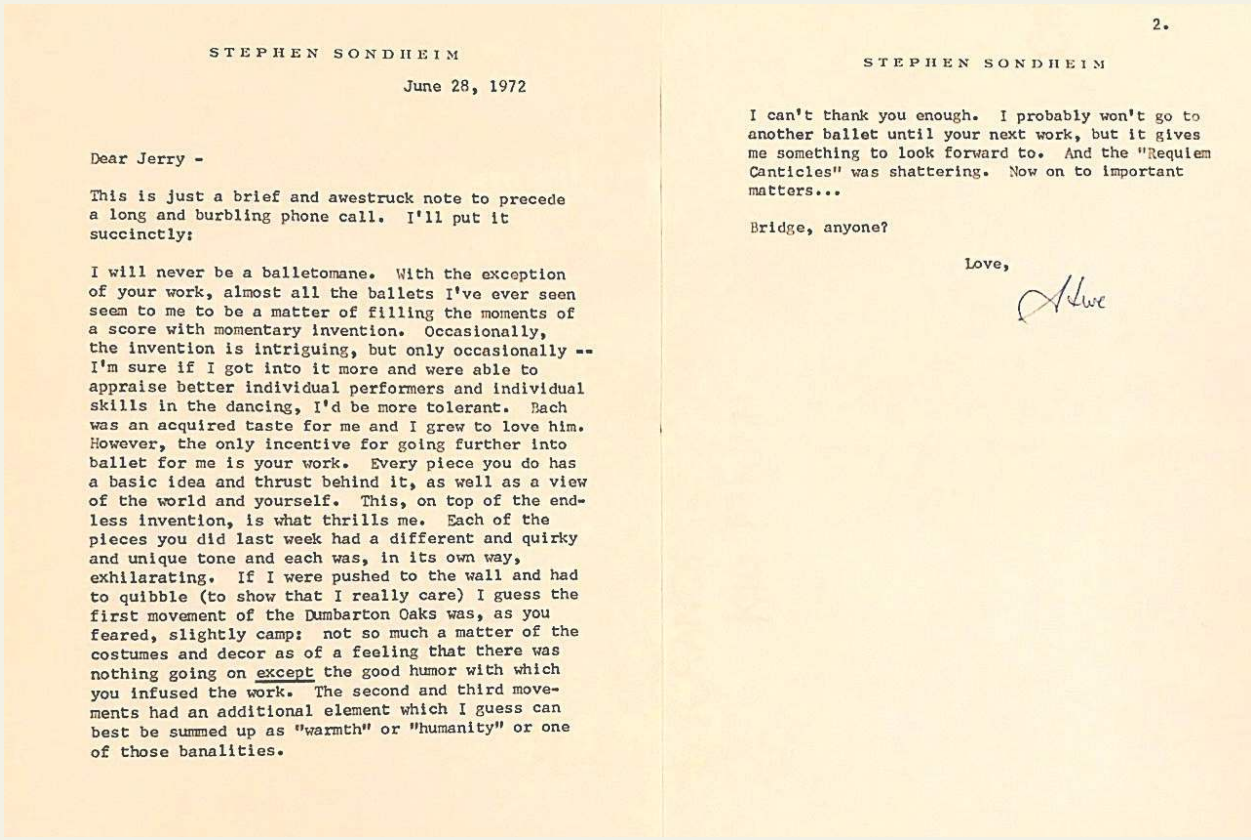
Thursday, April 20
Watched *Danses Concertantes*—it was terrific.
I think the season must show George off terrifically… no one can equal or come anywhere near him in using Stravinsky… it's the most perfect match. We all look like imitators.

Saturday, April 22
Found I worked better when I forgot counts + just danced it.

Saturday, April 29
Coming along, as long as I take it easy + trust technique + give into instinct. Talked to George. I said I thought all our work was so derivative because his work was such an extreme model of perfection of the Stravinsky scores. He said look—everything we do will look alike as the company is trained in a very special style + it will all come out like his style. If I were choreographing for Jack Cole dancers, it would come out looking like Jack Cole. George demonstrates + acts out all he relates. I told him of seeing Goldwyn Follies on T.V. + he enacted his whole episode with Goldwyn. He's fantastic—leaving out lots of words + supplying gestures instead. ■

"George said it could be done. And done with even hell breaking loose. Everyone understood that it was a Herculean task. The thing that we were to achieve was higher than any of the individuals concerned, and I think everybody realized that. And the dancers were fantastic."
—Jerome Robbins

Stephen Sondheim re: Stravinsky Festival



STEPHEN SONDHEIM

June 28, 1972

Dear Jerry -

This is just a brief and awestruck note to precede a long and burbling phone call. I'll put it succinctly:

I will never be a balletomane. With the exception of your work, almost all the ballets I've ever seen seem to me to be a matter of filling the moments of a score with momentary invention. Occasionally, the invention is intriguing, but only occasionally -- I'm sure if I got into it more and were able to appraise better individual performers and individual skills in the dancing, I'd be more tolerant. Bach was an acquired taste for me and I grew to love him. However, the only incentive for going further into ballet for me is your work. Every piece you do has a basic idea and thrust behind it, as well as a view of the world and yourself. This, on top of the endless invention, is what thrills me. Each of the pieces you did last week had a different and quirky and unique tone and each was, in its own way, exhilarating. If I were pushed to the wall and had to quibble (to show that I really care) I guess the first movement of the Dumbarton Oaks was, as you feared, slightly camp: not so much a matter of the costumes and decor as of a feeling that there was nothing going on except the good humor with which you infused the work. The second and third movements had an additional element which I guess can best be summed up as "warmth" or "humanity" or one of those banalities.

2.

STEPHEN SONDHEIM

I can't thank you enough. I probably won't go to another ballet until your next work, but it gives me something to look forward to. And the "Requiem Canticles" was shattering. Now on to important matters...

Bridge, anyone?

Love,

Steve

A letter Stephen Sondheim sent to Jerome Robbins after attending performances of The Stravinsky Festival at New York City Ballet in 1972. From the Jerome Robbins Papers at The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Sometimes, a whip is just a whip…

by Gregory Victor

Jerome Robbins and students from the School of American Ballet in his ballet, *Circus Polka*, at New York City Ballet, 1972. Photo by Martha Swope.

Picasso had his circus period. Although much briefer, so did Stravinsky, Balanchine, and Robbins.

When Igor Stravinsky and George Balanchine first met in 1925, Balanchine was choreographing Stravinsky's *Le chant du Rossignol* for Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. The ballet was the start of a lifelong friendship and many collaborations, which continued after both emigrated to the United States in the 1930s. In 1941, the Ringling Brothers & Barnum & Bailey Circus proposed that Balanchine choreograph a ballet using the circus's famous elephants the following year in New York. Balanchine immediately suggested using the music of Stravinsky.

Their phone conversation:

Balanchine: I wonder if you'd like to do a little ballet with me.
Stravinsky: For whom?
Balanchine: For some elephants.
Stravinsky: How old?
Balanchine: Very young.
Stravinsky: All right. If they are very young elephants, I will do it.

According to Igor Stravinsky, this is how George Balanchine asked him to write the music for the short ballet.

Stravinsky negotiated a decent fee with the Circus for a short instrumental and composed it within a few days. The piano version of *Circus Polka* subtitled "For a Young Elephant"—alluding to Stravinsky's brief phone conversation with Balanchine—was finished on February 5, 1942. Stravinsky called the composition a satire. Indeed, it has a history of witty interpretation. Balanchine choreographed the original *Circus Polka* for fifty elephants and fifty dancers, led by the elephant Modoc and by Balanchine's wife at the time, ballerina Vera Zorina. They all, including the elephants, wore pink tutus when the show premiered at Madison Square Garden on April 9, 1942. Ringling Brothers performed the ballet another forty-two times that season.

When Jerome Robbins chose to choreograph the music for the 1972 Stravinsky Festival, he handled it with a similarly comedic touch. As dance critic Frances Herridge wrote in the *New York Post*, "It was a completely charming bit of nonsense." In the *Los Angeles Times*, Marcia B. Siegel wrote, "Robbins's staging for forty-eight little girls from the School of American Ballet was charming and clever. Maybe the first children's dance I've ever seen that was as humorous as it was cute, and also worked choreographically. The audience demanded an encore."

In 1969, Robbins had returned to New York City Ballet after a twelve-year absence. In his new position, he shared the title of Ballet Master with George Balanchine and John Taras. When he appeared in his version of *Circus Polka* with the young students from the School of American Ballet, he cast himself in the role of Ringmaster, with the student dancers evoking the presence of the elephants. Decked out in a classic circus Ringmaster red jacket, Robbins directed the 48 dancers to perform their amusing configurations by occasionally using a whip for effect.

Although Robbins had used a whip in another work, *The King and I*, in 1951, its use here was entirely different. While the presence of a whip in the story being presented in *The King and I* is meant to disturb—in the end, the King of Siam rejects its barbaric violence and demands its banishment—the whip onstage in *Circus Polka* is rooted in the satire at the core of Stravinsky's composition. It is interesting to note that a whip appeared in yet another Robbins work. The choreographed fantasy sequence that followed "Dreams Come True," a number from the musical *Billion Dollar Baby* (1945), featured a comedic dance which included the passionate and funny use of a whip. The number was recreated by Robbins during the lengthy rehearsal process for his retrospective *Jerome Robbins' Broadway*, but was ultimately cut from the show before it officially opened.

In 1915, Stravinsky included a polka in his "Three Easy Pieces for Piano Duet," which he once said portrayed Ballets Russes impresario Sergei Diaghilev as "a circus-animal trainer cracking a long whip." It's as if Robbins picked up on the idea of the impresario but added an additional layer of satire. In Robbins' *Circus Polka*—especially with Robbins himself costumed as the Ringmaster—questions arise: Is this merely a circus Ringmaster, or is this a ballet choreographer? If this is a choreographer, then does his cracking a whip suggest that perhaps he is not as strong and in charge as he would like to appear to be? Is his cracking a whip an admission of fear of the youngsters that outnumber him under his direction? So much for the legend of the intimidating and powerful Jerome Robbins. It is a theatrical gesture that supports multiple readings, all in the spirit of the music.

Stravinsky composed "Three Easy Pieces" for four hands so that he could teach his children how to play the piano. Similarly, Robbins' ballet employs a theme of instruction to young artists. Indeed, Robbins' works, both balletic and theatrical, show an eagerness to include children in performances. Most significantly, Robbins never failed to treat children onstage with a playful dignity, whether it was in the introduction of the young princes and princesses to Miss Anna in *The King and I*, as each of them took a unique and telling stance before her presence, in the battle of the toy soldiers and the mice in *The Nutcracker*, the Lost Boys of *Peter Pan*, the entertaining young vaudevillians in the musical *Gypsy*, or the School of American Ballet students sharing the stage with him in *Circus Polka*.

The use of a prop whip onstage can be problematic for some of today's audiences. But it is precisely Robbins' knowledge of the power of that image that inspired him to bring it to the stage. Not one to shy away from powerful images in his art, Robbins was always careful to do so skillfully. The prop had various uses and, therefore, multiple possible meanings. When it served to make a necessary point, Robbins presented it with specific staging, sometimes wittily, as is the case with *Circus Polka*. Years later, Miriam Mahdaviani-Goldstone, one of the young dancers in the ballet's premiere, recalled, "No-one got hit by the whip. He was very kind and patient with us."

"Sometimes, a cigar is just a cigar," Sigmund Freud allegedly once said, which might bring to mind another Robbins classic ballet—*The Concert, or, The Perils of Everybody*, with its cigar-chomping husband. It might be a strange quote coming from the father of psychoanalysis, legendary for taking a deeper look at nearly everything. Was he really suggesting that perhaps not everything needed to be viewed through a complicated lens? Of course, discussion about the inclusion of the whip is always welcome. But such a discussion requires appreciating the ballet as choreographed. As part of Robbins' original artistic vision for *Circus Polka*, the only proper way to judge the work is to see it as it was intended to be viewed. The power dynamic onstage, with the Ringmaster and the young dancers, is part of the choreographic jest. Let the evolution be in our act of seeing, not in the diminution of what should be seen. Let us view past ballets as they were, in their time, as a sign that we are capable of understanding them in context and appreciating the multiple possible meanings in our own time. ■

Jerome Robbins' continuing influence

Featuring never-before-seen unit photography, storyboards, costume, and concept designs, and behind-the-scenes photos from Academy Award–winning director Steven Spielberg's first musical, *West Side Story: The Making of the Steven Spielberg Film* is a breathtaking book that chronicles the years of effort that went into bringing the beloved story back to the screen for a new generation. What follows are select quotes found in the book, from a few special friends of the Jerome Robbins artistic family.

Ellen Sorrin (Director, Jerome Robbins Foundation/Trustee, Robbins Rights Trust) Jerome Robbins both directed and choreographed *West Side Story*. His credit actually was "Conceived, Directed, and Choreographed by Jerome Robbins," and it was put in a box on the poster. It really stood out, and he wanted the recognition. He felt a great deal of ownership. But to anyone who doesn't know anything about him, I would say that he was one of the great artists of the twentieth century. I would also say that he created work that is part of our culture, and that anyone interested in America should see his work. Jerry's great gift was the fact that he told stories through choreography. I don't think anyone had really done that before him. And it came very naturally. If you look at the dance numbers in *West Side Story*, they really tell the story. They move the story along.

Rita Moreno (original film version: Anita; new film: executive producer/ Valentina) I met Jerome Robbins on *The King and I*, and it was really an extraordinary experience. He was brilliant. And then later, he asked me if I wanted to go to New York and audition for a play he was making called *West Side Story*. He explained it was a new version of *Romeo and Juliet*, and that I'd be wonderful for it. Yet, when it came down to it, I didn't have the guts to go for a Broadway show. But it was Robbins who told Robert Wise about me a few years later for the movie version. I auditioned for the singing, the acting, and then Jerry said, "You've got to audition for the dancing now. And if you don't cut the dancing, you don't get this part." I was very nervous, and I auditioned with Howard Jeffrey, who was Robbins' co-choreographer [credited as "Dance Assistant" in the film]. He could tell I hadn't danced in a while, but eventually, Jerry Robbins said, "She has a great sense of humor and style, and she is a fast learner." That's how I got the part.

Ellen Sorrin There were a few things that Jerry never wanted to discuss and being fired from the film was one of them. But I found out over the years that a lot of the work he did was already done by the time he was no longer involved. His imprint on the film is still very, very strong. And even though it won him an Oscar, which he shared with Robert Wise for Best Director, it had to have been a very painful time in his life.

Rita Moreno Jerry Robbins was fired by the time we got to the "Mambo" at the gym, and we were all terribly upset. He was very hard on us, but we really felt his absence. There was a palpable difference after he left. Jerry was a dynamic force and presence. There was something about him that radiated tension—some of it negative, and some of it positive. He was very demanding, and he did tons and tons of takes, which is why he was eventually fired. He wouldn't say, "Print it!" Even though the dancers were scared to death of him, they worshiped him.

Ellen Sorrin We taped all of Jerry's rehearsals [when he choreographed *West Side Story Suite* at New York City Ballet]. In one of the rehearsals, he's talking to the Sharks, and he points to the Jets and says, "They live badly. You live worse. I want to see that in your work. When he was rehearsing "America" with the girls, he said to them, "You all have your own stories, you all have your own clothes that you wear. You all have your own experiences. I want to see that in the work." He was always about the characters and went for the narrative. He wanted everyone to have their own motivation.

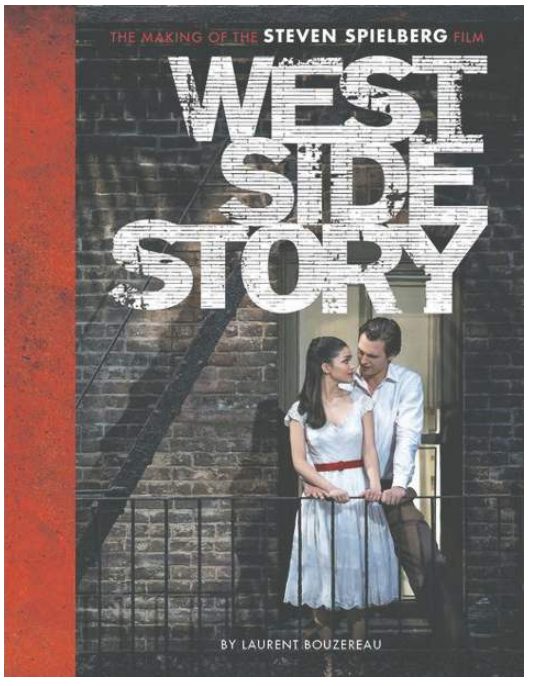
Harrison Coll (Numbers) My parents were both in musical theater. My mom, Susan Hartley, was a singer, dancer, and actress on Broadway, and my dad, Richard Coll, started as a tap dancer on Broadway and later became a filmmaker. He was an avid follower of Jerome Robbins and knew every step of choreography from both the film and Broadway versions of *West Side Story*. He seemed like a Jet at heart. I've actually seen some of Robbins's archival audition notes from an audition that my dad attended for the show *Gypsy*. My dad went by "Ricky" back then—Robbins put a check mark, an "OK," and an A– for singing next to his name! But ever since I was a kid, I remember *West Side Story* music playing at home. Being part of Steven's *West Side Story* production connected me to my father, whom I'd recently lost to pancreatic cancer. He survived for eighteen months before succumbing to the disease—I will never forget how he battled it every day, determined to live like he'd always lived, with gusto and guts.

The entire process of this film from start to finish connected me to him. I remember getting the email about the audition and feeling like I needed to make sure my dad was by my side. So I brought a small vial of his ashes to keep in my back pocket. I'd auditioned many times for the stage, but this was my first film audition. I was nervous at first but also incredibly grounded and ready to give it everything I had. I knew my dad was watching over me, his strength radiating from my left back pocket. Amazingly, I was invited to be a Jet, and I know my dad had something to do with that.

Father's Day happened to fall on the last day of filming "Cool," the song I remember dancing with my dad in my living room as a kid. My dad knew all the choreography, and we would dance the steps to the soundtrack or while watching the movie. He said he learned the steps from Jerry [Robbins]. I treasure that memory of dancing with my dad.

On the set that day, I seized the opportunity to memorialize my father. What better place to honor him than the set of Steven Spielberg's *West Side Story*. I brought a small picture of him, one of his old guayabera shirts, his watch, and a tin of his ashes, and I shared Father's Day with him. I felt him dancing with me. A feeling I will never forget.

After the last shot, when the crew began to close down the set, Justin [Peck], Patricia [Delgado], Craig [Salstein], Ansel [Elgort], Mike [Faist], the other Jets, and I sat in a circle at the end of the pier to thank the universe for the past few days. We all said a little thank-you and took a couple of deep breaths. I took my dad's ashes from my jacket pocket and told everyone about him; who he was and how he was connected to *West Side Story* and how I felt that I needed to release him. I asked if they would help me by singing a verse from "Jet Song." We sang together, taking turns with each verse, starting with Mike singing "When you're a Jet you're a Jet all the way, from your first cigarette to your last dying day." While singing, we made our way over to this perfect little secluded beach that overlooked the harbor and the set perfectly. When we reached the end of the verse we screamed, "When you're a Jet you stay a Jet." With those words echoing into the atmosphere, the sun setting, and the wind blowing as if spirits were flying over our little hideout, I walked to the water, knelt down, and said, "I love you. Rest in peace." I threw the ashes into the air and watched as they flew over the entire set. ■



Ariana DeBose (as Anita), Tanairi Sade Vazquez (as Charita), Yesenia Ayala (as Clary), and David Alvarez (as Bernardo), in Steven Spielberg's *West Side Story*, 2021. Photo by Niko Tavernise/ Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.

Kristie Macosko Krieger on producing *West Side Story* for a new generation

When did Steven Spielberg first mention to you that he was interested in filming *West Side Story*? I have known for a long time that Steven was interested in re-imagining *West Side Story*, but we didn't start seriously exploring the possibility of securing the rights until 2014. We met the Robbins, Bernstein and Laurents estates and Stephen Sondheim with great humility and the respect that such an iconic piece deserves.

Since this movie was a musical, was there much of a learning curve for you? It was a massive learning curve to produce a musical, let alone one where Robbins, Bernstein, Laurents and Sondheim had set such a high bar for us. But we surrounded ourselves from the very beginning with the best of Broadway—from Tony Kushner and our producer Kevin McCollum, to Jeanine Tesori, Justin Peck and Paul Tazewell. We hired Cindy Tolan to cast the film because of her deep expertise in theater, and our cast was made up of mostly stage performers. Between our cast and crew, there are a LOT of Tony Awards!

How important was accuracy in portraying the culture of the Nuyorican characters in this version? There's no denying that *West Side Story* has had a complicated history, especially among the Puerto Rican community. Steven, Tony, and our entire creative team understood from the beginning how important it was to have the Puerto Rican and Latinx communities see themselves represented onscreen. We all felt a responsibility—and recognized the incredible opportunity—to build a new and accurate interpretation of this story, designed for our times.

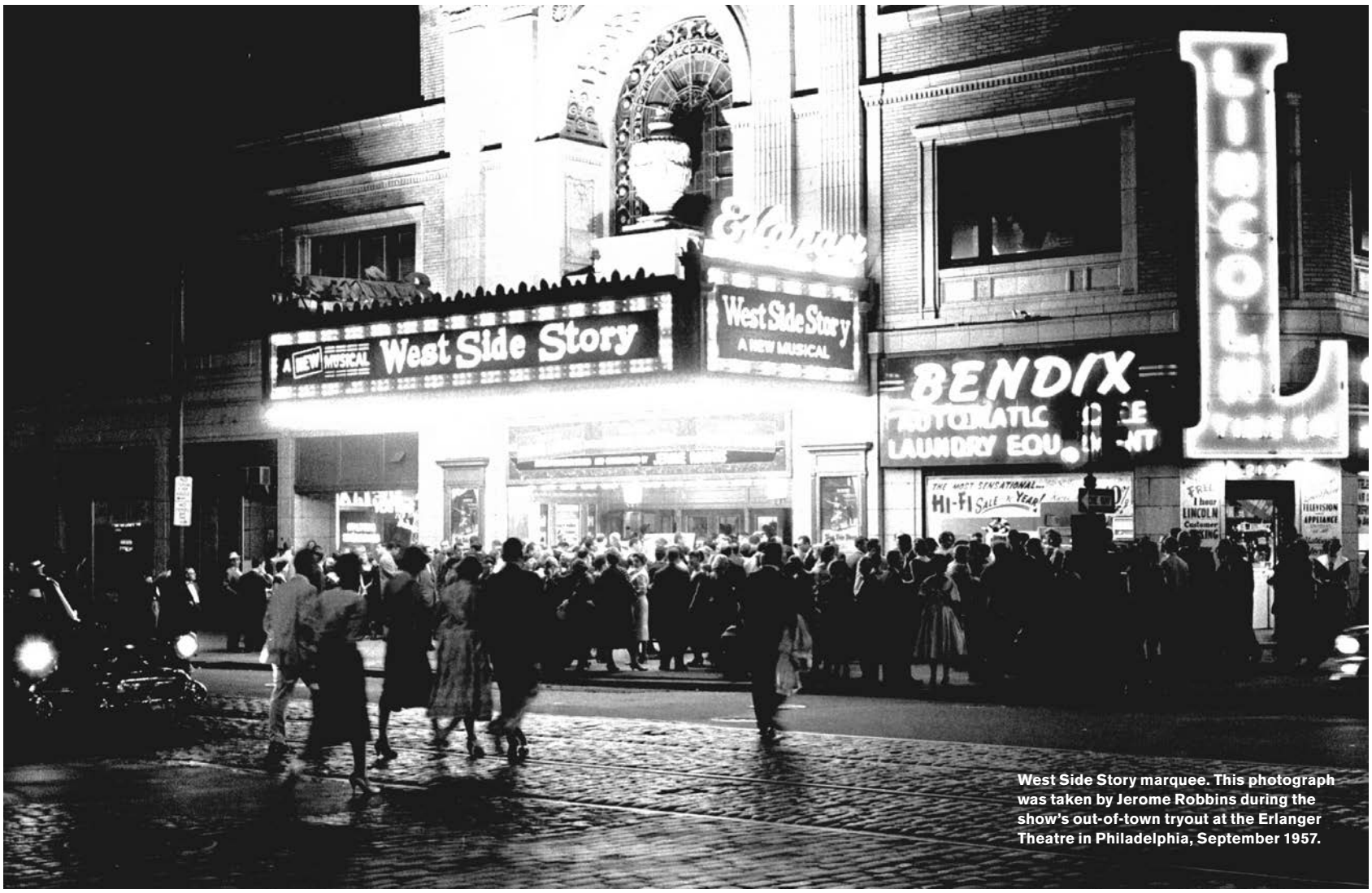
Because our cast is so young and lives in a world very different than the one portrayed in the film, we felt it was important to educate them about the historical and social context in which their characters lived. We set up panel discussions with cultural experts and people who lived in the San Juan Hill neighborhood at the time the story is set. These men and women saw the changes the neighborhood underwent and were able to offer the cast a window into what life was like back then. Many Puerto Rican migrants joined gangs out of sheer necessity and as a form of protection, and that was something we wanted to bring to the forefront of the film. It was exciting to see our cast so engaged and eager to flesh out a realistic picture of who their characters were.

Looking back, was there any particular moment in the whole process of making *West Side Story* that stands out as the highlight? If there's one number from this film people remember, I think it's "Dance at The Gym." It was one of the most ambitious scenes in the film and involved a lot of moving parts and pieces, not to mention we filmed it in a Catholic school gymnasium with no air conditioning! It features almost our entire cast—more than sixty dancers and 150 background actors—and is one of the most important scenes in the entire film. The way the set, the costumes, the dancing and the music came together was nothing short of magical. Everyone's creative contributions – the way Justin translated the iconic Robbins choreography, Janusz's photography, Paul's costumes, Adam's production design, etc.—completely shine through that entire sequence.

How was it having Stephen Sondheim visit the set and the recording sessions? We were beyond honored to have Stephen Sondheim with us on set and in recording sessions. He was a vital contributor to this film, and every one of us treasured our time with him and valued the connection he gave us to Robbins, Bernstein and Laurents as well. He was among the first people who saw the finished film—and loved it! That screening is one I'll never forget. It's bittersweet, because we lost him just days before our Premiere in New York, but what a blessing it was to work with him on this project.

Did your decision to produce the upcoming *Maestro* precede your work on *West Side Story*... Has there been any sort of overlap to your work co-producing both? It was a bit of a happy accident that Steven and I have produced two Bernstein projects in three years. We grew very close with Lenny's children—Jamie, Alex and Nina—during the *West Side Story* shoot, so we're thrilled to be working with them again alongside Bradley Cooper, who is directing, producing, co-writing, and starring in *Maestro*. It will not be a biopic, but a story entirely focused on the complicated love shared by Felicia and Leonard. Believe it or not, we're currently developing a Jerome Robbins project for TV… so, you can say we've firmly planted ourselves in this world! ■

Kristie Macosko Krieger has worked with Steven Spielberg since 1997, starting as his first assistant, and has worked on every one of his films since *Artificial Intelligence* in 2001. With *West Side Story*, she received her third Oscar nomination for Best Picture alongside Mr. Spielberg (previously having been recognized for *Bridge of Spies* [2015] and *The Post* [2017]).



West Side Story marquee. This photograph was taken by Jerome Robbins during the show's out-of-town tryout at the Erlanger Theatre in Philadelphia, September 1957.

"We were just all high on the work…"

The *West Side Story Symposium* with Leonard Bernstein, Arthur Laurents, Jerome Robbins & Stephen Sondheim

On April 18, 1985, a symposium on the creation of *West Side Story* took place at St. Peter's Church in the Citicorp Building, New York City. It was part of a series sponsored by the Dramatists Guild on landmarks in American Theater. The symposium was moderated by Terrence McNally. The complete conversation may be heard at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, in the Jerome Robbins Dance Division [call number *MGZMT 3-3284 JRC]. A transcription ["Landmark Symposium: West Side Story"] appears in *The Dramatists Guild Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (Autumn 1985).

Here is an edited transcription of the conversation between Mr. McNally and the four panelists – Stephen Sondheim, Leonard Bernstein, Arthur Laurents, and Jerome Robbins.

Terrence McNally The four gentlemen I have with me this afternoon, individually have certainly affected the history of the American theater—musical theater, especially—and it's hard to imagine what the musical theater would be like in 1984 without their efforts. I think in our community they are four men we hold in great, great respect, and much love, for all they've given us, and it's a real privilege to have them here today—Arthur Laurents, Jerome Robbins, Leonard Bernstein, and Stephen Sondheim. *West Side Story* is the one time these four extraordinary talents came together and worked together, and that's what we're going to talk about today. What I like to do is start with the germ of that idea, when someone says, "Hey, there's a musical or a play there," up through—in this case—September 26, 1957, which was the night *West Side Story* opened at the Winter Garden Theatre on Broadway. To the best of my knowledge this seed first was in Jerry's mind. If I'm wrong, correct me, but Jerry I'd like to start with you.

Jerome Robbins Okay. I don't know the date, exactly. It must have started in '49. A friend, an actor, was offered the role of Romeo and he said to me, "I don't know about this part. It seems very passive to me. Would you read it and tell me what you think?" At that time, I was working also at the Actors Studio, teaching there, so I applied all my knowledge and said to myself, "If I had to play this, how would I make it come to life?" And I thought, *Oh, there's a wonderful idea here, in trying to make it today.* So, then, I wrote sort of a very brief thing on it and started what I would call "the rounds"—looking for a producer who would be interested and looking for collaborators who would be interested. This was not easy. Producers were not at all interested in doing it, and although I went to Arthur and Lenny, at the time they were interested, but not interested in getting together to do one of these things. So, we put it away. And then, many years later, they were involved in another musical and asked me to join them on it, and I was not interested in their musical, but I did manage to say, "How about *Romeo and Juliet*?" I won them back to the subject, in effect, and that became the beginning.

TM Were Arthur and Lenny the first librettist and composer you approached?

JR Oh yes. I thought these were the best people for it. I think maybe some producer would say, "Why don't you go ahead this way, or go that way?" I thought that there's some way of bringing to the Broadway theater the best of the arts. What I knew about dancing, what Lenny knew about music, what Arthur knew about playwriting could be put together and make a kind of show which, probably, was not as prevalent as it is now. And so, I stuck with trying to get these guys.

TM Okay, and when did Steve get into the picture?

Stephen Sondheim '55. By the time I joined, Arthur had an outline—a three-page outline, single spaced and fairly detailed—and they were looking for a lyric writer.

Arthur Laurents Can I say something, Terrence?

TM Sure.

AL I think all this should be prefaced. Several years ago, Hal Prince wrote his theatrical memoirs—rather prematurely, as it turned out—and he, in that, talked about producing *West Side Story*. The original producer, the one who stuck all the way, was Roger Stevens. Then, later, he was joined by Hal and the late Bobby Griffith, who was a wonderful man. Anyway, I read Hal's recollection, and I called up Steve and I said, "I don't think that's the way it happened." And Steve said, "No." But it didn't. My point is not that Hal was distorting. He was telling it the way he saw it, and I think today each of us is going to tell it the way each of us sees it.

TM Jerry?

JR Leland Hayward was interested in it for a while. Cheryl Crawford was interested in it, very deeply, up to the point where we—all four here—auditioned the show to backers and raised not a cent. Richard Rodgers, we offered it to at one point. I mean there were a lot of producers in it.

SS And Hal and Bobby had turned it down before.

AL Actually, I think it was turned down by every single producer in the theater except Roger.

JR I don't think anyone in the audience should be shocked by that. A fait accompli is one thing, but for a work that is in a state of embryonic procedure—and quite radical at the time, to what was mostly being done—it's not surprising that people said, "I don't know what that's about." They had not heard Lenny's score, they hadn't seen what was going to be written, they hadn't, certainly, seen what was going to be danced, although at that one audition for backers we all got up there and gave everything we could to make it happen.

SS We all performed.

AL It was in a room in an apartment on the East River with no air conditioning and a lot of tugboats.

SS Windows open, and the sound of tugboats. Which was then, subsequently, used in the show, as a matter of fact.

TM Steve, when you got involved with the show, part of the *West Side Story* lore is that Lenny, you were originally going to do the lyrics yourself. Is that—this is your chance to—

Leonard Bernstein This is my contribution to *Rashomon*?

TM Yes.

LB It is really *Rashomon*. First of all, because we are four. We happen to be this Japanese quartet, all of whom seem to recall it slightly differently. And that's as it should be because we are very subjective people in our objective ways, and here we are trying to be objective for your sake. But I think in order to be so, you have to be somewhat subjective and *Rashomon*-ic because that's the only way we can tell our truths to you as a group. As I recall, the origins were indeed in '49. Jerry called up and gave me this idea, and called Arthur at the same time, and said, "Would you come over and let me explain it to you?" As I remember it, Arthur and I were, indeed, quite excited about it. This is the first contradiction of the evening.

JR I don't contradict that.

AL I do.

LB I remember that evening very well. I remember it like yesterday, the evening at Jerry's apartment, because of the excitement. What was different, among many other things, was that it was conceived on the East Side of New York and was a kind of *East Side Story* version of *Romeo and Juliet*, involving, as the feuding parties, Catholics and Jews. The time was the coincidence of the Passover/Easter season, in which feelings in the streets ran very high and there was a lot of slugging and some bloodletting, which seemed to match the *Romeo* story very well, except that this was not family feuds but religious or ethnic oriented feuds. As a matter of fact, Arthur and I were so excited about it that we began to talk about it, and Arthur wrote a couple of sketched out scenes—one of which was a pretty complete first scene, actually.

AL You know, I remember absolutely none of this. My reaction was that it was *Abie's Irish Rose* to music. And that's why we didn't go ahead. Then, by some lush coincidence, Lenny and I were at the Beverly Hills pool. And I remember at that time, the papers were full of juvenile delinquents and gangs, and then we really got excited, and we called Jerry and I think then the whole thing flew.

LB Actually, Arthur, we were sitting by the pool, talking about other things and there was a copy of the *Los Angeles Times* in the deck chair next to us. An abandoned copy, the headline of which said, "Gang Riots In Olvera Street." And this was about Mexicans and so-called "Americans" rioting together. And we both got interested in that. The thing that worries me is that all this is really an answer to a question about Steve, and how he got into it. When we began, I had, madly, undertaken to do the lyrics as well at the music, and there was a certain point—this is now '55, I guess—in which, for two reasons. For one, I was also working on another show called *Candide*, and for another, this musical—*West Side Story*—turned out to be extraordinarily balletic, which I was very happy about, and it turned out to need a tremendously more amount of music than I'd expected, and ballet music, and symphonic music, and developmental music. And I realized, for those two reasons—there were probably more, but those were enough for the moment—that I couldn't do the lyrics and all that music and do them well. And Arthur, when I was ruminating about this one day, said, "You know, last week I was at a party, and I heard a young fellow called Steve Sondheim sing some of his songs, at this party, and—"

AL I must correct that, on behalf of Steve.

SS I'll tell it. I played *Saturday Night* as an audition piece, and then I ran into Arthur many months later at an opening night party.

AL At the opening of *Island of Goats*.

SS That's correct. The Ugo Betti play. With Uta Hagen. Ugo Betti, Uta Hagen. Unbeatable combination. And so, I asked Arthur what he was doing, and he said he was beginning work on this musical and in chatting I said, you know, "Who's doing the lyrics?" And he said, "Gee, we don't have anybody because Comden and Green are supposed to, but they are in California, and they may be tied up with a movie contract, and we have to begin work on it within the week. Would you like to come and play for Leonard Bernstein?" And I said, "Sure," and next day I met Lenny.

LB Well, I freaked out when Steve came and sang his songs for me, and from that moment to this, we've been loving colleagues and friends.

SS A week later, the picture kept Betty and Adolph in California, so I was lucky, and I got the job.

TM Lenny, are any of the lyrics in *West Side Story* your creation, as the show now stands?

LB How do you remember that, Steve?

SS Two lines.

LB (*laughing*) I remember 200, but that's fine.

SS Well, two specific lines. God knows we talked about lyrics a lot. The original ending of "Gee, Officer Krupke" ended with—not the euphemism, but—I guess I'd better not say it. It ended with an Anglo-Saxon expletive. Hal Prince and Bobby Griffith, and one of Roger Stevens' assistants—a woman named Sylvia Drulie—came in to hear it, and she turned pale colors after she heard that phrase. And so, Hal and Bobby drew us aside and said, "Listen, it really is a shock. I mean we know what you're getting out if it." Nobody had ever said a word like that in a musical onstage, and I think only a couple of seasons before, the first expletive that had ever been said on a New York stage was said by Burl Ives in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, so we thought, "Why not take a little liberty with our musical and make it the *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* of the season." And she was so shocked, and Hal was genuinely upset. He said, "Whatever you guys want to write is fine, but she is, after all, a rather sophisticated listener and you may be alienating most of your audience. So, I said, "But what can we do?" And Lenny came up with the line that now stands there, which is to use the man's name as a verb—which is a brilliant solution because it's funny, and at the same time, everybody knows what you're doing, and you don't need the expletive, which in a way would have been out of place anyway, since the rest of the script was written in a kind of patois that Arthur invented. It was not real street talk. Something we can go into that's interesting is that the problem with writing colloquialisms, and particularly slang and argot is it dates so quickly. Arthur knew that if he used any of the slang that

was on the streets in 1955, by the time we got the show on—particularly by the time we got this show on—it would be "23 skidoo," so he made up the patois. "Krup you" is a perfect example of the style of the script. The other line that I particularly remember is the last line of "Tonight"—"sleep well and when you dream, dream of me." I was struggling over that line, and I had written about, oh, maybe forty alternates and I showed them to him, and he said, "Why don't you take that one and join it to that one?" In other words, I had numerous two-word phrases to begin with, and numerous end phrases. And I put them together and, of course, made that line, which is lovely. Those are the two lines I particularly remember.

LB That's very generous of you, Steve.

SS I told you I was going to be generous today.

TM Well, Steve, the other part of the *West Side Story* lore, while we're here, that you can contribute to is, did you write any of the music?

SS Just two lines.

JR I'd like to talk a little about that period, because I think it was one of the most exciting periods in the theater I've ever had. That period of the collaboration, where we were feeding each other all the time. We would meet at Lenny's house, we'd meet at my house, we'd meet wherever we could meet, depending on our schedules. Arthur would come in with a scene. Someone would say, "I think I can do a song on this." I'd supply, "How about if we did this with a dance?" "What if we did this?" "What if we did that?" And there was a wonderful sort of mutual exchange going on, in a very exciting way. We can talk about details—"I did this," "I supplied that"—but the essence of it was that what we gave to each other took from each other, yielded to each other, surrendered, reworked—

LB Stole.

JR —put back together again—all those things, which was of a very important and exciting time. I think that's sort of, in a way, when the collaboration was most fruitful, during that digestive period. And I say that because we got turned down so much, and for so many reasons, that we kept going back to the script all the time. Or, back, not to the script, but to our play and saying, "Well, if that didn't work, I wonder why not? What didn't they like? Let's take a look at it again.

LB Collaboratively speaking, I must say that for me it was one of the most extraordinary collaborations of my life—perhaps the most—in that very sense of our nourishing one another, and feeding, with a generosity on everybody's part that I've rarely seen in the theater.

JR I think what's interesting is that, you know, we, all four, were talking about the creative process. At that time, it's a state of creative bliss. We were all dedicated to making that show happen, with pushes and pulls by everybody, to get to where it was. I think Arthur had the hardest job of everybody, because if you take a Shakespeare play and you're going to convert it to today, music is nonverbal, dancing is nonverbal, and Steve also. And we had nothing to put our work against, while Arthur had that text and Mr. William S there all the time. We could make our poetry out of the dancing, out of the music, out of the lyrics to the music. Arthur had, really, the hellish job and the burden to make his text go along and still communicate some of the poetry, some of the argot, and some of the drives and passions of the time, and trying to match, somehow, with the style that we were creating as we went along. He had the toughest of all of us to try to get down that path.

SS There's another aspect to that. One of the remarkable things about the book is not only that it's so brief, but how much happens in it. It is, after all, a melodrama. Most people think of *Romeo and Juliet* as a romance, but it's a melodrama, and in every scene that there isn't a murder or a gang war, something extraordinary happens. Something that has to be set up, in terms of the plot, and then has to pay off. So, on top of the flavor of the piece, what is remarkable is the compactness of the plotting. The plot is still exciting. It was when Shakespeare took it, and it was the way Arthur retold it. But to do it in as brief a span as this book does is what's remarkable.

LB I was about to give the other example—the Prologue, which, believe it or not, originally had words. And a lot of that extraordinarily instrumental music was sung. It didn't take us long to find out that, that wouldn't work, because you couldn't understand a syllable.

SS It took us one month. That's how long it took to write it.

LB That was when Jerry took over and converted all that stuff to this remarkable thing which is now known as the Prologue to *West Side Story*, which is all done in movement.

AL I remember Jerry asking the question before you started to work on that prologue, and it's the most important question that you can ask at any time about anything in the theater. He said, "What is it about?" And, so, then we had to talk about what it was about, because one of the reasons that he is the most brilliant of all the choreographers we have is that he knows—not only knows, he knows how to do it—is that it has to be about something in musical theater. You just cannot get up and do an abstract dance. And when it's about something, then no one knows better how to make them dance, and move the story.

TM Were most of the big changes made in the writing process or in rehearsal?

SS I think this show probably changed less—it certainly changed less than any show I've ever done—from the first preview in Washington to the opening in New York, with the exception of *Sweeney Todd*, which also had almost no changes in it. We fiddled with the opening number in Washington, and I think Lenny and Jerry fiddled with the second act, the dream ballet.

LB We also fiddled with a couple of extra numbers which never —

SS Yes, which never got in. We'd been writing those in New York. But, on the way to the airport, leaving Washington, I said—after we'd had a very nice run down there—I said, rather, I thought, ingenuously, but I'm afraid in retrospect, arrogantly, to Jerry, "Gee, it's my first show. I wanted to sit up until three o'clock in the morning in smoke-filled rooms and rewrite the second act." And he looked at me with a look of such anger and, in effect, he said, "Just take that back. Don't ever say that out loud. Until you've been through it, you don't know." After that, I had some two o'clock, three o'clock hotel room scenes in subsequent years, and I realized Jerry was right. But the show got changed very little.

TM If I can detour back about the book, I think it was Steve who mentioned some of the language Arthur created. When I reread it, I was very aware of certain words that almost are nonsense, but that make great sense if you read them in rhythm, as street jargon.

LB Frabba-jabba.

TM When did you make this decision to create a whole vocabulary?

AL Right at the beginning. When they get around to telling the Cheryl Crawford story, I remember one of the things she was on my back about, she said she didn't like the book. She said, "No place do they say, 'That's how the cookie crumbles.'"

TM She wanted that in?

AL She wanted that in very badly. I think maybe if I'd put it in, she might have produced it.

TM Jerry, this might be a good place to remind everyone that the Tony Award that year went to *The Music Man*. It's hard to believe now.

SS There was also a letter in the *Herald Tribune* from Meredith Willson, who wrote *The Music Man*, complaining about how musicals should not deal with ugly subjects.

TM And some of the critics were a little appalled, but respectful. In rereading the reviews, they're much better than rumor has it now.

LB Well, the idea of a musical, the first act of which ends with two corpses on the stage as the curtain comes down, was really reprehensible to many people at that time. Even the score itself—I remember Steve and I, poor bastards that we were, trying, by ourselves, at a piano, to audition this score, mind you, for Columbia Records, which was my record company. And they said no. They said, "There's nothing in it anybody can sing. It's too depressing. It's too advanced. Too crazy. There are too many tritones. There are too many words in the lyrics. No one can remember them. Who can sing 'Ma-ri-a'? Nobody can sing that." And they turned it down. They later changed their minds, but that afternoon, Steve, I'm sure, will not forget.

JR I think that people are not here that helped make the show. The scene designer, the costume designer, and the lighting designer. They fed in, and supported us, interpreted for us, enhanced what we were doing. I think that first act finale scene, that "Rumble" set was one of the most beautiful sets. And the same with Irene Sharaff's costumes and particularly, at the time, Jean Rosenthal's lighting.

SS I'd like to tell something about the sets. When we got down to Washington, there had been a mistake made. Oliver had not gotten the right dimensions for the stage, so that when the bedroom set was supposed to roll off in the second act to make room for the dream ballet, which required a totally clear and empty stage, it rolled off and about a third of it didn't roll off because the wing space at the National Theatre was tiny. Being my first show, I immediately had hysterics,

saying, "We can't open! We can't open!" or something like that. And Jerry said, "We have 1500 people coming Monday night, and so we'll just take a saw and we'll saw it in half." And he was more upset than anybody because, after all, it was the moment of the ballet. I mean, he was building the entire scene and music to this moment, and it just didn't work at all because there was a third of a bedroom onstage. I thought he would blow his top. Not at all. He just got a saw—or got Ruth Mitchell to get a saw—and they sawed the set in half, and for the opening night in Washington, half the bedroom went off that way, and half the bedroom went off that way. And that's how to direct a show.

JR A little bit *Rashomon* on that one. The set was supposed to go off, except Oliver designed it not to go off. He designed it so that there would be these arches on either side. The remains of the bedroom set. And I really was pretty furious inside and I just went forward to Oliver and said, "That set has to go off, and you solve it." I didn't get a saw out. I just said, "You solve it. That has to go off." And he did. No saw in hand for me.

LB I like the saw version better.

JR I do too, but it's not true.

TM For all of you, was *Romeo and Juliet* always the source for this show that you kept going back to?

LB It was Jerry's source, and Jerry was our source. So, that's how it happened.

JR I'll tell you what's remarkable about Arthur's book, too, is that one doesn't realize how he managed to follow that story and, sometimes, scenes, as outlined in the Shakespeare play, without the audience realizing it, or critics realizing it. I thought that was a real achievement.

SS The objective that was hardest to achieve was how to find a realistic, contemporary, naturalistic, believable substitute for the whole filter, you know, the potion part of the Shakespearean plot, because how can someone take poison and seem to be dead and become alive again? Eventually, Arthur solved it by the false news that Anita brings when she's raped.

AL Actually, the thing I'm proudest of in the telling of the story is why she can't get the message through. Which is prejudice. Which is right within the theme of the piece. And I think that's better than whoever wrote the story originally in Italy, whoever it was.

LB You were fighting *for* Shakespeare. Strangely enough, you were the most faithful and we finally said, "But why do we have to stick to it at this point?" And then you found the solution. I think while we're toasting absent friends and colleagues, mention really should be made of Roger Stevens because he saved us at, I think the most critical moment, which was the moment just after Cheryl Crawford said, to the four of us, "You have to rewrite this whole thing. Or I don't do it." We all stood up and said goodbye and left, very bravely, all trusting in one another's fortitude, and all went to jelly, suddenly, and said, "What have we done? We have no producer. What do we do now?" And Arthur went into a phone booth and called London, collect. Called Roger Stevens, who was in London and had left his number and said, "If you're in trouble, this is where I'll be." And we were, God knows, in trouble. He called him and he came out of that phone booth saying, "Roger says, 'Whatever happens, keep working. Just keep writing it. I will guarantee everything somehow. Just don't worry about it.'" This was the lifesaver. I can never praise that man enough for that one moment, when he gave us the strength to have the courage of our own, somewhat shaken, convictions.

SS I have two addenda I'd like to add to that. One is that before we got to the phone booth, the Algonquin Hotel played a part because we went in to have a drink and decide what to do, and they wouldn't let us in because Arthur didn't have a tie on.

AL That's why I have it on today. I knew he was going to tell it.

SS I thought, *insult to injury*. I mean our entire lives are going down the drain and they wouldn't let us have a drink. So, we went next door to a place I'm sure all of you know called The Iroquois. The Algonquin is next to The Iroquois, which was a bar, and Arthur did, indeed, get into a phone booth. And the other thing was that I got on the phone that night and talked to Hal Prince and Bobby Griffith. Hal was in Boston, trying out *New Girl in Town*, and he said, "You sound terrible." And I said, "Well, we just lost our show today." And he said, "Why don't you send it to Bobby and me?" And I said, "Because two years ago you said it really wasn't for you." And he said, "Well, you know, I know you've done work on it and I'm anxious to get on to the next show after this one opens." I got one, got up there, and within 24 hours they called and said they would do it. When Hal and Bobby came in on it, we all felt that we had to make quick decisions and do

Carol Lawrence (as Maria) and Larry Kert (as Tony) embrace during the final moments of the original production of *West Side Story*. This photograph was taken from offstage by Jerome Robbins at a performance during the show's out of town tryout in Philadelphia, September 1957.

whatever was required of us. What happened was that the wheels got greased. It got very exciting. Suddenly, when there was this actual deadline, it was right around the corner, and we knew it was eight weeks away. Everything got solved.

TM What are your impressions of the rehearsal period itself, those eight weeks?

JR It was wonderful. I remember we started in a place called the Chester Hale Studios, which is now gone. It was on 56th Street, near Carnegie Hall. It was what you would call a loft above a garage. We had about four weeks there. I think we already started into some of the book, but not too much, and some of the staging of some of the numbers. Also, by the way, I had—we should mention him—the assistance and co-choreography of Pete Gennaro, who did, for the show, most of "America" and did the Sharks' dances in the competition in the dance hall. And also, he was very supportive all the way through.

TM Let's go to opening night in New York. Was that a repeat of Washington?

SS No. The first half hour was pretty dead. The audience, I think, had heard that this was a work of art—capital W and capital A—so they sat there on their hands, as we say, and were very attentive, like children in church. Until "America." At that point they realized it was a musical and they were supposed to be having a good time. From then on, it went very well.

LB The biggest thing I remember from opening night was the set change from the end of the "Quintet"—the ensemble number, "The Jets are gonna…" The set changed *during* the applause, because it was so prolonged, into this remarkable rumble set of Oliver's, and I remember this moment in which the applause was just beginning to dip—you know how you can sense it—and for me this was one of the most magical moments in the theater. That's when I had a sense of it.

TM It must have been quite a night. Are there any last thoughts?

JR When you talk about reviving it. It's been revived over the years. As a director I found something very fascinating. At the time we did the show, the cast understood the material very, very well and very, very deeply, and organically. Somehow it was like they were part of the times. With the recent revival I found that the cast somehow had rather middle-class attitudes, and that it was hard for them to understand the street, the turf, the toughness of the times, the necessity to own something, and I felt that I could never get out of them a real understanding of the material, both from an acting point of view and from a dancing point of view.

TM You mean in a way you didn't have to with the original production.

JR I never had to. It's a time which has passed, you see. ■

Dancers in the original film of West Side Story perform “Cool,” choreographed by Jerome Robbins, 1960. Photo from the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library Digital Collection.

Paul Gemignani: Life and Lessons from Broadway and Beyond

Paul Gemignani is one of the titans of the modern musical theatre industry. He has served as Musical Director for more than 40 Broadway and West End productions since 1971, including *Follies*, *Pacific Overtures*, *Candide*, *A Little Night Music*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Evita*, *Dreamgirls*, *Merrily We Roll Along*, *Into the Woods*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, *Crazy For You*, *Passion*, and *Kiss Me Kate*. Among his many accolades, Mr. Gemignani received the 2001 Tony Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Theater, and in 2011 he was inducted into the American Theatre Hall of Fame.

A biography by Margaret Hall, *Gemignani: Life and Lessons From Broadway and Beyond*, has been published by Applause Books and is now available. What follows is a recent conversation between Ms. Hall and Mr. Gemignani, focusing on his memories of working with Jerome Robbins on *Jerome Robbins' Broadway* (1989–90).

Margaret Hall Can you tell me about the first time you met Jerome Robbins?

Paul Gemignani Steve [Sondheim] called me and said, "Jerry Robbins is going to call you. He's got a project he's interested in, and I've recommended you." I said, "Great." I was doing the original production of Into the Woods at the time. I was invited to meet him at his house. I was nervous. This was big time theater royalty. I had seen a lot of his work and I thought he was brilliant. We had a very nice conversation. I left and I thought, *Well, I don't know*. He didn't tell me that I had the job. About a week later, the phone rang, and it was him asking me to come to a meeting. So, I thought, Oh, okay. And I had the job. Nobody ever said, "You have the job." That was our initial meeting, but he'd seen my work.

MH How did he first introduce the idea of *Jerome Robbins' Broadway* to you?

PG He told me in that meeting what he had in his head. He asked if I was up for a workshop—"Yes," and if I had ever done a workshop—"Yes." I knew it was going to be a compilation of his work, a lot of which, on Broadway, I didn't know. I knew that *West Side Story* was going to be in it, but I didn't know *Fiddler on the Roof* was going to be in it. I didn't know *High Button Shoes*. I'd never heard of it before. I love it, now that I know it, but I didn't know it at the time. Then, we got into meetings with the dance captain team—Cynthia Onrubia, Jerry Mitchell, and Victor Castelli—and they were all exquisite. And it was, as with all the people that I've ever met in Jerry's generation, a total collaborative situation. He was very nervous about Lenny's music, and we had to calm him down about wanting to change it—meaning, "Let's just change it and see what he does." I kept saying to him, "What's he going to do? He's going to scream and say, 'Don't change it!' So, we don't change it. But if we don't change it, then how are you going to do what you want to do?" And so, he would. Scott Frankel was the rehearsal pianist, and he wrote most of the changes. Pamela Drews was another pianist. Scott was more of a writer, but he played the piano a lot. That's how we worked, but it was slow going. Basically, he told me what the idea was, but until we got in the room with everybody—I don't mean dancers, I mean the creative team—we didn't really find out what was in his head.

MH He was really doing something that hadn't been done before. Bob Fosse had done Dan*cin'*, but that's very different than recreating numbers.

PG D*ancin'* is just dancing. It's exactly what it is. It's not making a through line, which why he eventually hired Jason [Alexander] to write stuff, because without it, nobody knew what was going on. We did, but no one else did. But that was late in the game.

MH Yes, it took a while to find Jason.

PG It took a while to find Jason and it took a while to find that he could write his own material. Jerry was totally respectful to all of us. Always. He listened to our suggestions. I never felt I couldn't say anything to him. People in that position don't want people lauding over them all the time. They want somebody to tell them the truth. If they're wrong, sometimes it's hard to say, "Sorry, but I don't agree with that." "Why not?" "Because…" But you have to be able to do that. When I was hired to do something, I figured that they wanted to hear my opinion. Even sometimes when they didn't.

MH You probably auditioned every dancer in the city.

PG Not in the city—in the world. It was endless. The music department in a dance show, if you allow it to be, is always second class, second citizen. I did say to him, "I know dancing comes first, but they have to sing. They have to have enough chops that I can deal with it, so that it doesn't sound like what we did was hire a bunch of dancers who couldn't sing." And he looked at me and smiled. I remember that. Dancers at that time, a great dancer, nobody ever hired them to sing.

MH The idea that everybody had to be a triple threat wasn't really a thing yet?

PG No. Not at all. If you danced, you danced. If you could sing, you'd sing. If you couldn't, you moved your mouth and didn't make any noise. This was the game. I never bought that game. "You have a voice—sing! It sounds great!" And what happens to people, when you tell them that, is suddenly they can sing, because they're not afraid. I'm not going to say that you're going to be in the opera, but with a group of 40 people, you won't notice them singing. And if I got a dancer who was overzealous, I'd just calm them down, in terms of, "Don't sing so loud. I'd like to hear the rest of the people." Jerry respected other people's talent. He knew when something was good or bad. He knew when the orchestra was functioning correctly. I don't think I've ever worked with a choreographer who knew music the way he did. He'd say, "the clarinet sounds funny." That kind of thing. "What kind of claves are they using?", he asked me once in "America." I said, "I have no idea. Why?" He said, "They sound hollow." I said, "They're supposed to sound hollow." I had to take them out of the pit, in front of him, and play them myself, and show him. I said, "We can mute them a little bit. Do you like that?" "Yeah. Play them like that. You play them." "No," I said, "I'm not going to play them. He's perfectly capable." That kind of stuff.

MH What else can you tell me about the process?

PG I think we had a week of pre-production, where he had Cynthia, Jerry, Victor, and a couple of other dancers doing all the steps for all the numbers he was putting together. There was no script at that time. Yet. After those basic staff meetings, we went into what seemed like most of the 1970s with auditions.

MH Did anything funny happen at the auditions?

PG There's nothing funny about it. I can tell you that right now. Not a single thing. The casting director, the dance captains, and I did a lot of eliminating first—before Jerry would come in. If they couldn't do the basics, they weren't asked back. Then, 25 people would come in the room—this was done at the 890 Broadway Studios—and the dance captains would teach them combinations. Always *West Side*. Some girls learned "Charleston"—not all of it, but enough of it, and a few other things. And then, finally, Jerry would come in for a big day. After all the dancers had passed—in other words, after he had all the dancers he was really interested in—I got them to sing. And I gave them grades—A, B, C, D, F. He'd turn over a card and he'd see a D there, and he'd say, "They can't be that bad." And I'd say, "You want to hear?" Most of the time he'd take my word for it. Once in a while, with a dancer he really, really liked, but who couldn't sing at all, he would say, "Let me hear them sing." So, they'd sing, sort of. And they'd

go out of the room, and I'd look at him, and he'd say, "You're right." And I'd say, "Well, if you really need them, I'll make it work." A lot of people had never sung before. But in that show, everybody had to do everything.

MH One of the great things about the Jerome Robbins' Broadway company was that every single person onstage was sort of a star in their own right. I think about someone like Mary Ann Lamb, or Donna Marie Asbury.

PG Absolutely.

MH You just want to watch them.

PG That's right. You couldn't take your eyes off the stage. You need leaders in the theater that know this and know what buttons to push, even if sometimes they're not comfortable. I don't think the theater should be comfortable. Not all the time.

MH What would you say was the most difficult number for you as a conductor in *Jerome Robbins' Broadway*?

PG I think the *West Side Story* suite, because it's so complicated in the way it was set up, and the way it jumps from number to number, even though it's telling a story. Nothing else was as hard. When you ask what was hard, I'd say Act One! Every production number, for an hour, take a 15-minute break, and then the rest of every big production number for an hour.

MH If you're doing, say, *The King and I*, all of the dancers can focus their energies on getting through "Small House of Uncle Thomas." But if you're doing *Jerome Robbins' Broadway*, you need to do *High Button Shoes*, and *On the Town*, and all these other sequences before you even get there. And it's not like there are long book scenes in between the numbers, where you can catch your breath.

PG That's right, and I think that's why we did so many run-throughs.

MH And always ending with *West Side Story*.

PG Always.

MH So many stories, when I've talked to the dancers on this show, they hated him during the rehearsal process because everyone would be exhausted at the end of the day, and Jerry would say, "O.K., we're doing the West Side Story suite now." But you know what? By the time rehearsals ended, they had the stamina to get through it.

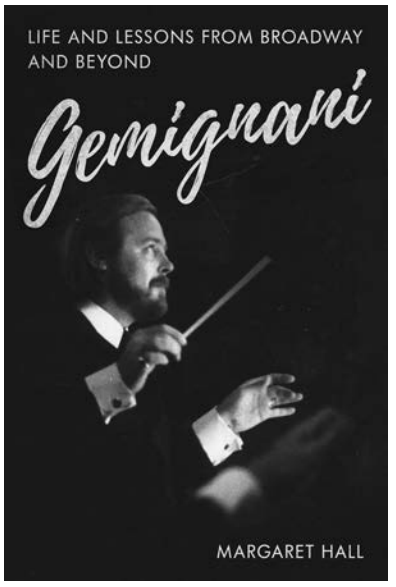
PG They could have danced it five times in a row. And it got better, and better, and more natural, and stronger. They couldn't see that. We could. I think the thing that made everybody nuts is that he never said, "I'm doing this for a reason." He never explained himself. It was just, that's what it was. Jerry said, "We're doing it." Once you got in that company, everybody realized, no matter how hard it was, they were in something special, and it was never going to happen again.

MH When you think back, what lessons did you take from working with Jerry?

PG Well, he literally gave me confidence to stick to what I believe in, to never accept second best. To not assume that this is the best I can do, or the best that somebody I'm working with can do. And to believe that the more thrilled and satisfied I am with something—say, a number—all the more pleasure it will be to the people that we are showing it to. But also, how much more fulfilled you feel when you approach it that way, as opposed to saying, "Yeah, it's another show, it's a Tuesday night, let's get it over with." I've always been somebody who starts new every time I step onto the podium. It's a different night, a different show. He gave me confidence in my own belief to treat everything as if it's the first time it ever happened, with that kind of energy, and with that kind of enthusiasm. With that kind of dedication. ■

Paul Gemignani and Jerome Robbins, with Leonard Bernstein and assistant music director Scott Frankel at the piano, rehearsing for *Jerome Robbins' Broadway*, 1989. Photo by Martha Swope, ©The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Select excerpts from *Gemignani: Life and Lessons from Broadway and Beyond*



1.

What Is a Music Director?

In the musical theatre, there are few positions more elusive than that of the music director—a critical piece of the creative team, they oversee the music in a musical to both carry out the composer's vision and collaborate with the performers onstage and in the pit to create a cohesive production. Many of the decisions regarding the score of a show are made by a music director, and they are often the member of the creative team who stays with the show furthest into its run, with composers, directors, and choreographers moving on to new projects after opening night. They regularly act as conductors for the shows on which they work, clocking in and out eight times a week alongside the performers, stagehands, and pit musicians, and they participate in the initial casting.

Their work, while incredibly important to the structure and success of a show, is regularly misunderstood by the industry at large. Considered by some to be the equivalent of a human metronome, their talent and insights can be overlooked by those who do not work with them directly. The Tony Award for Best Conductor and Musical Director was discontinued in 1964, and their efforts in the theatre have been left almost entirely unrecognized by the public ever since.

Paul Gemignani, whose life you are about to unpack, is widely considered to be the most successful music director living today. He is certainly the most awarded. With forty-two Broadway credits and sixteen films to his name, Gemignani has received a Primetime Emmy Award for Best Music Direction, a special Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Musical Direction, and a Lifetime Achievement Tony Award from the American Theatre Wing. He was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from the Manhattan School of Music in 2003 and inducted into the American Theatre Hall of Fame in 2011. And yet, even the most curious musical theatre aficionado is likely to know very little about the man who brought industry favorites such as *Sweeney Todd*, *Crazy for You*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, *Dreamgirls*, *On the Twentieth Century*, and *Into the Woods* to the stage.

He is something of a shadow, haunting the staves of sheet music strewn throughout rehearsal rooms, libraries, and concert halls across the world. Resistant to being photographed, he exits a room when a camera enters. To strangers, he is a burly bear of a man, imposing and impressive, with strong hands and ever-present tinted glasses. To those who know him, he is a gregarious and warm figure, with a glint in his eye as he slides a moment of wit in between the stories of a sage. He is deeply private, with a storyteller's heart.

When Paul began his career, he had no intention of working in the musical theatre. Becoming a music director was something that had never crossed his mind, until it was suddenly in front of him. Fifty years later, he stands as the looming figure at the podium, hands aloft and heart open. When he began his career, he had few examples to turn to; now, with this book in hand, we hope that his experiences will influence and inspire the next generation of music directors, many of whom do not know what lies ahead. ■

2.

For all of the fights and fears, Jerry had deeply treasured the time the company had spent in the rehearsal studio. After so many years away from Broadway, he had finally come home and had been able to relive, in some small way, the period of work that had come to define his legacy for all time. The theatre had changed drastically since he had first stepped foot onstage in 1938 as a member of the ensemble of *Great Lady*. *Jerome Robbins' Broadway* represented the turning of the generational tide—Jerry was going out with one giant burst of light, with the sixty-two performers in the show holding the keys to how he would be remembered. For all of his pain and antagonism, Jerry had never wanted to be a monster. His temper had haunted him his entire career, but in spite of his worst behavior the company had come together to make something beautiful. And now, he faced his final big Broadway opening night. It wasn't only the rehearsal process for *Jerome Robbins' Broadway* that was ending—it was the end of Jerome Robbins the man on Broadway. He wasn't crying out of worry that the show wasn't going to succeed. He was crying out of recognition that after fifty years, his journey on Broadway was complete.

When the curtain rose at the Imperial Theatre, it was too much fanfare. In an industry that was struggling under the immense loss of the AIDS crisis, *Jerome Robbins' Broadway* was a welcome reminder of the golden age of Broadway. For many people in the community, the show that had stoked their love of musical theatre was a Robbins show, and now numbers that had been thought lost to time were suddenly alive again, exactly as Robbins had intended them.

They became one of the hottest tickets of the season and won six Tony Awards, including a Best Actor statuette for Jason Alexander, and Best Musical. When the Drama Desk Awards came around, Paul received a phone call telling him to attend the ceremony itself. Paul had never been one for award shows and tended to skip them if he wasn't involved in a performance that was happening, but they pressed him to come for one key reason—they were giving him the Drama Desk Special Award. Their equivalent of a lifetime achievement award, it is an annual prize given to people who have had a significant impact on the New York theatre scene.

Paul was surprised for several reasons—for one, he associated lifetime achievement awards with people who had retired, and he was nowhere near slowing down. The idea of receiving an award for his work had never come up before—music directors were, across the board, not recognized by any of the main theatrical award ceremonies. The Tony Award for Best Conductor and Musical Director had been discontinued in 1964, before Paul had ever come to New York, and he had swallowed the fact that the only public recognition he would get would be if Sondheim won for Best Score, when he would mention his music director and orchestrator by name in his speech. The Drama Desk Special Award was the first significant tip of the hat that Paul had received from the Broadway establishment at large, and he proudly accepted it beside Jerome Robbins, who also received a Special Award for his imprint on the theatre.

Robbins' legacy had officially been cemented as legendary, and the company prepared for a long, exhausting run. The production stage manager, Beverley Randolph, would purchase a massive bottle of ibuprofen at the start of each week, and by Wednesday it would be half empty, with every member of the company in a significant amount of pain from start to finish. Under significant physical stress, the company still had an immense amount of fun. ■

Theodore S. Chapin honored with the Floria V. Lasky Award

In October 2021, the directors of The Jerome Robbins Foundation honored Theodore S. Chapin, long-term President and Chief Creative Officer of The Rodgers & Hammerstein Organization: A Concord Company, with the Floria V. Lasky Award in recognition of his invaluable contributions to the cultural landscape of New York City. Ms. Lasky's daughters, Emily Altman, President of The Frederick Loewe Foundation, and Dara Altman, Chief Administrative Officer and Executive Vice President at Sirius XM Radio, presented the award to Mr. Chapin at a reception in New York City.

Theodore S. Chapin was chosen by the Rodgers and Hammerstein families to run their office, which he expanded into the Rodgers & Hammerstein Organization, responsible for management of the copyrights created by Richard Rodgers and/or Oscar Hammerstein II, as well as the representation of other extraordinary musical artists. Ted was also the co-founder of the Encores! series at City Center and producer of the Musical Theater Lab. His book *Everything Was Possible: The Birth of the Musical Follies,* based on his experience as the production assistant on the original Broadway production of the musical *Follies*, was published by Alfred A. Knopf. He serves on the boards of Goodspeed Musicals, New York City Center, The Kurt Weill Foundation (chairman), and The American Theater Wing (co-chair).

After representing Jerome Robbins for more than 50 years, Floria V. Lasky (1923-2007) continued to serve as executor of his estate, President of The Jerome Robbins Foundation, and Trustee of The Robbins Rights Trust. Over the half-century of their association, Ms. Lasky became and remained Jerome Robbins' lawyer and advisor, his steady counselor, and his fiercest champion. Though she was an "accidental entertainment lawyer," Floria V. Lasky's profound contributions to theater and ballet are with us today.

During the luncheon, Emily Altman, Daniel Egan, and Anika Chapin spoke of Mr. Chapin's remarkable career in the theater.

Emily Altman (President of the Frederick Loewe Foundation)

In 1971, a college student learned from a brilliant songwriter, a gifted producer-director, an innovative choreographer—and a complex show—that *everything was possible.* And in the fifty years since, Ted Chapin has proved that it's true—that with intelligence and imagination and, as Floria just told us, integrity, just about everything, even the most improbable thing, *is* possible. At least in the theater.

Consider just a few…

According to *Forbes* this past June, the Rodgers & Hammerstein music catalogue is now the third most valuable music catalogue in the world. Just behind the Beatles and Michael Jackson. And ahead of Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, Elton John, Billy Joel, and Taylor Swift.

The 2019 video of Ariana Grande's hit version of "My Favorite Things"—she, loaded with bling and bathed in pink light—has been watched over a billion times. That's a billion people, give or take, in the second decade of the twenty-first century humming the same melody Mary Martin sang on the Lunt-Fontanne stage over half a century ago (without pink gels and wearing a simple novitiate's uniform). Improbable? Absolutely. Brave and innovative? Unquestionably.

And as far back as 1997, a remake of *Cinderella* on TV—with groundbreaking color-blind casting and a controversial, feminist angle—drew an audience of 60 million viewers, won seven Emmys, and eventually became one of the most-watched musicals in TV history. Innovative? Ahead of its time? Absolutely.

Encores! at City Center is an ongoing treasure. So is *Lyrics and Lyricists* at the 92nd Street Y. The Tony and Academy Awards for R&H shows are countless.

The common denominator is, of course, Ted Chapin. "[W]e just kept moving forward," he has said. And so, he has. Brilliantly, innovatively, with obvious modesty, with grace, and with generosity.

In fact, as the person who manages "that other musical theater team"—Lerner & Loewe—along with my Lerner counterpart, I deal with my awe and envy by asking Ted for lots of advice. And he's always happy to answer.

My mother, of course, got it right. Ted, you *are* a "true man of the theater." And you are a gift to us all. Thank you.

Daniel Egan (coordinator of the Shen Curriculum for Musical Theater at Yale University)

The co-mingled knowledge, integrity, and delight everywhere apparent in Ted's career has also provided the next generation of theater makers with a template for how great works of art can exist in a changing world. Ted's openness to new interpretive possibilities in the R & H canon is legendary and has helped these works find new relevance and new audiences in successive generations. Needless to say, this is good for both the art and the business of theater.

Recent productions like *Oklahoma!* at Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Bard, and then St. Ann's Warehouse and Broadway point to new ways of understanding the embedded vitality, continued relevance, and theatricality of works we might otherwise too quickly dismiss as belonging to another era. The fact is, these shows are well constructed, well considered, and well crafted—and like all great works of art, they endure because successive generations can approach them as new, and in the process, uncover new ways to understand their impact on our cultural life.

Ted Chapin's career is a testament to finding something you love and then investing it with your whole being—heart, soul, skill, and always, delight. All of us who love the American Musical Theater have Ted Chapin to thank for the continuing relevance of musical theater as a part of the New York Cultural landscape.

Anika Chapin (artistic associate at Goodspeed musicals, accomplished dramaturg and literary manager specializing in musical theater)

I know from talking to so many people who have been inspired by his career, or his book, or by a conversation they had with him, that I am not the only one who has had their lives shaped by Ted Chapin. And specifically, by his deep and true appreciation for this art form and this field. So, lucky theater, to have such an advocate. And lucky us, who get to be inspired by him. And lucky me, specifically, to have such an inspiration as my Dad. ■

Allen Greenberg (Director, Jerome Robbins Foundation; Trustee, Robbins Rights Trust), Gregory Victor (Editor of the Jerome Robbins Foundation newsletter), Christopher Pennington (Director, Jerome Robbins Foundation; Trustee, Robbins Rights Trust), and Ellen Sorrin (Director, Jerome Robbins Foundation; Trustee, Robbins Rights Trust) at the Floria V. Lasky Award presentation, 2021.

2021 NYPL Jerome Robbins Dance Division

Dance Research Fellows

Tommie-Waheed Evans
HOME

Referencing human rights as radical performance, Tommie-Waheed Evans explores the discomfort, abandonment, and strife of segregation and social injustice through the voices of African Americans and LGBTQ people in his project *HOME*. Evans is a queer black dance maker whose work explores blackness, spirituality, queerness, and liberation.

Petra Kuppers
Crip/Mad Dramaturgies

Petra Kuppers' research seeks to guide future researchers to new ways of approaching dance and disability, by working directly with disabled (crip) artists and (mad) artists, or people who identify with and reclaim these labels. Kuppers is a disability culture activist, a wheelchair dancer, and a community performance artist who creates participatory community performance environments.

zavé martohardjono
TERRITORY

zavé martohardjono researches documentation of folk and contemporary Southeast Asian, Iranian, and First Nations dance-theater and ritual dance that tells stories of community self-preservation in the midst of genocide. martohardjono is a queer, trans, Indonesian American artist who uses de-colonial and anti-assimilationist dance, ritual, and multimedia practices to make work that contends with the political histories our bodies carry.

Ariel Nereson
Plague Dances: Revisiting Bill T. Jones' AIDS Archive in the Time of COVID

Ariel Nereson brings together ideas and practices from Bill T. Jones' and Arnie Zane's choreography, critical race theory, and queer studies in order to make visible the ongoing contributions of queer artists of color to reimagining collectivity. Nereson is a dance scholar, educator, and practitioner whose research considers the relation of performance histories to practices of racial violence and white supremacy in the United States.

Jason Samuels Smith
Digging Deeper

Jason Samuels Smith challenges the current tap canon by seeking alternate resources to surface an unwritten history in tap. Samuels Smith is a tap dancer, choreographer, and performer who promotes respect for tap dance as an ambassador for tap around the world.

Huiwang Zhang
Towards a Democratic Body: Documenting the Creative Processes with the Bill T. Jones/ Arnie Zane Company

Huiwang Zhang draws on Bill T. Jones' and Arnie Zane's collaborative dance making in the '70s and '80, to consider how a movement vocabulary is built through an active doing and thinking process to create a democratic body. Zhang uses choreography to give voice to carefully structuring an alternative history from the personal and private stories of the individual.

Last year, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts' Jerome Robbins Dance Division 2021 class of Dance Research Fellows explored the complex relationship between dance and democracy. Each fellow received a stipend and a research period (from July 1 to December 31, 2021) to complete their work. The fellows also enjoyed the invaluable assistance of the Dance Division's curatorial and reference staff throughout the duration of their fellowship. In January 2022, the Fellows showcased the outcome of their research in a presentation at a day-long symposium, which served as the culmination of the fellowship.

The Jerome Robbins Dance Division Dance Research Fellows was created in 2014 to support scholars and practitioners engaged in graduate-level, post-doctoral, and independent research using the division's unmatched holdings. The 2021 round of the Dance Research Fellows was made possible through the generosity of the Anne H. Bass Foundation, The Evelyn Sharp Foundation, the Geraldine Stutz Trust, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, and the Committee for the Jerome Robbins Dance Division.

“Tuning with Architectures of Care,” from Petra Kuppers’ presentation, *Crip/Mad Dramaturgies*. Photo by Petra Kuppers.

The Crip/Mad Archive Dances

Petra Kuppers

In 2021, still in the middle of the ongoing COVID pandemic, I had the honor to be a dance research fellow in the Jerome Robbins Dance Division of the New York Public Library. I went into the archive to look for my ancestors. I searched for disabled and mad people, for the ways labels like “handicapped,” “disabled,” “crip,” “psych,” “mad,” and more, travel and intertwine, shift spaces, and multiply in library cataloging systems, in the words of people describing one another, describing themselves. I used diving and divining methods to get to my subjects: my search was not methodical—more like an underwater drift, lulled by the light flickers of old videos, ancient TV footage, and films. I followed rumors, associations, asylum garden architects, dance therapy classes, even filmic ballet dreams.

I worked on the Crip/Mad Archive Dances, on dancerly, active, choreographic ways of finding traces of disability in the dance archive. I chose my poetic and drifting methods because regular searches are not often fruitful—even while some of my disabled dance brethren have now made it into mainstream archives, we are still too few and far between. Many of my crip/mad comrades are not cataloged in the archive at all, and some still choose, due to stigma, not to list disability, psych, or HIV/AIDS status in their biographies.

Even in 2021, a straightforward archival search on dance and disability did not get me very far. Similar to researchers in many other cultural archives—where people keep dancing alongside and under the radar of dominant ways of thinking what “dance” is supposed to look like and where it is supposed to happen—in disability culture searches I often need trickster methods to find what I am looking for. This is true even when disabled people are out about their status. The world is ableist, and many people, from funders to producers to archivists, try to avoid words like “disabled,” “psych survivor,” or “mad,” and use euphemisms or silence to make us “regular” dancers. And that means, unfortunately, that we become unfindable.

My reasons for this search were not archival completeness—somehow restoring the usually neglected, underfunded, and disavowed dance practices of disabled people to some shiny pedestal of public respectability. My reasons grew out of a longing for ancestry and lineage, and out of a longing for ritual acknowledgment, for the chain of embodied transmission that is the central archival/reportorial function of dance memory—long before anything gets into an actual physical (video, photo, criticism) archive. What fuels my work in the archives as a dance practitioner is my belief that we can restore moments of generational influence. We can acknowledge changes in the practices of disability dance, and we can touch in with physical presences across time as we nourish the disability dance scene now, in the present, and into the future.

At the end of each of my archival days at Lincoln Center, I called together disabled choreographers, dancers, and their allies for evening meetings outdoors, away from the shimmering lights of video screens. We moved with the embodied gestures I found inside the archive, shared stories, and savored the chain of transmission and memory. We began each of these Crip/Mad Archive Dances with a thanksgiving: an acknowledgment of embodied transmission, of interdependence, of the chain of connection. So now, I invite you to give thanks yourself to someone who supported you, or moved with you, literally, on the journey to this moment today, as you are reading this entry in this newsletter. Make this a movement, a gesture.

In my time in the archive, I found movement jewels by people like Raimund Hoghe and Homer Avila. I found a movement score inspiration by Megan Hughes from the British Touchdown Dance Company, which includes blind and visually impaired dancers. Contemporary disabled choreographer Elisabeth Motley shared with the crip/mad dance archives group a gesture by Louise Augustine Gleizes, one of the inmates of the famous Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris. We moved with vignettes and sensations from Vaslav Nijinsky’s asylum stays in Switzerland. One of the images here shows a group of dancers in Michigan tuning with architectures of care alongside a photo of Nijinsky in a deck chair in the asylum garden: we are dancing with the shrubs and trees, the curves and arches of the image, reflecting on the effects of insulin shocks. Another of the photos shows a group of dancers at the Dance Studies Association’s annual meeting taking inspiration from a 1970s group of people in a dance therapy session at the Bronx Psychiatric Institute. In a video I was allowed to watch in the archive, the dancers were engaging in a hand dance, the fine and careful mirroring of hand gestures improvisers use to tune in with one another. In our New Jersey outdoor assembly, we are echoing these gestures across time.

One of my finds in the library was Fred Benjamin, jazz dancer and teacher, a lineage carrier for Young Black Modern Dance, a faculty advisor of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center, and a touchstone for many. Benjamin was one of four people interviewed by Billie Mahoney for the TV series *Dance On* in 2003. In that episode of her weekly TV show, Mahoney talks to four dancers who went through significant trauma. In his segment, Benjamin tells Mahoney about how he was attacked in his own NYC dance studio by men who stabbed him many times and left him near death with significant nerve damage to one of his lower legs. He describes the aftermath of this violent assault and his eventual healing through dance. His dance signature shifted: he began to develop more upper body gestures, more emphasis on arms and the rhythmic patterns carried there, as he could no longer control one of his lower legs in the way he was used to. A disability choreography emerged: not just an “overcoming” of disability, but a new way of expressing his dance through different corporeal pathways.

I am not a lineage holder for Fred Benjamin’s dance, and jazz and modern are not part of my personal repertoire. So, when I shared this story in the Crip/Mad Archive Dances, I invited people who had actually danced with Benjamin to gift us a movement moment they remembered, to move away from external mimicry toward bodily transmission, the knowing in the bones that marks us as dancers. I was honored to receive such movement gifts from two dance elders, Robin Wilson (during a Crip/Mad Archive Dance in Michigan), and Halifu Osumare (as part of a Crip/Mad Archive Dance as a plenary performance for the Dance Studies Association’s annual meeting in New Jersey). Each presented a movement moment that touched in with their embodied memories of Fred Benjamin and shared it toward the future.

The Crip/Mad Archive Dances continue. As the choreography of the ritual develops, I usually assemble four of these movement glimpses, embodied moments, so that we can enact them in the flesh. This is a call toward an ancestral lineage as disabled people. In our individual execution of each movement, we add our own embodied journeys, the interdependent webs that brought us to this ritual action.

I end this short report with thanks to the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts’ Jerome Robbins Dance Division and the incredibly helpful and enthusiastic staff and curators who work there, and who extended me such kindness, with thanks to the web of dancers, and with thanks and respect to the resilience and persistence of disabled dance artists. We are alive within and without; we are here; we dance in the archive. ■

Plague Dances

Ariel Nereson

When I first read the 2021 call from the New York Public Library's Jerome Robbins Dance Division for the next class of Dance Research Fellows, the theme—dance and democracy—struck an immediate chord. My first book focuses on renowned choreographer and director Bill T. Jones's choreography as democracy-in-motion: *Democracy Moving: Bill T. Jones, Contemporary American Performance, and the Racial Past* (University of Michigan Press, January 2022) frames Jones's dances about Abraham Lincoln as public intellectual labor, Black aesthetic praxis, and historical knowledge production. Though Jones is "the most written-about figure in the dance world in the last quarter century" (Wyatt Mason, *New York Times*, June 6, 2016), *Democracy Moving* is the first scholarly monograph devoted to his work. My research on Jones and his company, Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company (BTJ/AZ), had been in progress for a decade when my book was released, and largely without the voluminous new resource at the Jerome Robbins Dance Division: the newly-acquired, processed, and cataloged Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company Records. I had worked in this archive at New York Live Arts and was eager to see what I might find now that it had been cataloged. My research proposal, however, was inspired equally by my work as a scholar and my leisure as a spectator, as someone who watches dance (and, in the spring of 2021, had largely been watching dance through my computer screen for the past year).

In March 2020 I was eagerly anticipating the premiere of Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company's *Deep Blue Sea* at the Park Avenue Armory, a production that was to mark a return to the stage for Jones. As with all live performance in New York, the production was canceled because of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time, the pandemic's immediate impacts on live performance, particularly dance, remained to be seen, particularly as these impacts coincided with ongoing and urgent work for racial equity and justice, work that BTJ/AZ has consistently prioritized over its nearly forty years of dance-making. After the spring 2020 premiere cancellation, Jones reflected that COVID-19 was his "second plague"; by referencing the AIDS epidemic that profoundly influenced his artistic career and personal life, Jones located restorative formations of collectivity not in the "unprecedented" present but in the past, in an archive of embodied practices and recorded works that enact queer coalitional world-making.

As the pandemic unfolded, I noticed that the works being engaged virtually during COVID-19 were largely those that referred to the early AIDS crisis in the US of 1981-1996, despite the fact that Jones has made over 150 dances in his career. These included the Brooklyn Academy of Music's streaming of the 1984 work *Secret Pastures* as the centerpiece of their virtual Pride 2020 programming, a virtual revival of Zane's choreography for *Continuous Replay*, and the release of Rosalynde LeBlanc and Tom Hurwitz's documentary *Can You Bring It*, about the re-staging of the 1989 work *D-Man in the Waters*. I applied to the New York Public Library Jerome Robbins Dance Division Dance Research Fellowship in order to complete the archival research for a new project, "Plague Dances." This project considers how Jones's AIDS archive has been revisited, revived, and revised during the ongoing time of COVID-19.

Through my research I found the NYPL's archival materials to be evidence of queer worldmaking practices that enact coalitional relations across racial difference and are forged through pleasure, grief, care, and creativity. While reviewing materials associated with Jones and Zane's AIDS-related work, I developed a minor obsession with the 1984 work *Secret Pastures* and became more interested in how works made prior to Zane's passing of AIDS-related lymphoma in 1988 provide a context for understanding queer social formations during the AIDS crisis. *Secret Pastures* premiered at BAM in 1984 as part of the Next Wave Festival and, unlike works like *D-Man in the Waters*, has not been re-staged. It is an irreverent, buoyant work that mobilizes glam, club, and pop aesthetics across several media including movement, music, sets, and costumes. The work has become, in some ways, a very glamorous aside in the more dominant narrative of the company's AIDS-era repertory as serious, austere, and more concerned with art-making as mourning. But I think we should pay more attention to *Secret Pastures* as we emerge from COVID-19.

Secret Pastures is an incredibly rich example of collaborative, interdisciplinary dance-making. Composer Peter Gordon, Jones, Zane, visual artist Keith Haring, fashion designer Willi Smith, and hair and wig designer Marcel Fieve collaborated on the vision and materialization of the work and its star-studded premiere, attended by Andy Warhol and Madonna, put BTJ/AZ on the map. This Polaroid, taken by Paula Court, haunted my time as a Dance Research Fellow. I hadn't seen it before and found it particularly arresting as evidence of how the worlds made onstage through collective, creative vision and labor were in a mutually-animating relationship with the kinship and friendship of queer social worlds that these artists inhabited—a two-way street, rather than the more common analytical assumption that the artistic world reflects the social. Zane, Haring, and Smith all passed of AIDS-related illness, and I believe *Secret Pastures* attests to movement, breath, joy, and life in the biographical narratives of these artists that have become saturated by tragedy.

"Plague Dances" has ended up being equally, if not more, focused on the extra-theatrical materials in the BTJ/AZ archives related to *Secret Pastures* than video and still images of the production itself. The letters, casual photographs, designs, logos, ad campaigns, and scribbled reminders that circulated amongst the collaborators and were preserved in the archives felt like the real find, and *Secret Pastures* as a production became the context to help me make sense of the other materials, like the Polaroid.

What I found in the Dance Division is plenty of evidence that Jones and Zane's collaborations with Haring, Smith, and other queer artists across many disciplines were not one-offs but rather indicative of durational relationships of care, ambition, conflict, and support. Emphasizing the longer durations of these relationships seems important to me in the context of narratives wherein Haring, Smith, and Zane's lives are "cut short" by AIDS. Materials like Keith Haring's 1982 logo for the company, or his drawing for Zane, help us understand the richness and complexity of the off-stage relationships amongst these artists, qualities mirrored in the abundant, riotous world of movement, sound, line, and color created onstage in *Secret Pastures*.

My next move is to connect the rich socio-cultural contexts of queer nightlife, celebration, and affirmation that are enacted through Jones and Zane's collaborations with Gordon, Haring, Smith, Fieve, and others with the dance field's own historiography. Jones and Zane's work is sited very explicitly in New York City and responds to that city's critical atmosphere. In the archives I found this advertisement copy for a flyer about Jones and Zane's workshop at the Pineapple Dance Centre in 1985.

The workshop was a two-and-a-half-week experience learning methods related to "New Dance," as described in this image. I'm struck by this language, especially because it seems to have been a very temporary way that Jones and Zane described their work—I've never encountered this language before in my research on the company. The emergence and disappearance of "New Dance" as a set of distinct aesthetics and container for choreographic thought happened during the shift from *Secret Pastures* to *D-Man in the Waters*. As we emerge from a period of time where dance invented itself anew yet again in the midst of pandemic, we can understand "New Dance" as a product of interdisciplinary artistic collaboration *and* networks of mutual aid, solidarity, and connection across differences that sustained Jones, Zane, and their collaborators during another time of epidemiological risk. ■

above left
Peter Gordon, Bill T. Jones, Arnie Zane, Keith Haring, and Willi Smith in front of Haring drawing, 1983/4. Photo by Paula Court. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Jerome Robbins Dance Division [call number: *MGZMD 477, Box 38, Folder 1].

above right
Against a white background with cutout photos of Balinese landscapes, Ube Halaya, Raha Behnam, zavé martohardjono, Marielys Burgos Meléndez and x pose as their deities, dressed in bright colors, make up, wigs, feathers, robes, and headdresses. Photos by Kathleen Kelley, collaged by zavé martohardjono.

Research, Ritual, and Recognition

An archival search for ancestral Indonesian dance

zavé martohardjono

I started my research fellowship at the NYPL Jerome Robbins Dance Division in 2021 with several desires. To make a performance and installation, *TERRITORY: The Island Remembers*, I wanted photos, documentation, and choreographer journals describing Balinese and Indonesian ritual dance and mythologies of political resistance. I hoped to find dances of community self-preservation in the midst of colonization and political division.

I wondered what the archive would teach me about ritual. Ritual, as I have worked with it in my own performances, carries non-verbal, embodied meaning. And its meaning is inflected with the cultural norms of ritual participants. As an Indonesian-American artist, I grew up assimilated in North America, not speaking my own ancestral languages. Nuances of my ancestor's myths are lost on me without translation that relays hidden and double meanings. I worried about relying on Western anthropological interpretations of Balinese dance. My fellowship proposal included these concerns. I would approach archival material questioning and interpolating the colonial perspective that shapes, filters, and defines what we understand as the canon of Asian dance.

Most of all, I hoped to recognize dance rituals from my Indonesian ancestors that would point me to the story of division and reconciliation I was devising with my *TERRITORY* collaborators.

Research, self-recognition and self-affirmation were cornerstones for co-creating *TERRITORY* from 2019 to 2022 with dance and interdisciplinary artists Raha Behnam, Ube Halaya, x, Marielys Burgos Meléndez, Julia Santoli, Kathleen Kelley, Bree Breeden, Rosza Daniel Lang/Levitsky, Maya Simone Z., Katherine De La Cruz, and Jordan Elizabeth Reed. Our multimedia installation activated by evening-length ritual-based performances tells a parable: An island grappling with colonial division attempts reconciliation after a climate disaster. Split by a colonial border, one side is home to an indigenous community who resisted capitalist invasion and thrives in autonomy from European conquest. The other side is home to an urbanized Brown and Black society. They struggle to live, eat, and breathe. They suffer from inequity, racial capitalism, fatigue, and oppressions of empire. Their memory of themselves, resilient before the border, has slipped away.

Supported by Julia and Maya, Raha, Ube, x, Marielys, and I created deities. Through our deities, we protect the island and tell its story using dance, rituals, and collective actions with audiences. Connecting to urgent questions about Lenape land we live on, *TERRITORY* asks: What care and ritual practices can transform our internalized colonization and collectively shift us from crisis to co-creation?

In search of our deities, Raha, Ube, x, Marielys, and I drew on pre-colonial mythologies from our Iranian, Filipinx, Jamaican-Chinese, AfroTaina-Arawak, and Indonesian cultures. We read about indigenous technologies like vernacular architecture that resists climate change. We discussed the resistance technologies sprouting up around us protecting Black and Indigenous communities and people of color.

While we connected past and present clues, my research in the NYPL archives became an act of navigating gaps. Looking at documentation of Balinese ritual, I read between the lines of what I could, and could not, find.

My deity for *TERRITORY* is named Ultimate Disaster. She is a fiery, terrifying, red-lipsticked femme force of nature inspired by the Balinese queen of the leyaks Rangda. As a child watching Rangda's dance on trips to Bali or spotting her mask, she terrified me.

I searched the Dance Division collections for Rangda, her dance, and symbolism. I pored over photographs, handwritten journals, and letters searching for what her ritual dance meant. Most roads led to documentation from the 1920s and 1930s by Claire Holt, Margaret Mead, and Walter Spies. They lived in Bali when tourism and foreign curiosity was first exploding on the island.

Rangda did not appear as much as I'd expected. Writing about her was limited. She is described as an evil demon of death and destruction, assumed to be the Balinese version of goddesses Durga or Kali. A historical telling says she was Mahendradatta, a Javanese mother living in the 11th century who became a "rangda", a widow. No one would marry her daughter, so she used magic to unleash an epidemic. Rangda appears in the Calonarang, a dance you can see today thought to have originated in 1890 from Bali's Gianyar region. In the Calonarang, Rangda and her counterpart Barong fight a battle with no resolution.

Jane Belo and Margaret Mead wrote about Rangda framing her in Western references using Freudian psychoanalysis. They debate her as representing fear and analyze her as a narcissistic mother. Belo's 1949 book "Bali: Rangda and Barong" ends with insult: "Rangda, in her connection with death, destruction, and disease, is but the ugly counterpart of living, procreation, and well-being."

My skepticism flared. Rangda can destroy, yes, but Western notions of "evil" miss her significance. Christian colonizer concepts of a good hero necessarily destroying evil in a progressive path to collective good obscures her complexity. In the Calonarang, she cannot be killed–not by the many dancers who try to slay her with ritual daggers nor by the Barong. Rangda and her power are not to be eradicated because the Balinese understand this would cause chaos and upset the balance of the universe. Half of a cosmic balance, Rangda is black magic to Barong's white magic. She is destruction to creation. She is part of a dynamic between oppositional forces that, together, create divine harmony.

From a Balinese understanding of duality, my deity, Ultimate Disaster, comes alive. Ultimate Disaster sparks fear like Rangda with purpose. Enraged by injustice, environmental imbalance, the death and destruction caused by war, white supremacism, she incites the terror of knowing *things are not right*. She sees unjust harm and sets fire to what's not working. Ultimate Disaster jumps onto a burial mound where many islanders are buried and blazes a fire that burns the island down.

Her terrifying grief sparks us to look at ourselves and our societies honestly and raze the ground so a more just world can regrow. Her devastating fire medicine is the demand of many enraged activists, who chant in the streets, "Burn. It. Down."

Our co-creation process for *TERRITORY* became a container for endless questions and visions of a different future. What answers Raha, Ube, x, Marielys, and I couldn't find in archival research, we filled in with intentions, dream-memories, intuitions, and dances, songs, and rituals divined in the rehearsal studio. As we searched for story, I felt our queer, trans, feminist, activist, radical bodies locating connection, recognition, pain, and processing that comes with clarification. Whatever the limits and frustrations of navigating translation, the very undertaking of seeking our ancestral rites, rituals, and mythologies proved powerful.

As I navigated the archive and gave myself permission to expand and reinterpret readings of Balinese ritual dance, I kept loyal to a core understanding: the Balinese respect and attend to the needs of both seen and unseen things through daily ritual. Island-wide ceremonies like Eka Dasa Rudra, held once a century, aim to purify the island and the whole universe. The Balinese know that when we humans become lax in our devotion to the land and the deities, this irks the ancestors and causes disharmony. Ritual offerings are made not for personal gain, but to care for the spirits – benevolent and trickster alike. Dance, ritual, and collective action feed hungry spirits. Ritual dance offers ancestors the attention, affection, laughter and play they need.

As we put the finishing touches on our premiere of *TERRITORY: The Island Remembers*" at Gibney Dance in April 2022, I hoped that this work would satiate my ancestors and audiences alike. ■

Making *In Balanchine's Classroom*

A conversation between Ellen Bar and Connie Hochman

In 2007, Connie Hochman began interviewing former dancers trained by George Balanchine, with the idea of writing a book about the impact his teaching had on their dancing and their lives. Soon, she realized that the dancer's responses must be seen, and the project ought to be a documentary film. She conducted more than one hundred interviews with dancers and others who knew and worked with Balanchine over the span of his many years with New York City Ballet and the School of American Ballet. She also unearthed never-before-seen archival footage of George Balanchine, the teacher. This research is at the center of the film *In Balanchine's Classroom*, directed by Connie Hochman (now available on DVD).

What follows is a conversation between Ellen Bar, a former New York City Ballet Soloist, film producer and film consultant, and Connie Hochman, an alumna of The School of American Ballet, former dancer with Pennsylvania Ballet (renamed Philadelphia Ballet), and director of the film.

Ellen Bar Let's go back to the beginning. This is such a specific topic, and yet now that you've made a movie about it, it feels like such a natural subject—"Of course we should have this film." I'm curious to learn how you focused in on this aspect of Balanchine, how you came to the idea, and how the idea progressed as you made the film.

Connie Hochman The first memory I have of being interested in understanding Balanchine the teacher, as opposed to the choreographer, was when I was 17 and at the School of American Ballet. I had started at the School at age ten, with these extraordinary teachers whom Balanchine had hand chosen. Now it was probably around 1970 or '71 and my friends were starting to get into the Company, and I heard that there was a class that he taught every morning. I asked about this class because if dancers came out of his school with training by Stanley Williams, [Alexandra] Danilova, [Felia] Doubrovska, Suki Schorer, [Helene] Dudin and [Antonina] Tumkovsky—incredibly rich training—why was *he* teaching company class… when he could instead focus on choreographing?

These were friends who had gone through the School with me, so we were like family. We knew each other inside out. But when I asked, they clammed up. I'd say, "But I really want to know," and they would wave me off. I couldn't get anything out of them. That stayed with me. When I did not get into New York City Ballet, I felt unfinished business with Balanchine, because I really wanted to dance for him. Luckily, I got into Pennsylvania Ballet [renamed Philadelphia Ballet] and had a wonderful experience there. After retiring, I taught for a former Balanchine dancer, Lynne Stetson, at her studio in Rye, New York, and I started going down to the School to watch classes because I was teaching seriously, whether it was teenagers or adults. I started watching Kay [Mazzo] and Susie [Pilarre] and, of course, Suki, and I could tell that though there were common denominators, there was also so much individuality, and I started to get this feeling: these unique perspectives should not be lost. The feeling grew and became overwhelming so I began contacting dancers one by one. Vicky [Victoria] Simon was the first to agree to an interview.

George Balanchine teaching at New York City Ballet in 1964. Photo by Martha Swope, courtesy of Zeitgeist Films.

EB Did you have an idea that you were going to make a feature length documentary out of the interviews, or were you focused primarily on recording their perspectives?

CH It was a book idea at first. I remember the book, *I Remember Balanchine*, where [Francis] Mason did phone interviews. I loved reading that format and I thought that in a book you could pack a lot in. I started writing to as many Balanchine dancers as I could but for some reason they didn't want to talk about his class. He was not viewed as a teacher. I got the reaction, "Why do you want to talk about his class? Let's talk about his choreography and his rehearsals." The class was not their happiest time of day. But a few people jumped right in, such as Patricia Wilde, and Violette [Verdy]. The interviewees were so expressive, entertaining, and animated! Right away, I felt this rush—*This has to be a documentary*. They were talking about a visual art form and they were performers. As soon as they started expressing themselves, they were profoundly eloquent in their communication—both in word and gesture. So, it began as a book idea, but morphed into a film after about five to ten interviews.

EB I can see how Violette would cause you to have that idea. She's so expressive. Tell me about the archival footage of Balanchine teaching. How did you find it? I'm sure it was terribly difficult, everything from finding it, to clearing the permissions. I'd love to hear about that.

CH I was doing these interviews and word spread. I think the Balanchine dancers told each other, "She's serious" and people started warming up to it. I met with Suki, to get her blessings, because her book had just come out *[Suki Schorer on Balanchine Technique]* and we had stayed close from the time I left the School. I wanted to convey to her that the views I was trying to get were not counter to hers. She practically stopped me in my tracks and said, "You *have* to do this. Everyone will have their own memories." She was very strong—"Do this." While I was there someone at the School told me that once in a while, on Balanchine's birthday, they would have on a monitor this black-and-white footage playing, and people would walk by, watch a few moments, laugh, and walk on. I heard that and I did a double take. You know, "Footage of Balanchine teaching?" I had to pursue it. I think I asked Amy Bordy about it. You had to get special permission from the Jerome Robbins Trust to watch it at the Library. So, I wrote to Christopher Pennington and got permission and that's how I started getting familiar with it.

EB So, that was footage that Jerry Robbins had taken?

CH Yes. I found out that it was Jerome Robbins who shot it.

EB So, you found out that this footage existed, and that it was at the Jerome Robbins Dance Division of the Library for the Performing Arts. What was your reaction when you went there and saw it?

CH I went, watched it all, and took notes. Then I went back with my friend Victoria Bromberg, a Balanchine dancer, so she could help me identify every person in it. Every time I watched it, though, at some point I wouldn't feel well. I would have to stop and get some water. I thought, *Is it the fluorescent lights*? *What's going on*? Then I realized, it was maybe because it was filmed with a hand-held camera, catching Balanchine totally unguarded, and all the dancers, and all the action. Robbins was tucked behind Gordon Boelzner at the piano. I realized I was getting motion sickness because he was trying to film *everything*. He was getting the individuals, their faces, the footwork, the pace of the steps. You could almost feel the strain in the room, the effort, the tension, and the sweating. And then, moments of lightness and laughter. You'd get Balanchine telling a story and miming. It was all filmed in this true to life way, getting the motion in the room. It was actually very hard to edit, with all that action. It was a real class, not staged. It was the real thing. Jerome Robbins knew exactly what he was doing. He was capturing the visceral experience.

EB What year was this? Did he film more than one class?

CH He filmed on two occasions. In 1973 and 1974. At one point, I was having trouble getting through to the powers that be to get the doors to open for me to actually do this movie. One of the problems was that it was hard to earn the trust and confidence of The [George Balanchine] Trust. In one sense, they said yes right away. Very early on, when I posed this idea, they gave me the green light. But maybe people wondered whether I would really do it. So, it was an easy green light at first—it was not easy, but it was a very sincere green light. But when it got down to the nuts and bolts, and getting the material I needed approved for work copies, they didn't understand that if this is about his classroom, "Why," they asked me, "do you need rehearsal footage?"—which seemed to fall outside the scope of what they understood the film was about. I was asking permission for an array of archival footage—rehearsal footage, which I had discovered at the Robbins Dance Division—in order to build context and show that the class was pivotal. I wrote and wrote about there being a connection, and my wanting to show *why* he was teaching – the big picture. But they just weren't getting it, and this was a big problem. So, I had to find someone who would be able to translate my vision into language and, not an argument, but a rationale *why*. I realized that the perfect person was Amanda Vaill. She had just finished her biography of Jerome Robbins. She's an incredible writer, reveres Jerome Robbins, reveres Balanchine, and is deservedly so well respected. I asked and she came on board. She came to my editing office, and I showed her a curated collection of the interviews and footage. She "got it" right away and wrote an early treatment, an encapsulation of my vision. I sent it to the Trust and that *did* open the doors. They understood. Interestingly, Amanda had been given permission to read Robbins' journals and she said that there was an entry he wrote one day about Balanchine teaching.

EB Did Jerry weigh in on what he thought Balanchine was trying to accomplish with his class?

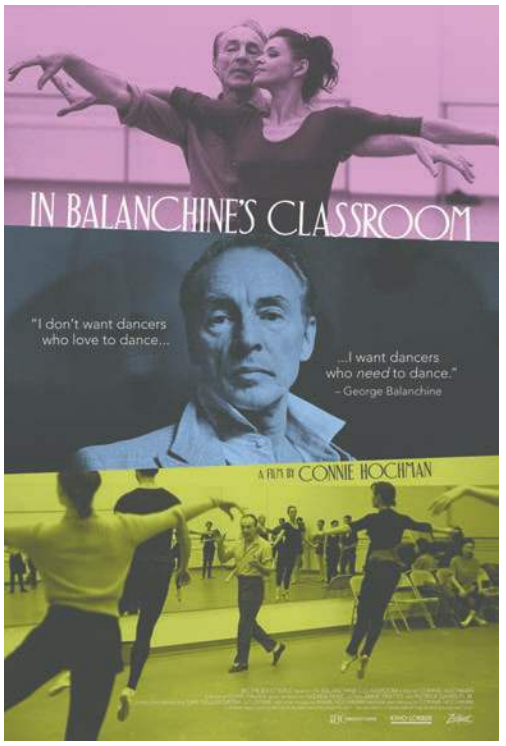
CH How can I express it better than in his own words? Jerry wrote:

> *Balanchine teaches, and how he teaches. He doesn't give a class. It's not just a warm-up and workout for the dancers. It is a master class in how to* do*, and he invests each particular moment of classic and basic ballet vocabulary with a* how *and a* why *and a detail of such elevated elegance and perfection. If I am known as a perfectionist, one should attend his classes. Unfortunately, one can see the attitude of the dancers still remains aloof and apart – 'That crazy man.' They don't know and don't see that he insists on details, each of which is basic and never ornamental. They hold it for a few poses and then drop it. What a revelation the classes are.*
>
> And then he quotes, as if Balanchine is saying it:
>
> *"Each step, each moment, must be a miracle." Apropos of* port de bras *–* "Breathe *your steps." "There is no sex, no difference of the sexes in ballet." I'm going to film it all as soon as possible.*

I think what he meant by "there's no sex in ballet" is that the beauty has to be there regardless. You know, a man's hand, a woman's hand, it doesn't matter. The *expression* has to be there. At the end of the footage, Balanchine is walking towards the camera, and you hear Jerome Robbins chuckle, and Balanchine kind of waves at him dismissively, laughing, and you hear Balanchine say, "You finally got me." You feel a sweet rapport between them. I call that classroom footage the first miracle—that he was able to record it, because Balanchine didn't want anyone watching class. The dancers say that over and over. Balanchine would say, "This is our time. They won't understand. They'll think we're crazy."

EB I know you conducted over 100 interviews, and yet, for a feature length movie you can't have that many voices. How did you narrow down who were the subjects you were going to use in the film?

CH The first cut we did was a three-hour assembly laying out the subjects we wanted to cover, and the themes. It had about 30 voices. I wanted it to feel like a classroom, but I didn't know enough about film to understand that you can't tell a story with 30 voices. And we got feedback from the film people whom we had weighing in that there were too many voices. So, this was one of the painful parts. I had the dancers, whom I felt very loyal to, who had given so generously, so selflessly, and I knew how much they conveyed. I didn't want to give up those voices, but then I had my editor who wanted to make an effective story. I went through a lot eliminating voices. Little by little, I learned the art of film, as best I could on the job, and learned that to have a story that has any kind of build, you have to have characters. And to have real characters, they need screen time. Also, I needed voices that would contrast well with each other—strong personalities. All the Balanchine dancers were personalities. That's what made the interviews amazing. Balanchine chose dancers who interested him as people. But most critical, I needed voices who revealed the struggle, who brought us in on some kind of transformation they underwent. An interview could be very informative, but not all of them really let us in on where Balanchine was leading them – ultimately to a place way beyond technique. And the last box that I had to check was whether footage existed of them in Balanchine's class. I needed footage of them in class and rehearsal with Balanchine so the audience could actually see them in the visual storytelling that film requires.



EB Those unused interviews are still a great resource. Have you thought about any other way that you might use them?

CH Yes. We've started work on the *In Balanchine's Classroom Archive*, a collection of the full interviews and contemporary footage of the Balanchine dancers teaching class and rehearsing ballets all over the world—how Balanchine is refracted through them. It's Balanchine, but it's also who they are as artists and as teachers.

EB That's going to be such a great resource. What can you tell me about the footage of Balanchine rehearsing? I loved all those stage rehearsals where he is a silhouetted figure and everybody is in their rehearsal clothes, or half in costume. Where did you find all that?

CH Since I was not a filmmaker by profession, I went to different consultants, and one person who was very helpful was Andrea Meditch. In the very beginning, we met and she got an overview of the project and said, "The interviews are incredible, but you're going to need more footage of Balanchine." So, I said, "I know what's out there. There have been many documentaries done, and there's a finite amount of footage." And she said, "No. You'll find more. Search the four corners of the earth." So, I started talking to people like Judy Kinberg, Ellen Sorrin, and Nancy Reynolds, asking, "Do you know of any footage? Do you know of any B-roll before *Dance in America*, when the camera was running?" I hounded these people. I started looking at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. It became kind of an addiction. I would be on my computer, on the digital archive, where you can go in and read descriptions of the footage. So, this is a thank you to The Jerome Robbins Dance Division and what they have accumulated with such care. It is such an extraordinary resource! I would dive deep into the metadata and all of a sudden, I would see, "Balanchine works with dancer," or "Balanchine talks to dancer." I realized that meant that there's a little footage of him. So, I'd write down the call number. I did this for weeks, months, and my husband and I practically lived there for a summer. Tanisha [Jones], and Daisy [Pommer], and Arlene [Yu], and the entire staff there, were all wonderful. We found amazing footage—footage that Judy Kinberg was *in* and couldn't remember, because it was B-roll, and incidental footage that wasn't part of the filmed performance. We found so much footage that we couldn't use all of it.

But there's more! By now the Balanchine dancers were a huge support. They knew my heart was in this and that I was really trying to do justice to the subject, trying to be a conduit for their experience. Hopefully I was taking the audience into the classroom. Dancers started saying to me, "Somebody filmed. Somebody filmed when we were there. You should try to find it." But they wouldn't tell me the name of the person. They just told me one of the dancers would film. Finally, somebody gave me the name—Christine Redpath. The most humble, soft-spoken, modest person there had the wherewithal to bring a movie camera to the theater and on tour. Because Balanchine adored her—maybe he felt like it was family home movies—he'd wave to the camera, smile, and let her film. How do you do that while you're taking class, rehearsing, and performing? But somehow, she just filmed and filmed. So, I approached her, and she met with me and my husband, Mark, and gave permission for us to use her footage.

It wasn't yet digitized. There were shoeboxes of these little tapes. Mark would meet her at Dugall [Visual Solutions], the photo specialists, and they digitized them there. My editor and I would be in our editing suite, and they'd bring in the digitized film, and we'd start watching it. At first, when you watch it, it's very strange footage because it had started to deteriorate. It was full of static and grainy, and there were all these light flashes, so it was like looking at an impressionist painting, but live. My editor and I would stare at it and see the possibilities. We realized that it actually served the movie that it was in that shape. It was a perfect expression of how ephemeral dance is. The footage itself sends a subliminal message—it's there one moment and then it's gone.

EB What was the biggest surprise or revelation along the way?

CH Every day was a revelation. I wanted to learn what the dancers understood about Balanchine's teaching. I had to really understand that. With all due respect, I feel that if you, or the dancers today of New York City Ballet, or anywhere, if they could hear the Balanchine dancers speak, in depth—because the film is a haiku, it's just a drop of what they learned—that it would open up worlds. Balanchine saw the body in four quadrants. Not just top and bottom. Four quadrants. Bart Cook talks about it like a shish kebab. Why did Balanchine sometimes say, "Turn out your arabesque leg more. The bottom leg's not that important"? He didn't mean that turnout is not important. He didn't mean cheat. It was beyond that. He knew that with a dancer, the head is the tomato, the shoulders are the red pepper, then there's an onion, a green pepper. He knew that the body could make these tiny adjustments if you had your core. If your center was absolutely stronger than steel, you could do all kinds of things. So, since no body is perfect—no one has a 180-degree turnout, except possibly Violette—he was saying, tweak the shish kebab a little. The standing leg, just let go a little, but keep *that* [gesturing symmetry] intact. It has to be symmetrical. But tweak it a little, and then counter that. He was teaching them a science of technique. There's such geometry to it.

So, were there any revelations? I would listen to the interviews. I had them playing all the time, until I started to absorb it. I was a dancer, but this was not easy material. The dancers would go up to him and say, "Could you explain what you really mean about the heels off [the ground]? I know you don't really mean dance with your heels off…" And he would have a little meeting with them about it. It was very profound, what he was teaching. The heels could touch the floor, but the weight was in the ball. It wasn't like you just put your weight on the ball of the foot. You had to develop so much pull up, by using the floor, that there wasn't weight left on the heel. It wasn't merely shifting the weight. It was extremely involved. So, there were revelations every day. It wasn't just about technique either. Music. Energy. Dedication. It was on every level. It was a completely spiritual realm. What it turned out to be was "the artist's journey," as in the Joseph Campbell sense. The artist's journey was *The Hero's Journey*. And how to tell that story so that the six voices become one. A composite. Different facets of one Hero—Merrill the technician, Heather [Watts] the unruly child, Jacques [d'Amboise] the wise man, Edward [Villella] the prodigal... It was a revelation for the editors, too, every day. We never felt it was finished, but we had to just finish it.

EB I think that's the case with filmmaking. You're never really finished, but at some point, you stop. Have you gotten any responses from current dancers? My dancing days are long past, but I can imagine that this would have been really interesting to see, and helpful to me, as a dancer.

CH I feel somewhat unsettled about it, and a little sad, because I don't know if it's reaching dancers today.

EB Well, you've had the misfortune of putting out a movie in the middle of a global pandemic, after 15 years of work, but I think that even if it's slower to reach its audience, people are going to be very affected by watching it. I think it's truly amazing that you persisted, and that you went through so many challenges, and that you finished this movie. It's such a remarkable story and it's so very specific, which is what I love about it. Now that it's here, it feels like, of course, this should exist. It was such a joy to watch. I think that to find things that people have never seen, and to talk to so many eyewitnesses, and have them captured forever is incredible. I hope that you are very proud of yourself, and that you are taking time to bask in this accomplishment. So, thank you.

CH Thank you, it was a pleasure. ■

Recent performances

top
Davide Dato and Hyo-Jung Kang in Jerome Robbins' *Other Dances* at Vienna State Ballet, 2022. Photo by Ashley Taylor. © Vienna State Ballet / Ashley Taylor.

center
Autumn Klein (soloist) with Randolph Fernandez and Mayim Stiller (corps de ballet) in Jerome Robbins' *2 & 3 Part Inventions* at Oklahoma City Ballet, 2022. Photo by Jana Carson.

bottom
Ulrik Birkkjaer, Sarah Van Patten, Mathilde Froustey, Benjamin Freemantle, Tiit Helimets, and Jennifer Stahl in Jerome Robbins' *In the Night* at San Francisco Ballet, 2022. Photo by Erik Tomasson / San Francisco Ballet.

front cover
The cover of the journal Jerome Robbins kept during rehearsals for the Stravinsky Festival at New York City Ballet in 1972.

above
Sketch by Jerome Robbins of Igor Stravinsky from the journal. From the Jerome Robbins Papers, The Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Select Upcoming Performances of Jerome Robbins Works

JULY 28, 29 (2022)
IN THE NIGHT
Seoul and Gangneung, South Korea

SEPTEMBER (2022)
THE CONCERT* & *AFTERNOON OF A FAUN
Carolina Ballet, Raleigh, North Carolina

OCTOBER 21, 24, 27 & NOVEMBER 1, 4, 9, 11, 12, 14, 18 (2022)
THE CONCERT* & *IN THE NIGHT
Royal Swedish Ballet, Stockholm, Sweden

Please keep in mind that cancellations or postponements are always possible.

News from The Jerome Robbins Foundation
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