



Photo by Jerome Robbins of Tanaquil Le Clercq

NEWS FROM
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Jerome Robbins



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Filmmaker Nancy Buirski on *Afternoon of a Faun: Tanaquil Le Clercq* An Interview by Ellen Bar

When *Afternoon of a Faun: Tanaquil Le Clercq*, the documentary film by Nancy Buirski opened at the New York Film Festival last fall, it became an instant “must-see.” Before the film’s premiere at the Festival, its screenings were already sold-out. Audiences were enthralled by Buirski’s extraordinary film recounting the fascinating tale of Tanaquil Le Clercq, the ballerina who inspired the legendary choreographers George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins, who was felled by polio at the peak of her career.

Recently, Ellen Bar had the opportunity to interview Nancy Buirski about the film for The Jerome Robbins Foundation newsletter.

Ellen Bar: *What was your inspiration for making this film?*

Nancy Buirski: Tanny. I saw a small segment about her in the documentary on Jerome Robbins, *Something to Dance About*, and I was seduced by her the moment I saw her on screen. And I didn’t know her story. So it wasn’t as if I already knew about this compelling and somewhat tragic story of polio ending her career or anything like that. I was just watching her dance. And you know, she’s not only an incredible dancer, but she has an amazing presence on stage and that’s probably what drew me in. I was mesmerized.

EB: *How did you find out her whole story?*

NB: Well, I researched her online and other places. The first person I talked to was Robert Weiss, a former dancer with Balanchine and now the head of the Carolina Ballet. I had known him because I ran Full Frame, a documentary film festival in North Carolina for many years, and he had attended my festival to introduce a film, *Ballet Russes*. He was excited about the idea of a film on Tanny and he introduced me to both Jacques D’Amboise and Barbara Horgan. The rest was history as they say.

EB: *What was the next step in your research?*

NB: As soon as I realized the connection between Jacques D’Amboise and Tanny, I read his book, *I Was a Dancer*. I realized I also needed a lot of background in dance, so I read parts of Jennifer Homans’ book, an encyclopedic work on dance, *Apollo’s Angels*. To learn more about Jerome Robbins, I turned to Amanda Vaill’s book, *Somewhere*, and also read Deborah Jowitt’s *Jerome Robbins: His Life, His Theater, His Dance*. The two of them really informed me. I started looking at more documentaries on dance. There’s a very good documentary on Balanchine, another American Masters film. I also started researching polio because I wanted to learn more about what that felt like. I read Philip Roth’s book, *Nemesis*, which was chilling. It really helped me understand the climate of the times and how panicked people were about polio in the late 40’s and early 50’s until the vaccine came out. So I knew fairly soon that I was dealing with almost a two-part film – one that dealt with dance and one that dealt with polio and disability. That fascinated me – finding a way to lace those stories together, and attract both audiences.

EB: *What was the biggest logistical challenge of trying to tell this story?*

NB: Finding the footage and, once having found the footage, figuring out who owned it and who we needed permissions from. I began working with Steeplechase Films, the production company led by Rick Burns, and he attached one of his researchers to the project, a woman named Katie O’Rourke. We started excavating footage and it was complicated because those who have it don’t necessarily own it. A repository for a lot of the footage is the Jerome Robbins Dance Division of The New York Public Library, but it doesn’t mean they own it. So we had to start ferreting out footage and photographs from a lot of places and that was a real challenge. We did come across a lot, in many cases much more than I expected. I was particularly concerned about finding footage of Tanny after she was ill and The Jerome Robbins Foundation/Robbins Rights Trust was very helpful because Jerome Robbins had photographed her in her wheelchair. Those pictures were incredibly moving and I knew I’d use a lot of them. And then I was also very fortunate to be introduced to Martha Swope, who had traveled with Tanny in Europe in the late 70s, and had photographed her, so we have home movies of the two of them. It was my main fear that I wouldn’t find that, because she had kind of dropped out of the public eye and was not interested in publicity at all, so she hadn’t invited photographers or people to shoot her. But fortunately it existed, and it was beautiful. We really were supported in a huge way by The George Balanchine Trust, The Jerome Robbins Foundation, and the New York City Ballet Archive. Dance Theatre of Harlem Archive helped us find the photographs of Tanny teaching at the Dance Theatre of Harlem – I don’t think we could have told that part of the story without those photographs. We went to the March of Dimes. We went to Warm Springs – that was really wonderful. The footage from Warm Springs is footage most people have never seen.

EB: *Was there anything that you really loved in the film, but in a “killing your darlings” type of way, had to cut to make the film better overall?*

NB: The good news is no. The bad news is that there may be, because I have to cut the film back five to seven minutes for the American Masters broadcast; so there will be some “darlings” that will go. But right now the film is at 91 minutes and I can’t think of anything that I don’t have in there that I really would have wanted.



Photo by Jerome Robbins

EB: That's great. So you said you had looked to other films for inspiration, like the Balanchine film, and the Robbins film, but were there any non-dance films that inspired you?

NB: Yes, when I first thought of doing this movie, I immediately thought of *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, and I thought I would try to tell the film as much from Tanny's point of view as I could. It wasn't easy to do that, as it turns out. I would have had to reenact an awful lot, which I'm not a big fan of; and all the other footage was coming in and allowed me to tell it from a different vantage point. So I ended up just enjoying that and realizing that I could still communicate the emotion I was looking for through the use of montage, and I ended up going in that direction. I didn't want it to be a purely conventional movie where the information is in front of you and you go in a totally linear way and you have a voice of God narrator telling you what happened to her. I was excited about the use of the four narrators interlacing their stories and then doing whatever I could to communicate, not just what happened to her, but how it must have felt. I did that through the use of montage rather than reenactment.

EB: I liked the decision you made - and I think you use a similar device in your previous film *The Loving Story* - to let the archival footage play out and not hold back. It felt like you were really just letting us watch her dance. I feel with a lot of documentaries, and I don't know if it's creative or logistical with other documentaries, but it feels like you want to watch more and they always cut it off and move the story on too quickly.

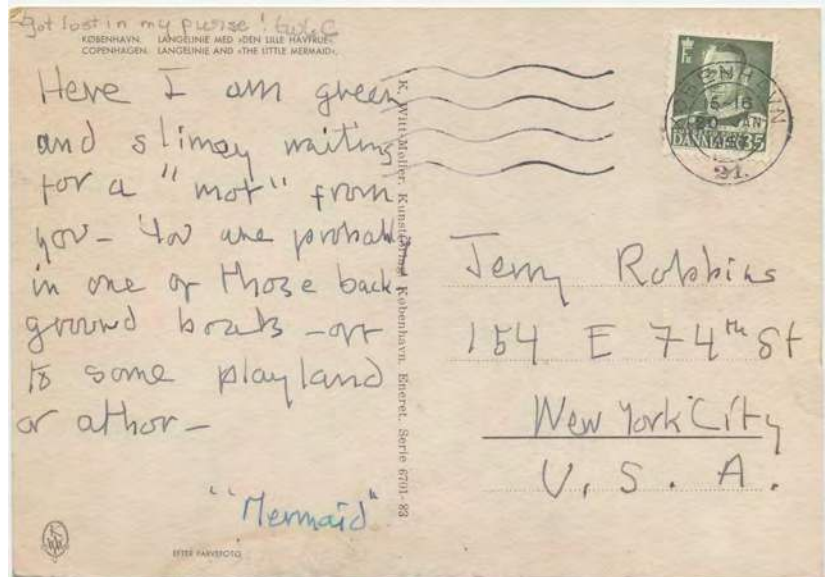
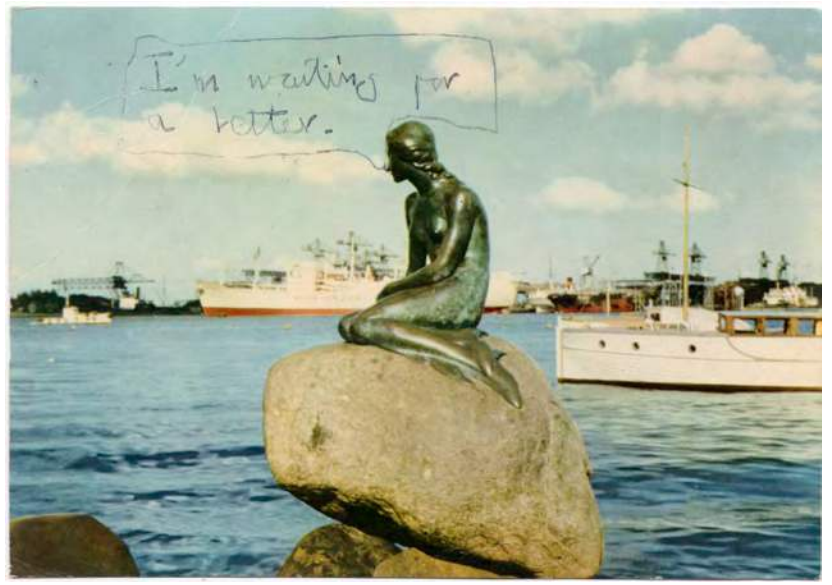
NB: You lose the emotion if you do that. I think what's happened is that documentaries too often tell their stories the way they think they are supposed to be told. Formulaic is a bit of a cliché term but there are a lot of people who have studied documentaries and follow a certain kind of course; they make a point and then they show it. And then they make another point and then they show it. For me, so much of these films, both of them, really have to do with the emotions of the film and you don't really get that if you don't let the picture play out and the music play out.

EB: What was the biggest discovery for you in making this film?

NB: How complicated the characters were. I learned that these characters are not black and white. They are not simple in any way and it was okay to leave some questions unanswered, about all of them. There are moments when they behave in very noble ways and moments when it appears they don't behave in noble ways and I think that's okay. And I was okay leaving that in the film without trying to resolve it and answer questions for an audience.

EB: How did you fund the film?

NB: It's not fully funded. I'm happy to talk about it, because most people think that when you have a festival screening, the film was fully funded, and it's not.



Most of the funding came from American Masters and the Ford Foundation. The other funders are smaller family foundations and individual donors, and one investor. And we're still out there looking for funds because the archival footage - in spite of some very generous support on the part of The Jerome Robbins Foundation and The George Balanchine Trust - the rest of the archival footage was frightfully expensive.

EB: Was it challenging to have these big characters like Balanchine and Robbins involved in the story?

NB: I think the challenge was what not to use - you know, there is a lot out there and when you're making a film, you're deciding what the essence of your film is. So it was just a question of, how do I communicate the essence and power of Tanny's story and what role do Balanchine and Robbins play? They're part of the constellation. It's not about them, it's really about her and that's a set of very subtle and creative choices that one makes and eventually it comes together. I'm not trying to be an encyclopedia about any of their lives so it was important that most of the key information came through and, more importantly, the emotions of Tanny's life.

EB: What do you think the essence of the film is?

NB: I think it's a tragic and compelling story about a woman who finds herself unable to do what she always thought she would do. I think that's the most literal aspect of it but I think there is a real poetry in Tanny's life as well. In many ways it's about defying gravity and Tanny comes crashing down, as all dancers will eventually, but she just comes crashing down sooner. And so at the end of the day I think the real essence of the movie is a question - who am I? Who am I when I can't do what I thought I was going to do?

EB: Did you ever allow yourself to have the imaginative flight of fancy of what Tanny's life would have been if she had just gotten that vaccine before she left?



Photo from the collection of Jerome Robbins

Dear Jerry -
 This is a right handed
 letter - I hold my hand up & write
 and Ede moves the paper along like
 a typewriter. I am out of my
 respirator! Forever - They took the
 body & motor away today - I think
 of you always -
 Tammy

Home movie taken by Jerome Robbins of Aidan Mooney, Tanquil Le Clercq and Randall Bourscheidt in Spoleto, Italy.

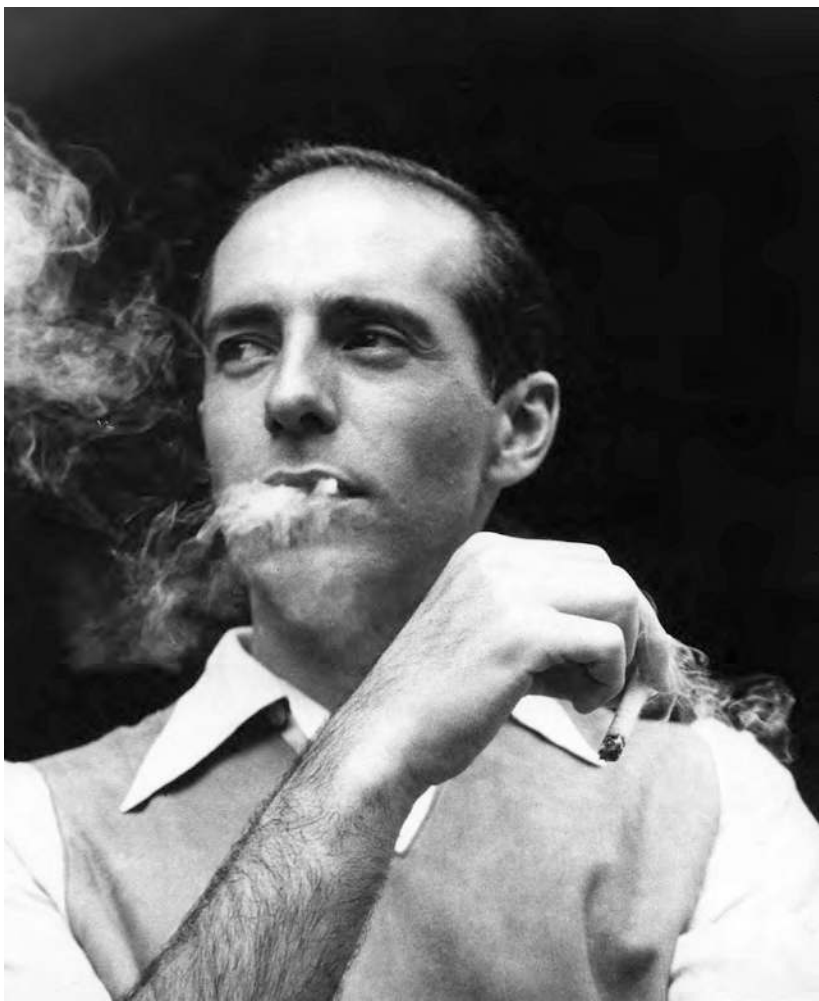


Photo by Tanaquil Le Clercq of Jerome Robbins



Photo by Jerome Robbins

NB: Many times. Many, many times. And it also makes you think about people who aren't taking vaccines today. There is one decision that can change your entire life. The other thing that I had to remind myself: that as powerful as she was and as influential as she was to dance, that was a very short period of time in her life. She ultimately lived in a wheelchair far, far longer than she ever danced.

EB: *Why should people watch this, even if they don't care about ballet?*

NB: You know, it's a universal story. It's really about how we deal with limitations. You know we have dreams and sometimes those dreams are fulfilled, but more often than not, they don't last forever. Randy Bourscheidt says so eloquently in the film that Tanny lived in the moment, as all dancers do because they know their careers are not going to last very long. It makes you really appreciate what you have and live in the moment and also understand that if your career is cut short or if your dream is cut short, it doesn't mean you can't have a life. Your life can still be very rich and I think that that's what Tanny taught us. Her personality didn't change and she did end up having quite a rich life with friends and other interests. It doesn't have to all be over when we lose what we thought was going to be the main thing we did in our lives.

EB: *So how can people see the film?*

NB: Well, we are doing some festivals. I don't have the names of them yet, but we're going to be doing more festivals, and then, most importantly, prior to the American Masters TV broadcast, we will be doing a robust theatrical release. We've just signed with Kino Lorber, and it looks like we'll be starting in New York. We'll have at least 3 weeks of screenings there and then we'll have a wide release. We'll also be available to educators, libraries and schools. We're going out of our way to make sure that they are aware of this.

EB: *What do you think Tanny would have thought of the film?*

NB: Oh God, I hope she would have loved it. I really do. She was a tough critic, and I just hope she would love it, but I don't know. It's hard for me to put myself into her place but, as Barbara Horgan says in the film, she was tough. What's interesting is that many of the dancers who came to the movie don't critique it in the way I was concerned they might. That I might have gotten something wrong in terms of dance or there was something that I left out that they would have wanted to see in. I'm not getting that at all. They just seem to be very moved by the way the story is told.

EB: *Any closing thoughts?*

NB: I just want to emphasize that these projects you don't do by yourself. I know that I'm getting a lot of nice responses to the film, and I'm very proud of it, but I really want to share that recognition with everybody who worked on it. Damian Rodriguez, our very talented editor; Ric Burns and his team at Steeplechase; Susan Lacy, former head of American Masters, who discovered the film early and saw its potential. The team at Cactus 3 who helped clear all the footage – a mammoth task. And so many more. I'm really grateful to everyone who helped – it's really a team effort.

Nancy Buirski is the founder and was the director of the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, the acclaimed international festival based in Durham, NC. Buirski produced five collections of documentary shorts in collaboration with Docurama and *The Katrina Experience*, a collection of feature-length documentaries for libraries and schools. She served as the executive producer of Pangea Day Film Content. She is currently the producer of *Althea* and *Harlem Woodstock* and she produced *Time Piece*, an innovative cross-cultural omnibus documentary combining stories of Turkish and American filmmakers. Her film, *The Loving Story*, recently won the Emmy Award for Outstanding Historical Programming and was the recipient of a coveted Peabody Award. Prior to her work in film, she was a documentary photographer, writing and photographing *Earth Angels: Migrant Children in America*, and the foreign picture editor at The New York Times.

Ellen Bar joined the New York City Ballet as a corps member in 1998 and was promoted to Soloist in 2006, where she danced until 2011. She and fellow dancer Sean Suozzi developed and produced the feature-length 35mm film adaptation of Jerome Robbins' *NY Export: Opus Jazz* and the accompanying documentary *A Ballet In Sneakers*. It premiered at South by Southwest 2010, where it won an Audience Award, and it aired on PBS' Great Performances. Ellen is the Director of Media Projects for New York City Ballet, where she develops, produces and directs film and video content for the company.

A Fortunate Misunderstanding

by Gregory Victor

In *Afternoon of a Faun: Tanaquil Le Clercq*, the luminous documentary about ballerina Tanaquil Le Clercq, film director and producer Nancy Buirski explores how Le Clercq, as a dancer and a woman, was the muse to not one great artist but two; both George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins. Le Clercq's marriage to Balanchine unified artist and inspiration, and Robbins created many of his ballets, including his reinterpretation of Claude Debussy's *Afternoon of a Faun* for her.

The ballet was set to Debussy's music, *Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un Faune*, which was inspired by a poem by Stéphane Mallarmé, which describes the reveries of a faun around a real or imagined encounter with nymphs. In 1912, Vaslav Nijinsky presented his famous ballet, drawing his ideas from both the music and the poem. The Jerome Robbins pas de deux of *Faun* was a variation on these themes. But it was as much about the dancers of New York City Ballet as any other inspiration, and it was clearly related to Tanaquil Le Clercq and Robbins' admiration of her dancing. "All of the ballets I ever did for the company," Robbins once said, "it was always for Tanny." Still today, Jacques d'Amboise, who occasionally partnered Le Clercq in the ballet states, "It was the one of the greatest roles of her career."

Although her performance in Robbins' *Afternoon of a Faun* was very well received, it is possible that a factor determining that ballet as her signature role is the existence of a kinescope of her performance. Today's audiences will never know the effect of seeing her dance a complete performance of Balanchine's *Symphony in C* or *La Valse* or Robbins' *Age of Anxiety*, to name a just a few, although we certainly see the effect of her presence in the choreography of every ballet in which she created a role.

But at least there is *Afternoon of a Faun*. The Robbins ballet is the singular complete performance of Tanaquil Le Clercq preserved on film. Of the thirty-two roles Le Clercq created in a Balanchine or a Robbins ballet, *Faun* stands alone, allowing future generations of dancers and balletomanes the rare opportunity to see her beauty and artistry in a complete performance, with their own eyes.

But the existence of this filmed performance was perhaps not always as appreciated as it is today. I visited with Jacques d'Amboise, who danced with Le Clercq in the filmed performance, and asked him to share his memories of this legendary performance of *Faun*.

It was the decade of television, and in 1952, television was introduced in Canada. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) began operations on September 6, 1952. Two days later, the CBC Symphony Orchestra was formed and the medium of television was on its way to fulfilling its promise as a tool that



would bring Canada entertainment and education, “from east to west to north,” as their motto stated. In 1951, George Balanchine’s *La Valse* had appeared on American television, in CBS’ first commercial color telecast. The CBC pursued the idea of airing a cultural event of similarly high regard; a ballet from the repertoire of the esteemed New York City Ballet. But which one?

In 1953, Jerome Robbins was hard at work, creating his *Afternoon of a Faun*. As was frequently the case with a new Robbins ballet, the dancers in rehearsal were often the last to know who would be dancing the premiere. For *Faun*, Robbins rehearsed Tanaquil Le Clercq and Francisco Moncion, and Irene Larsson and Jacques d’Amboise. D’Amboise recalled that Robbins “kept playing with us,” asking the four to keep switching partners so that he could see how the partners complemented each other. Robbins was in search of the steps, but also the feeling inherent in the poetry and the music.

The style that Robbins wanted for the ballet was one of innocence. “Both dancers should seem young and ‘unused’ somehow. They should seem vulnerable,” he stated in an interview years later. Robbins’ rehearsals were notoriously difficult, and d’Amboise, who had created roles in so many Balanchine ballets, was not thrilled to be rehearsing with Robbins. D’Amboise confessed that he often brought a book to rehearsal. “I would sit off to the side, reading my book when Jerry would work. I would watch and get it all, but I would also continue reading.” D’Amboise remembered the rehearsals as something of a test of wills between he and Robbins. “‘Hello, Jacques, are you watching? Did you get that?’ Jerry would ask,” d’Amboise recalled. “‘Got it, Jerry,’ I’d reply,” said d’Amboise. “Then, when he was ready to start a new section, he’d say, ‘Jacques, we’re moving on now,’ and I’d say, ‘OK, Jerry,’ and get up and join the rehearsal.” For d’Amboise, nothing about rehearsing with Robbins was as effortless or as efficient as rehearsing with Balanchine. “Rehearsals were miserable,” d’Amboise acknowledged. “Jerry would not decide on a ballet’s steps until he had done a thousand variations. And he was constantly playing one dancer against another. Anything his inventive mind could think up to get more passion out of a dancer, he did. He would start by using a dancer’s quirks and natural movements and then develop them into choreography. And he was famous for coming up with many steps and versions of a ballet in rehearsal. We soon learned that the first version Jerry worked out was usually the one that would most likely end up being the version he wanted in the end. He would be in the wing, with everyone about to go and say, ‘You know that first version we did for this section? That’s what we’ll do. Everyone do that.’ And it would drive the dancers crazy.”

Although Robbins loved to play with a ballet’s casting until the last minute there was never any doubt that, with Robbins’ admiration for her dancing, Le Clercq would dance the premiere of *Faun*. When it came to New York City Ballet ballerinas, Le Clercq transcended all others. With a long, elegant, tapered body, she enthralled viewers and choreographers alike. Her thoroughbred racehorse build became the prototype for George Balanchine as he refined his choreographic style, and *her* distinctive style redefined what was expected of a great ballet dancer in America.

For the premiere on Thursday, May 14, 1953, Tanaquil Le Clercq danced with Francisco Moncion. At that same performance, d’Amboise and Larsson danced the company’s season premiere of Frederick Ashton’s *Picnic at Tintagel*. D’Amboise recalled, “When *Faun* was going on, I turned down the sound in my dressing room. I didn’t want to hear it.” D’Amboise danced the part soon enough, however, (and many times) when the company went on a cross-country tour.

By 1955, the American National Theater and Academy (ANTA) sponsored a summer tour of Europe, which included performances in Monte Carlo, Marseilles, Lyons, Florence, Rome, Bordeaux, Lisbon, Paris, Lausanne, Zurich, Stuttgart, Amsterdam, and The Hague. According to d’Amboise, Balanchine’s *Western Symphony* and Robbins’ *Afternoon of a Faun* were the two smash hits with the Paris audiences in 1955. *Western Symphony* had premiered the previous fall in New York and Paris audiences adored Balanchine’s take on the Americana theme.

As for *Faun*, the Paris audiences adored an American’s take on what could be called a French theme, leading critic Edwin Denby to write: “Robbins’ new version of Debussy’s *L’Après-midi d’un faun* was the biggest hit of the season. He seemed to have struck on a new and yet right interpretation of the music, which is sultry and sensual, but dreamlike, as if unsatisfied desires fed the summer afternoon with beauty.” The ballet may have been choreographed by a guy from Weehawken, but in every other aspect, it was as French as, well, as the word “ballet.” After all, the music was by Claude Debussy. Both the music and the ballet were inspired by the poem by Stéphane Mallarmé, and it evoked the memory of a ballet that had created quite an impression when it was first performed in Paris in 1912. On top of that, the Robbins’ ballet was a pas de deux, danced by Tanaquil Le Clercq and Jacques d’Amboise, two names that any French balletomane would have no trouble pronouncing. Writing about the twenty-six year old’s dazzling performances in Paris, critic Marie-Françoise Christout declared that Le Clercq “could be compared to no other contemporary ballerina.”

The Canadian television company had heard what a sensation *Faun* was in Paris, and the pas de deux seemed entirely suited to their desire to broadcast a ballet. The producer and director, Noël Gauvin, sent letters to Le Clercq and d’Amboise inviting them to Montreal to perform it for broadcast. They agreed, assuming that Gauvin had cleared the filming with Jerome Robbins.

They arrived in Montreal, ready to perform in the cold studio, with a cement floor and very little room to warm up. Everything was in place, including the Orchestre de Radio-Canada, conducted by Désiré Defauw, off to the side. Noticeably absent was the décor by Jean Rosenthal. The white silk walls and ceiling that suggested a heavenly ballet studio were replaced by a set of ballet bars defining the dancing space and a perfectly adequate backdrop suggesting an infinity of space.

What was retained (and amplified by the television camera’s downstage placement) was the idea of the “fourth wall” as an ever-present studio mirror, allowing the dancers to play to the viewing audience while at the same time suggesting the narcissism inherent in the dancer’s world and the moment they shared. Robbins once said, “The mirror is the dancer’s work tool. Dancers live with mirrors from their very first lessons.” When the two young dancers gradually drift into moving together, they rarely confront each other face to face; they gaze at reflections of themselves and their partnership. Neither do they “perform” for the audience; they execute every movement as if discovering it for the first time.

The single camera used the entire time began filming. (Director Noël Gauvin had invented a technique where the camera could be placed low, just above the footlights, with a periscope attachment that allowed the camera to pan vertically and film at any level. The whole ballet was filmed with the lone camera, which rarely stopped its own movement.) The orchestra’s flute began playing the soft, inviting cascade of Debussy’s notes. On the harp glissando, a pool of light arose on the outstretched, relaxed body of Jacques d’Amboise, about to awaken in a dance studio. After articulating the extensions of his bodily instrument, and after

marking a series of moves and phrases, he rested on the floor and Tanaquil Le Clercq entered. He awoke and the two danced an extended moment of purity. The curiosity at play in this *Faun* resulted in a delicate, tentative kiss. The moment was transcendent. Innocence was shattered, and with an aura of sensuality surrounding it, the moment was but a memory as the ballet came to an end. Le Clercq exited and d'Amboise returned to his sleeping position, bringing to mind the original poem's unanswered question, "Did I love a dream?" As seen through the soft focus of the 1955 kinescope, the ballet's innocent, tender perfection was captured impeccably by the still-developing technology.

Dancers love to dance. They need to dance. It certainly wasn't about the pay ("I think we got paid \$500," said d'Amboise), but filming the performance gave Le Clercq and d'Amboise the opportunity to dance the ballet in between the summer European tour and the fall New York season. But the filming had never been cleared with Robbins.

It was 1955, the year that City Center initiated its annual three-month winter seasons running from November to January of the following year. Le Clercq and d'Amboise returned to rehearsals in New York and thought no more about it when, on October 6, 1955, *Afternoon of a Faun* was broadcast on CBC. D'Amboise recalled, "Then we came back to the New York City Ballet fall season -- it was *Nutcracker* time -- and somehow Jerry got word that we had done his ballet on Canadian television. And he was not happy. We said, 'We thought you knew about it. Tanny and I just received these letters asking if we would come up and dance the ballet. We figured that you had OK'd it. We're sorry. We didn't know, Jerry.' We had no idea that the TV people had not asked Jerry's permission."

What happened the following year, of course, transformed the regrettable lack of proper communication into a reason to be eternally grateful that the performance was captured on film. In the fall of 1956, while New York City Ballet was on tour in Copenhagen, Denmark, Le Clercq's career as a dancer suddenly stopped. Just weeks after her 27th birthday, she was stricken with polio and never danced, or walked, again.

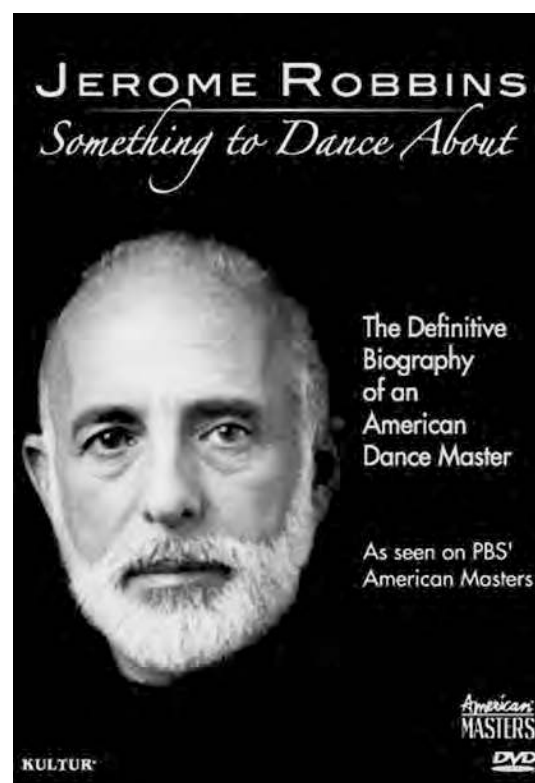
But when she *did* dance, as the *Faun* film shows, it is obvious that the superlatives attached to her legend are not overstated. In fact, they hardly seem sufficient, making the point once again, that the dance, the movement, the bodily gesture in time and space can indeed put mere words to shame.

Years later, Jerome Robbins, grateful to have a record of Le Clercq's dancing, called the filmed *Faun* incident "a fortunate misunderstanding." Indeed. What remains of the event is a faded black-and-white kinescope in which the eternally youthful Le Clercq and d'Amboise are captured forever in that moment; frozen forever in the mirror that is the camera. As d'Amboise finished recalling the filming of *Faun*, he sighed, "How I loved that ballet... and dancing with Tanny." Then the ever-exuberant, eternally vigorous D'Amboise, for a brief moment, paused at the memory, concluding that *Afternoon of a Faun* was "one of the greatest ballets that Jerry ever did."

Terpsichore triumphant. And so Tanny was.

The CBC broadcast of Jerome Robbins' *Afternoon of a Faun* may be purchased online at the Video Artists International website: http://www.vaimusic.com/VIDEO/DVD_4377_JacquesdAmboise.htm

Gregory Victor is a theatrical writer, director and stage manager, living in New York City. He is currently at work on a book about Jerome Robbins' creative output.



A "Q & A" with Judy Kinberg

Producer/Director of *Jerome Robbins: Something To Dance About...*

Presented by PBS channel Thirteen (WNET), AMERICAN MASTERS profiled Jerome Robbins in *Jerome Robbins: Something to Dance About*. Directed and produced by six-time Emmy Award-winning filmmaker Judy Kinberg and written by best-selling Robbins biographer Amanda Vaill, the two-hour film was narrated by Ron Rifkin, who performed the roles of both Robbins and his father in a workshop production of the director/choreographer's theatrical autobiography, *The Poppa Piece*. The documentary features excerpts from Robbins' personal journals, archival performance footage, and never-before-seen rehearsal recordings, as well as interviews with Jerome Robbins himself and over forty witnesses – among them Mikhail Baryshnikov; Jacques d'Amboise; Suzanne Farrell; Arthur Laurents; Peter Martins; Frank Rich; Chita Rivera; Stephen Sondheim; and Robbins' *Fiddler on the Roof* collaborators Jerry Bock, Sheldon Harnick, and Joseph Stein.

The following "Q & A with Emmy Award-winning Producer/Director Judy Kinberg" is reprinted with the kind permission of Thirteen/WNET.

With access to Jerome Robbins' personal archive and performance library, Emmy-Award-winning producer/director Judy Kinberg captures a multi-faceted portrait of the complex mid-century master. Robbins' life and works touch upon the larger issues of 20th century American culture, from the evolution of musical theater and the development of American ballet to the aspirations and struggles of first-generation Americans and the effects of McCarthyism. Kinberg was a member of the original production team of the groundbreaking DANCE IN AMERICA series, winner of over 80 major national and international awards, including 20 Emmy Awards and two Peabody's. She has developed an important body of work on dance, both performance programs and documentaries, including virtually every major American choreographer and dance company of her time, such as George Balanchine, Martha Graham, Jerome Robbins, Paul Taylor, Frederick Ashton, Antony Tudor, American Ballet Theatre, New York City Ballet, and many others. The producer/director discusses her latest film, AMERICAN MASTERS *Jerome Robbins: Something to Dance About*, which premiered February 18, 2009 on PBS.



Martha Swope



Jesse Gerstein.

Q: *You've worked with Jerome Robbins on past projects. Tell us about that experience.*

A: Robbins was a handful and a half from a producing point of view. We made three DANCE IN AMERICA programs with him, including the only complete recording to date of the much-loved *Fancy Free* and the beautiful *Other Dances*, with Natalia Makarova and Mikhail Baryshnikov. He was demanding, unsympathetic to our problems, funny, scathingly honest, told great stories, and had the best eye of anyone with whom I've worked. And there was some pretty stiff competition there. The entire time we were making the first program with him, it was often so painful that I promised myself I would never work with him again. And then I did.

Q: *What makes him an American master?*

A: Robbins brought a uniquely American sensibility to his work, beginning with his landmark ballet, *Fancy Free*, which reflected his desire to "dance about how we are today," rather than only perform the old Russian works that were the staples of ballet. He was a primary architect of four of the most enduring works of the American musical theater, including one, *West Side Story*, which was responsible for expanding and elevating the form, plus there is not a more important American-born ballet choreographer. If that's not an 'American master,' what is?

Q: *How do you approach Robbins' role during the McCarthy era when he testified before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC)?*

A: Very, very carefully and as fair-mindedly as possible. We give the facts, both from Robbins' point of view through his journal entries and also through several acquaintances, since he never discussed it publicly, and from the point of view of Madeline Lee Gilford, who he named.

Q: *What would you say is the most compelling aspect of Robbins' story?*

A: I find the fact that Robbins was so full of contradictions fascinating. He was a wildly successful man who was riddled by insecurity, a man of enormous generosity who was capable of extreme selfishness, often inarticulate in person, but a poetic writer, a homosexual who very much wanted a family when those things were mutually exclusive, a natural storyteller who aspired to master the art of the abstract ballet, a man who rejected Judaism in his youth, only to produce *Fiddler on the Roof*. People can say completely opposing things about Robbins and both be right. It happened numerous times in our interviews, sometimes with a single person.

Q: *What did you learn in making this film that surprised you the most?*

A: I was very fortunate in that I was permitted to read Robbins' diaries, and they were a revelation, not so much in what he said, but in how he said it. He was often described as "inarticulate," and in person, he sometimes was, but I was greatly impressed by how he expressed himself in words, often poetically, and we've used many quotes in the program. We had an enormous advantage in that our writer, Amanda Vaill, had written *Somewhere*, a marvelous biography of Robbins, on which she worked for eight years, so she was thoroughly familiar with all his writings, whereas I was only able to read about twelve years' worth.

Q: *With so much great material to choose from, how did you decide what to include?*

A: In some ways, there was too much material, such as all the hours of fascinating interviews we amassed, and in other ways, there wasn't enough. There are just a few fragments of Robbins dancing, for example, and virtually all of them are in the show. There are no recordings of his original Broadway shows. Even the archive tape of his compilation show, *Jerome Robbins' Broadway*, was not made with the original cast, and Robbins was so disturbed by the quality of the recording that he insisted a notice be put on the tape indicating that it did not represent his work.

In the case of the ballets, there are many which were not professionally recorded, and only archive tapes exist, which show just the architecture of the ballet from far away, but no detail, so they don't generally represent a ballet in a way that would be useful in a film biography. So what we chose to include was, in some measure, limited by what recordings exist in which the viewer can actually see the dancing well.

What, finally, we decided to include were the dances we felt were most important and were best recorded and those which enabled us to illustrate the points we wished to make about Robbins and the interconnections with his work. Nothing is there simply to represent itself; each selection is tied to an idea or an event, our aim being to illuminate the artist through the work.

Q: *How much influence does Robbins' art have on dance theater today?*

A: I think most Broadway choreographers would tell you they owe a debt to Robbins. He was instrumental in elevating the musical to an American art form. There's a reason that his greatest shows are still revived – *Fiddler* and *Peter Pan* just a few years ago, *Gypsy* right now, and next year, *West Side Story*.

Q: *From where does your love of dance come?*

A: Mark Morris once told me that he believed "dance is for anyone, but not for everyone," and I think he's right. I discovered ballet at a relatively late age, by a stroke of good fortune. I was a dramatic literature major in college and had studied music, but had no exposure to ballet, when I was invited by a young man whose parents had a subscription to American Ballet Theatre, but couldn't use the tickets, to join him for a performance. I had no idea what to expect, but it took place in a theater, so I figured I'd try it. As luck would have it, I saw a performance of *La Sylphide* with Carla Fracci and Erik Bruhn, and by the time the curtain came down, I was hooked. I've completely forgotten who my date was, but can remember the image of Fracci and Bruhn as if it were yesterday.

Amanda Vaill was nominated for the 2009 Emmy Award for Outstanding Writing for Nonfiction Programming for *Something to Dance About*, and the film won both an Emmy and a George Foster Peabody Award.

Jerome Robbins: Something To Dance About is available on Netflix and for purchase on Amazon.



Photo by Paul Kolnik of George Balanchine's *Serenade*

Some notes on ballets...

by Jerome Robbins

It is not very difficult to string together a certain amount of movement to an equal amount of music. Like filling a ditch, it isn't hard just to fill time and space with action. And some ballets are like that. The classic dance (frequently taught without recognition of its inherent power, beauty and dynamics) is often mounted on the stage in a series of classroom steps and overdecorated with clever arms, hands, costumes, set and makeup.

But what is worth striving for is difficult and challenging: to communicate a truly felt experience in as inventive and revealing way possible. For it isn't only what one says, but *how* one says it that lifts a work from the ordinary.

Each ballet must create a strange and totally new world. Each must be unique and different. Some are like places in dreams, bizarre, absurd, frightening and heavenly; but each offers a vision of some aspect of life. Each ballet is governed by its laws of behavior, relationships and morality, and it is the privilege of each ballet that these laws possibly stand well outside our own conscious recognitions. But each world must be *true* to its own laws, and it is up to the choreographer to convince and continuously assure us of their validity. One must feel safe and secure in the strange logic of behavior. An audience, liking or disliking the world presented, always knows when the subject is felt with conviction. A choreographer fails when he lacks this conviction, or doesn't strive for any, or is unable to reach into his own deep felt beliefs. Then he will fumble, twist away embarrassedly, and try frantically to cover his deception.

I believe that ballets are rituals. Each ballet is a powerful rite which evokes response about life that cannot be said in words or plots or any specifics, but which is thoroughly understood solely through sequences of movement. Try to describe Fokine's ballet *Les Sylphides* or Balanchine's *Serenade* and *Apollo*, or the dance portions of Petipa's *Swan Lake*... all of which are true rituals. You will succeed in telling how you felt and what emotions were aroused, but these intangible essences were created through the continuity of formalized abstract movements.

Finally, a ballet is a ritual of *exorcism*: it is achieved through the magic of movement. Something about our existence is perceived and felt and translated by the choreographer with the help of the dancers. The rite is formed and conditioned within a strict technique and disciplined craft. It is heightened and made larger than life by music, light, color; it finally is submitted to the collective ceremony of theatre and comes to its fulfillment under the darkness of the house, infused with the attention of assembled individuals enrapt in watching a part of their existence revealed and identified and relived.

From the Introduction to *Ballet Panorama*, Serge Lido, A.C. Black Ltd., London: 1961

Setting a Gold Standard

Jerome Robbins, Bach, and *The Goldberg Variations*

by Mindy Aloff

Jerome Robbins made *The Goldberg Variations*—the first of his several ballets to music by Johann Sebastian Bach—over a year stretching from 1970 to 1971. It is a ballet of monumental ambition, and part of the New York City Ballet audience, for whom it was made, considered it a grand folly as well, taxing their concentration beyond reason. Robbins had chosen to design a suite of storyless dances, connected to one another in time by the music and in structure by the play of choreographic themes and patterns, while excluding dramatization or even a fiber of narrative. The dancer-figures are not a group of friends, as in the 1969 Robbins hit *Dances at a Gathering*, nor are they lovers, as in the 1970 Robbins hit *In the Night*—both works to scores of Chopin miniatures (mazurkas, waltzes, nocturnes, etc.) that Robbins had assembled to serve his choreography. With *The Goldberg Variations*, however, it was Bach, not Robbins, who was doing the driving, so to speak: One could, as Robbins did, cut a few canons in Part II, but one couldn't cut too many or rearrange the variations that remained without loss of artistic integrity. Furthermore, even with cuts to the score, the ballet has a running time of some 75 minutes. And, although J.S. Bach is venerated by everyone, 75 minutes of his keyboard music—the music alone—requires a kind of rigorous attention and intellectual alertness that even George Balanchine's audience found challenging. This new ballet was no entertainment, not even the kind of Apollonian entertainment that Balanchine, whom Robbins revered, said he himself was making in his ballets. Indeed, it doesn't seem to have been made for an audience but rather for Robbins to test the limits of his gifts as an artist while the audience looked on. In an interview with *The New Yorker*, published shortly after the ballet's May 27, 1971 premiere, Robbins said:

"I guess, after the Chopin, I just wanted to get away from romantic music. I wanted to see what would happen if I got hold of something that didn't give me any easy finger ledge to climb. It seemed to me that in the *Goldberg Variations* Bach was describing something very big and architectural, and so I thought I'd try that and see how I could do. The piece was really spread over a long period, which in a way I'm grateful for because it gave me a lot of time to think. It was like approaching a beautiful marble wall. I could get no toehold, no leverage to get inside that building. The first weeks of rehearsal were as if I were hitting it and falling down, and having to start over. Chopin wasn't that hard, because of

the emotional and romantic line of the music. Bach throws you back on yourself a lot more. . . . The challenge of *Goldberg* is that it's 30 variations all in the same key and formally all alike. Yet the possibilities of interpretation are endlessly rich."

In the subsequent decades, though, *The Goldberg Variations*—"The" is part of the title of Robbins' work, thereby distinguishing it in print from the English title of Bach's—has remained in NYCB's repertory. Although not frequently performed in comparison with Robbins' Chopin ballets, the beautiful Bach "marble wall" has been scaled sufficiently often that the ballet has built up respectful adherents, even some adoring fans, both on the stage and in the auditorium. Robbins' reading of Bach's music does not quite exhibit the profundity of the 20th-century musicians associated with it in the concert hall, notably Wanda Landowska and Glenn Gould; however, his choreographic approach achieves its own architectural grandeur, and its formal playfulness is dotted with passages of intense aesthetic emotion, especially in the pas de deux.

The Goldberg Variations is divided into two "Parts," with a slight pause midway through. Named for the mid-18th century teenaged harpsichordist Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, who may first have performed the music (legendarily to divert the insomniac Count Kaiserling, although even the Web site of the Count's descendants can't confirm that), Bach's score begins with an "Aria," which is followed by, as the title page of the first (1741) published edition of the score reads, "diverse variations for harpsichord with two manuals." The note continues: "Composed for connoisseurs, for the refreshment of their spirits, by Johann Sebastian Bach, composer for the royal court of Poland and the Electoral court of Saxony, Kapellmeister and Director of Choral Music in Leipzig. . . ." After the theme makes its pilgrimage through the variations upon it, the work concludes with its restatement in its original form ("Aria da Capo")—although, as one might expect, the restatement, after all the compositional operations upon it, has a different, more intensely meaningful character.

Robbins' dance analogy for these framing statements of the theme—brand-new and then, an hour and a-quarter later, resurrected—is realized with help of Joe Eula's costumes. For the "Aria," Robbins presents a ballerina and a danseur center stage, costumed in a Baroque style (with, for the woman, heeled shoes) and dancing a minuet-like duet of battements tendus and other fundamental



Photo by Wilfried Hösl



Photo by Wilfried Hösl





Photo by Wilfried Hösl

classical steps and figures. The rest of the dances in Part I, for nearly a score of men and women, are performed with the dancers costumed in variations on practice clothes, the women *en pointe*. Then, for Part II, to a flourished musical announcement, a new cohort enters, ultimately consisting of nearly 30 men and women, all costumed in variations on Baroque dress, the women also *en pointe*. Finally, after three pas de deux for principals and various other dances, the group assumes a tableau, and the stage clears. Audiences often begin to applaud here, thinking the work is over with the last variation. But Bach and Robbins have one more thing to say: the “Aria da Capo.” The original couple returns to perform their original dance, yet, this time, they are dressed in practice clothes. During *Goldberg’s* 75 minutes, Robbins seems to be suggesting, the music, rooted in the Baroque, gradually flowers in the modern world—and Bach emerges as Our Contemporary.

To prepare this article, I spoke with NYCB pianist Cameron Grant, who has played the Bach at performances of Robbins’ ballet since 1995, and with two dancers who performed in *The Goldberg Variations* during different NYCB eras.

The first dancer is the esteemed ballerina Allegra Kent, on whom—with Bart Cook—the second of Part II’s three pas de deux was made. (As Kent was injured at the time of the première, the opening-night dancers for that pas de deux were Susan Hendl and Anthony Blum.) Kent explained that Robbins began his choreographing of the entire ballet with her and Cook’s partnered adagio. It took him only about a week of daily rehearsals to complete it: The dance “flowed out of him,” Kent observed, and he worked with uncharacteristic calm and enthusiasm. (It may have helped that Kent was one of his favorite dancers in the company.) He didn’t give verbal images to the dancers or discuss his interpretation of the Bach with them, Kent remembered: He showed her and Cook the movement he wanted, and they followed him. Kent did add that he experimented with choreography for them that proceeded at a contrasting rate to the music: “There were a lot of notes but the dance was slower.”

The other dancer I spoke with was Robert La Fosse, a principal at American Ballet Theatre during the early 1980s, whom Robbins brought over to the New York City Ballet in 1986. In 1989, La Fosse went with Robbins to the commercial revue *Jerome Robbins’ ‘Broadway’* and then, when that show had run its course, returned to NYCB. (He still performs some character parts in its repertory.) Around 1990, Robbins cast him, with Stephanie Saland, in the first *Goldberg* pas de deux of Part II, originally danced by Karin von Aroldingen and Peter Martins.

La Fosse loved dancing in the ballet and pondered Robbins’ intentions during a recent interview. He spoke of the choreography as a type of deconstruction of the music and pointed out that many of the dance variations “are about numbers”—how many men and how many women are visible, how the dance is counted by the dancers. “He was really interested in the music,” La Fosse said, “the difference between legato and staccato. And he wanted certain effects. Some stuff is really hard, as when we’re moving in slow motion. You’re working for a *quality*—textures, rolling through point, or clear and crystalline.

This is really different from his other ballets, like *Fancy Free* [where there are characters or dramatic figures]. Here, you come as you are, as in Balanchine. [Robbins] is trying to make a pure dance-ballet in the House of Balanchine. He was respectful: He quoted Balanchine often and used what he knew. I could feel it: the *épaulement*, the emphasis on *croisé*, the partnering where the man displays the woman. But, unlike Balanchine, Jerry didn’t often teach class, and when he did, he couldn’t come up with combinations. His relationship to ballet was different from Balanchine’s, who came from *The Sleeping Beauty* and daily class. [Robbins in *The Goldberg Variations*] wants to be something he’s not. He’s pushing to do the formality. It’s a pulling between him and the Baroque and Balanchine, and it’s a struggle.”

From Cameron Grant, I was curious to learn how the way he played Bach’s music for Robbins’ ballet differed from how he would approach it as a soloist in a concert hall. “There’s a natural tension between the music and the dance,” he said, “a push and pull in the rehearsal process. Musicians want it a certain way, and [yet] dancers have to be able to dance; when [a musician] does any performance [for dancing], the music has to be predictable for the dancers. As a result, [what would be] slow tempos [in a concert hall] tend to be on the fast side [for the ballet], and fast tempos tend to be [in the ballet] on the slower side. This happens a lot with Jerry’s dances. In a fast tempo, Jerry generally landed in a zone that made the music awkward to play, because he wanted to put in steps, and I had to pull back just enough to give him room. I can pull out a tempo, but Jerry would scowl and say, ‘Don’t make a big ritard.’ [The late NYCB pianist] Gordon Boelzner told me that, on the opening night of *Dances at a Gathering*, Jerry said to him, ‘Just like class, Baby. Just like class [i.e., no rubato].’ You want to shoot yourself with Chopin. But Gordon was amazing; he made it sound like great music. You see, Jerry liked syncopation, and with too much rubato rhythm, the syncopation might not be clear.”

In *The Goldberg Variations*, Grant observed, even with the tempo restrictions Robbins wanted there’s always a point when Bach brings emotion to the fore. “The last variation is the ‘Quodlibet.’ The dancers are all facing the piano, as if to say, ‘Here’s to you, Bach!’ Then the [ensemble] begins to dissipate, and I play the ‘Aria da Capo.’ When I get to this, I have tears in my eyes: The preceding hour and 15 minutes has been a journey, hard and long, and the concentration required is so intense. Then you come back to the ‘Aria.’ The tempo doesn’t matter; you have a kind of release. You just play music.”

Mindy Aloff is the author of *Hippo in a Tutu: Dancing in Disney Animation* and, most recently, the editor of *Leaps in the Dark: Art and the World by Agnes de Mille*. She teaches courses on dance history and criticism at Barnard College, in New York City.

On choreographing *On the Town*, out-of-town...

An Interview with Joshua Bergasse

by Gregory Victor

Set in 1944, *On the Town* is the story of three sailors who have just 24 hours of liberty in New York City, before being shipped out. The war is on and their future consists of an overseas adventure from which they might not return. Squeezed for time, they manage to find love and adventure in the Big Apple before the day is over.

Credits for any production of *On the Town* indicate that the musical is "based on an idea by Jerome Robbins." This does not mean that it is a reproduction, but merely an acknowledgement that the musical is filled with the same ideas and spirit that made *Fancy Free*, the ballet by Robbins upon which the musical is based, an instant hit. To choreograph a new production of *On the Town* is surely an intimidating task, given the beloved association of the story of the three sailors with the iconic choreography of Jerome Robbins.

Joshua Bergasse is a NYC based choreographer and teacher who has been in the business for over 20 years. Josh was the choreographer of the NBC series *SMASH*, produced by Steven Spielberg, which earned him an Emmy Award for "Outstanding Choreography" in 2012. An accomplished performer, Joshua has performed on Broadway and on national tour for several shows, including *Movin' Out*, *Hairspray*, *The Life*, and *West Side Story*. He is set to choreograph the New York City Center Encores! production of *Little Me* in February, 2014.

Joshua Bergasse choreographed the acclaimed production of *On the Town* that played this past summer at the Barrington Stage Company in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. In a very positive New York Times review of the show, Ben Brantley wrote, "Best known for his work on television ("Smash," "So You Think You Can Dance"), Mr. Bergasse takes to the stage with a relaxed confidence and, most important, a feel for dance as a medium for defining individual character." While evoking the mood of the 1940s, Joshua Bergasse provided original and spectacular choreography that was entirely new, but was also a tribute to the Jerome Robbins genius for telling a story through movement.

GV: When did you know that you wanted to choreograph?

JB: I grew up in my mother's dance school and I started teaching there at a fairly young age -- around 15 or 16 -- and I was choreographing for recitals and competitions, and it just became what I did. I started to get those abilities and tools and skills early in my life... not even knowing that I was getting that. Just learning how to be creative in that way, and how to use that part of my brain. So when I moved to New York, it was just a logical thing to start teaching there, and to take every opportunity to choreograph benefits and showcases. People would tell me they were doing a showcase, and then ask me if I'd choreograph a number, and I'd say, "Sure! Of course! That's what I do." But I didn't realize that I was going to be a professional choreographer until much later.

Then I came to New York on vacation and I went to an audition for a national tour of *West Side Story*. We did the original Jerome Robbins choreography, and I got the role of Baby John. That took me on tour for two years. I wasn't going to take the job, but my mom said, "You have to take this." My time with the Robbins choreography for *West Side Story* informed me as a dancer and a choreographer more than any other experience. After the tour, I came to New York and I danced and then started dabbling in choreography because I had done it at my mom's studio. Then I just kept choreographing until I was doing more of that than dancing. It was kind of a natural transition.

GV: So what was your first professional choreography?

JB: My first work as a choreographer was in 2000, for a theater piece at the Cherry County Playhouse (in Western Michigan) called *Crash Nation*. One of the great numbers in that piece was a mix of tap dance with fraternity step dancing. It was very rhythmic and powerful, and we used it to tell a story. The whole piece was born out of the incident at Columbine High School, looking at how kids who went through that find a way to deal with it. That was my first professional choreography.

GV: What was it like, as a first time choreographer, to use choreography as a means of expression to communicate something that was contemporary and relevant?



Photo by Lee Cherry of Joshua Bergasse

JB: It was daunting, because it was something new, that was going to be seen by audiences for the first time. I wasn't making up steps for a musical already written, where I knew what the beginning, middle and end would be. It was a brand new creation.

GV: Let me ask you, then, about choreographing a musical that has been seen before -- *On the Town*. I've known you since we both worked together on Twyla Tharp's *Movin' Out*, where I was a stage manager and you were a dancer. I bring that up because we both worked for years on that show, and it was centered on the experience and effects of war on the lives of its characters. When you approached the material in *On the Town*, did your experience in *Movin' Out* inform it in any way?

JB: That's an interesting question. I think that *Movin' Out* was such a profound experience for me, and for everybody who was a part of it, because so many of us had never gone through a wartime experience. I have family members who have been in a war, but I never had that firsthand experience, so you learn about that while working on *Movin' Out* and you draw upon those emotions to get through the show. I think that, although I didn't relate the two shows together... You know, this production of *On the Town* was directed by John Rando, who gave us a really wonderful speech on the first day of rehearsal, where he told the story of *On the Town* and ended it by saying, "And the sailors went off to war." And then he added, "and then they came back... And what if they came back and they were reunited with the women they had met during their 24 hours leave in New York City... and then those couples had children... and then their children had children... and those children are your parents?"

GV: That suggests a continuity of the war experience in 20th century American history.

JB: It puts these shows in perspective. Because it seems like it was so long ago. You can look at *On the Town* as a happy-go-lucky period piece, because it's so long ago, but it takes place in a nation at war. And you don't know if, after this 24 hour leave when they go back to war, if they're ever going to come back. And that's the weight of it.



Photo by Florence Vandamm of *On the Town* (original Broadway production)

GV: And the "wait" of it, you could say... In the original production, that was something profoundly felt by the audience, which itself was often full of sailors who would be seeing their first Broadway show, having obtained tickets from the USO. The show's bittersweet quality, a result of confronting the unknowable future during the war, permeated the musical and was carried out into the sidewalks of Times Square as audiences left the theatre.

JB: It puts it in perspective. I think that the original Broadway production began with the playing of "The Star Spangled Banner," and it was John Rando's brilliant idea to do that again. I think that it gives perspective to what you're about to see – that it's not just musical comedy. Especially when you see the service members in the audience – the men who, as soon as they hear that "Star Spangled Banner," stand right up. When I see that, and when the rest of the audience sees that, it's an instant reminder of what this is about.

GV: When Jerome Robbins viewed the ballet *Fancy Free* over the decades, he felt that one of the biggest challenges was in maintaining the distinct characters of the three sailors, each of whom have their own disposition and personality. How did you incorporate the characterization of the three sailors into your choreography, or even just the quality of their movement? Where did you start?

JB: We started with the casting of the roles. It was about finding the right actor to play each of those sailors. As a choreographer, it's important to be prepared, but when you're dealing with a piece like *On the Town*, you have to draw upon what those actors and dancers bring to it. Tony Yazbeck has this wonderful quality as Gabey. He's sentimental and sweet, and he feels everything very deeply and he brings that to his dancing. So when I give him certain moves, I say to myself, "Yes, this works very well on him, or no this isn't right for him." And then, working with

Jay Armstrong Johnson, he has this comical quality and this looseness and this fearlessness. So you find that in him and you bring that out and you barely have to do anything -- he just comes up with it on his own. I think it really begins with casting, and then discovering the movement with those people that you cast. As much as the term "organic" is overused, that really makes the physicalization of the characters organic.

GV: What is your process in choreographing a show?

JB: Usually my process begins with getting to know the music intimately. Then I get into a studio in a pre-production phase with some dancers, not necessarily in the show, but people that I work with and that I am comfortable with. We just bounce ideas off of each other and we come up with a framework for a lot of the pieces. Then there are other pieces where I realize that it's so specific to the character that it needs to be created on them, when I have them. I'd say fifty percent of it is created before rehearsals begin and fifty percent with the actors in the show.

GV: How did you avoid the trap of choreographing only to the rehearsal piano's reduction of the complete score? Your dances are full of choreographic moments that almost demand the specific orchestration in Leonard Bernstein's score.

JB: You know what I did? I got to know the music through Bernstein's symphonic recordings. So when we were in rehearsal with just the piano – and we didn't even have drums, just the piano – I knew what the orchestration was going to be. It was very important. Then when you finally get to hear the orchestra, you realize, "No, this is wrong here," and so you start making adjustments. I've learned my lesson from working on previous shows when I didn't know the orchestrations



Photo by Kevin Sprague of *On the Town* (Barrington Stage production)

and it was a surprise to me. At which point I realized that everything was wrong, and that I had to redo choreography because the pianist played it this way in rehearsal, because that's what was on their page, but the actual orchestration is something completely different. Now I make sure that I know what the orchestration will sound like and what the tempos will be.

GV: *When did you first encounter the choreography of Jerome Robbins?*

JB: It was definitely the film of *West Side Story*. In my household, growing up, we were big fans of it. That was kind of like a bible to me in my younger years, as a teenager. Doing high school productions, doing it at the dance school in recitals, using that music.

GV: *Did you do any specific research for *On the Town*? Did you watch *Fancy Free*, for example?*

JB: I did not. I've seen *Fancy Free*. But I didn't go back and look at it again. I felt so comfortable with *On the Town* and with the style of the show that I didn't feel that I needed to research any movement. I didn't want to, because, obviously we weren't recreating the original choreography. I didn't want to compare myself – because that would be daunting to do that – with Jerome Robbins.

GV: *I was curious about that because in your staging there is one moment at the end of Act One when your choreography encapsulated an entire scene in the ballet *Fancy Free* with just one movement phrase. All of the characterization and motivation was there.*

JB: You know what's really funny? While the show was running this summer, I got an email and a phone call from Julianne Boyd, the Artistic Director of the

Barrington Stage Company saying that she got a letter from someone who came up from New York to see the show, who wrote that they couldn't believe that we didn't credit Jerome Robbins for the choreography, because it was clearly the original Robbins choreography. But I've never seen it, and I got really nervous and thought, "Gosh... what if I accidentally recreated the original choreography?"

GV: *You know, Jerry Robbins got the idea of using three sailors from actually observing the sailors on leave in New York City during the war. He was struck by the fact that the sailors went around in threes, rather than alone or in pairs. So, he put three men and two girls on stage. Talk about dramatic structural possibilities. It brings to mind the George Balanchine quote, "Put a man and a girl on stage and there is already a story; a man and two girls, there's already a plot." Will this production of *On the Town* have a life beyond Barrington Stage? Is there talk of bringing it to Broadway?*

JB: I'm hoping. It would be really nice. I think we were able to tell the heart of the story simply and sweetly.

GV: *Simply and sweetly. Not unlike the show's closing ballad. Well, Josh, thank you for sharing, and we'll catch up, as they say, "some other time."*

Note: At the time of this newsletter's printing, there are continued plans for this production of *On the Town* to open on Broadway, with a full production anticipated for this year. In December of 2013, a developmental dance lab workshop of the musical took place.

Ellen Sorrin,

Director, The Jerome Robbins Foundation; Trustee, The Robbins Rights Trust writes:

Jerome Robbins was a very important person in my life, long before I met him. *Peter Pan* was the first Broadway show I saw as a young child. I fell in love with the theater at that very moment. Of course *West Side Story*, *Gypsy* and *Fiddler on the Roof* followed, which only made my admiration for his artistry and love for his work even greater.

It was a twist of fate that put us together decades later to work on an historic event; he as artistic director and I as producer for the New York dance community's response to AIDS, *Dancing for Life*, on October 5, 1987.

Heading to New York City Ballet to produce the 1988 American Music Festival, I was once again in Jerry's sphere, as he and Peter Martins were the co-directors of the Company. In 1990, I produced "A Festival of Jerome Robbins Ballets," which was the Company's tribute to Jerry.

Jerry wasn't an easy person and as hard as many felt he was on those he worked with, he was even harder on himself. I grew to understand his passion as well as his demons. I learned a great deal from Jerry, and his striving for perfection gave me a look into how he pushed himself, and the rest of us, to be our best.

When Jerry died in 1998, I was appointed in his will to be a member of his advisory council, which was given the responsibility to make decisions about his ballets. Our group took that responsibility very seriously and worked together to support and expand his legacy.

Now that I have joined the Foundation and the Trust, taking on a new role, I look forward to continuing to make a contribution to Jerry's place in history as well as to make certain that his name will remain an important part of the future of both ballet and Broadway.

Ellen Sorrin is also Director of the George Balanchine Trust as well as Managing Director of the New York Choreographic Institute, an affiliate of New York City Ballet.

Upcoming Performances of Jerome Robbins Works...

Here is a select list of upcoming performances of Jerome Robbins works in the USA and elsewhere.

MAY 2014:

1, 3, 6, 7, 9, 11
San Francisco: GLASS PIECES (ballet); San Francisco Ballet

28, 29, 30, 31
Toronto: OPUS 19/THE DREAMER (ballet); National Ballet of Canada

31
London: THE CONCERT (ballet); Royal Ballet

JUNE 2014:

1
Toronto: OPUS 19/THE DREAMER (ballet); National Ballet of Canada

5, 6, 10, 12, 13
London: THE CONCERT (ballet); Royal Ballet

19, 21, 23, 25, 27, 29
Paris: DANCES AT A GATHERING (ballet); Paris Opera Ballet

JULY 2014:

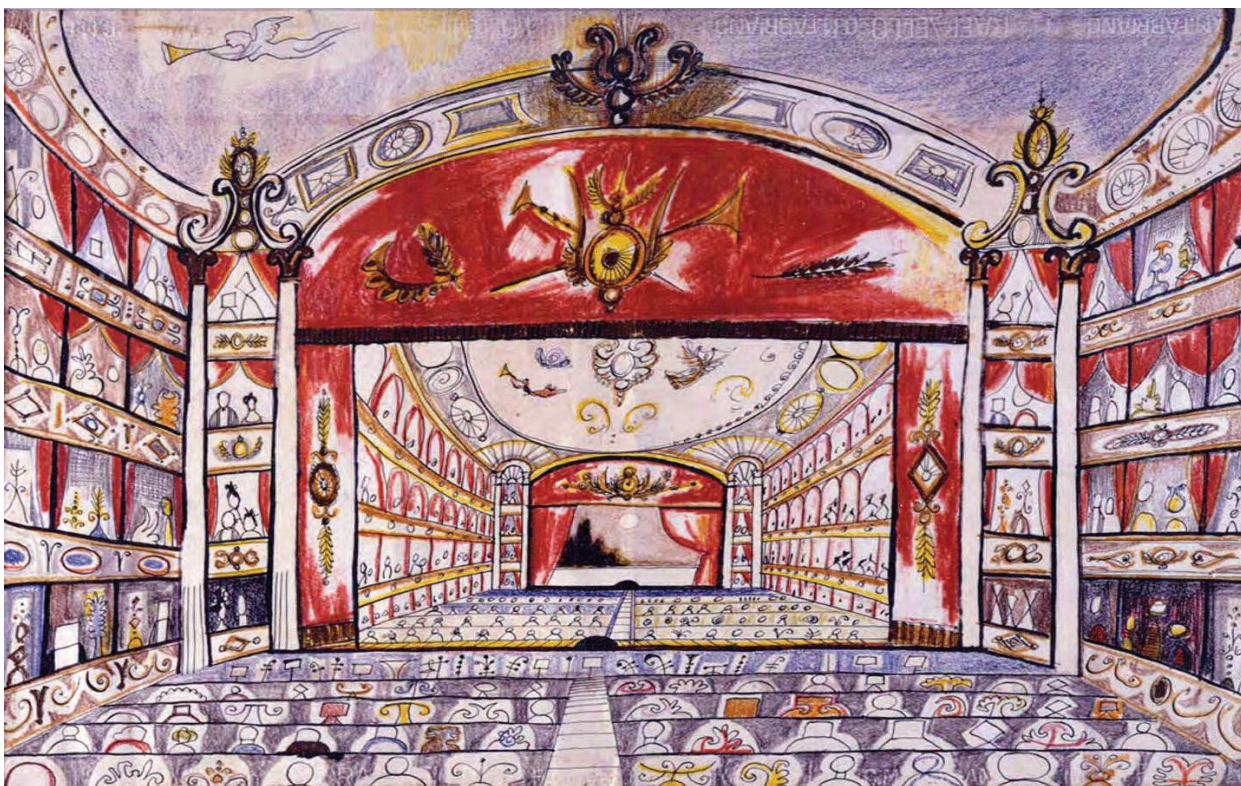
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7
Paris: DANCES AT A GATHERING (ballet); Paris Opera Ballet

JULY 2014:

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7 Paris: DANCES AT A GATHERING (ballet); Paris Opera Ballet

9, 11
Saratoga: GLASS PIECES (ballet); New York City Ballet

10, 12
Saratoga: CIRCUS POLKA (ballet); New York City Ballet



Show curtain for *The Concert*, designed by Saul Steinberg. ©The Saul Steinberg Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

The Business of Show

by Allen Greenberg

Jerome Robbins had ownership rights, both as an author and choreographer in both theatrical and ballet works. The experiences one of his executors and trustees learned from the disposition of these rights and from discussing what others have done with their rights is reflected in part below.

Whether a choreographer, composer, lyricist, author, costume, set or lighting designer, one day you are at that meeting with your lawyer discussing your will and the planning that goes with it. You will need to seriously consider your rights related to the production you worked on. Some questions you may need to consider:

- Do you wish all your rights to be “gathered” in the same entity – say a trust, or to be given outright to specific beneficiaries or a combination of both?
- Who do you wish to control those rights – initially, and subsequently when those individuals selected can no longer serve?
 - You may wish to select more than one person to approve future productions of your work along with artistic control. You should be mindful that maintaining artistic integrity could be in conflict with maximizing revenue. Careful consideration is needed.
- Who do you wish to be the recipient of the income that is earned?
- Do you wish to “parcel” out a right – e.g.,- to some the use in the U.S. and to others outside the U.S. (this can cause major conflicts among beneficiaries).
 - For example, if you give one beneficiary the U.S. rights to a work and another the non-U.S. rights, a conflict can occur say for a U.S. based ballet company that wishes to perform that ballet on tour outside the U.S. Or, if you provide 2 individuals each, with the rights to a different ballet, and a company wishes to perform both, the company now has to negotiate with 2 individuals....adding complexity and possibly conflicts among beneficiaries.
- Do you wish to provide any specific instructions to the trustee(s) if bequeathed to a trust or to an individual(s) if bequeathed as such?

Jerome Robbins bequeathed all his rights, both his theatrical and ballet rights, to a trust with individuals and a Foundation as the beneficiaries of the income earned by the trust.

This structure allows the trustees to exploit all of his rights in an organized manner and allows the beneficiaries a share on a percentage basis that Mr. Robbins determined, in the income from all his rights rather than rely on any specific work for income. It also allows for the trustees to license the work to avoid any conflicts with any other licensees – e.g., in different territories, a potential problem discussed earlier.

As you can see, there are many areas, including artistic and financial, that need to be considered regarding the rights to an artist’s works. The above is in no way an exhaustive discussion of the many areas one should consider when considering what one may wish to do with their rights at death.

Next to come: charitable alternatives while alive.

The information in this column contains general information about financial and legal matters. The information is not advice, and should not be treated as such.

Allen Greenberg was a long time financial advisor to Mr. Robbins and is currently a Director of The Jerome Robbins Foundation and a Trustee of The Robbins Rights Trust. Mr. Greenberg is a co-founder and officer of PEF Services, an administrative service provider to private capital funds. He currently serves as an officer and director to The Geraldine Stutz Trust, Director of FEGS, and officer and director of Remi Arts.

The Floria V. Lasky Award and Symposium

In honor of Floria Lasky, the Jerome Robbins Foundation created the Floria V. Lasky Award and Symposium. Floria Lasky entered Hunter College at the age of 14. After graduating first in her class at New York University law school in 1945, she joined the law firm of Fitelson & Mayers, where she would stay for the next 62 years, eventually becoming a partner. A master negotiator, she was a leader in the field of entertainment law. For more than fifty years she knew Jerome Robbins, whom she represented, and she continued to serve as president of The Jerome Robbins Foundation and trustee of The Robbins Rights Trust until she died in 2007.

Most recently, the Floria V. Lasky Award was given to Cora Cahan, President of The New 42nd Street. Ms. Cahan was the third recipient of the Floria V. Lasky Award. Past recipients include Paul H. Epstein and New York City Center, accepted by Arlene Shuler.

As she accepted the award, given in recognition of her contributions to the cultural landscape of New York City, Ms. Cahan remarked, “I’m pleased and proud to receive this honor, which pays tribute to a remarkable woman. Floria Lasky was a born-and-bred New Yorker who I met over 40 years ago. Her friendship coupled with her commitment to artists and to advancing the cultural life of this great city has always meant the world to me.”



Cora Cahan.

After a distinguished career as a dancer, Cora Cahan metamorphosed into an effective arts administrator, co-founding and serving as Executive Director of the Feld Ballet, developing the Lawrence A. Wien Center for Dance and Theater familiarly called “890 Broadway,” and acquiring and transforming the Elgin Cinema into the award-winning Joyce Theater, New York’s pre-eminent theater for dance.

In 1990, Cora Cahan was recruited to become President of The New 42nd Street, a non-profit organization established by New York State and New York City charged with restoring and finding appropriate uses for seven neglected historic theaters on the blighted block between Broadway and Eighth Avenue. The renewal of 42nd Street began in December 1995 with the rehabilitation and restoration of The New Victory Theater, New York’s first theater entirely devoted to children and families. Over the course of the following ten years, The New 42nd Street initiated and supervised the transformation of the remaining theaters and designed, built and operated the New 42nd Street Studios, a \$34.7 million facility which houses rehearsal studios, offices, and a 199-seat black box theater, The Duke on 42nd Street, creating a permanent workplace for performing artists and the creative process on 42nd Street.

The Floria V. Lasky Award was presented in conjunction with the Floria V. Lasky Symposium. In 2012, The Jerome Robbins Foundation and The Rockefeller Brothers Fund embarked on a new annual undertaking - The Floria V. Lasky Symposium - with the intention of providing actionable information to our not-for-profit community while honoring Ms. Lasky’s dedication to the cultural life of New York City. The Floria V. Lasky 2012 Symposium focused on technology strategy, planning and implementation, and offered sessions featuring leaders in arts and culture. The Floria V. Lasky 2013 Symposium was devoted to “Embodying your Brand,” with “brand,” in this context referring to the culture of an organization, and how that is conveyed both internally and externally.

Jerome Robbins in Spoleto

by Amanda Vaill

Jerome Robbins first visited Spoleto in 1958, when at the invitation of Giancarlo Menotti he brought a small dance company, Ballets: U.S.A., to the inaugural Festival dei Due Mondi. At the festival the company created a sensation with the premiere of Robbins's *New York Export: Opus Jazz*; but perhaps more important for Robbins personally was the relationship he forged with the city of Spoleto. "It was the first time that I felt my life and my work were in equal balance," he said later. "I was in heaven." He was to return to Spoleto often over the years: creating dances with Ballets: U.S.A. - among them *Moves* (1959) and *Events* (1961); directing experimental theater for the Festival during the 1960's; choreographing an international cast of dancers in *Celebration: The Art of the Pas de Deux* (1973); and, during the 1970's and early 80's, simply using it as a place of respite and renewal. "I love the sensitive grace of everything there," he said, "the buildings, the fountains, the mountains, the terrain, the people, the food, the gesture, the culture. There's such a beauty to the eye and to the spirit. When you first come, you see all the obvious things: the Piazza del Duomo, with its incredible stairs, and the Duomo at the far end, the aqueduct. But when you live there for awhile you start to notice the cornices and the lamps and the archways and the alleys - and everything begins to bloom. Something about the whole place makes me feel like I belong there, or I'm from there." In 1972 the Commune of Spoleto offered him the lifetime use of a small stone house standing at one end of the Ponte delle Torre; and although other commitments made it impossible for him to accept it, he was deeply touched. "In Spoleto, the daily respect for me as an artist moves me," he wrote in his journal, admonishing himself never to forget this "magical, holy" place. "Restore yourself here," he said. From his writings and from the work that he created here, it's clear that he did.

Amanda Vaill is the author of the bestselling *Everybody Was So Young: Gerald and Sara Murphy—A Lost Generation Love Story*, which was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award in biography, and *Somewhere: The Life of Jerome Robbins*, for which she was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship. In addition to her screenplay for the Emmy- and Peabody Award-winning public television documentary *Jerome Robbins: Something to Dance About*, she has also written features and criticism for a range of journals from *Allure* to *The Washington Post Book World*. She lives in New York City. Her new book, a work of narrative historical nonfiction entitled *Hotel Florida: Truth, Love and Death in the Spanish Civil War*, will be published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux in April 2014.



Photo by Jerome Robbins

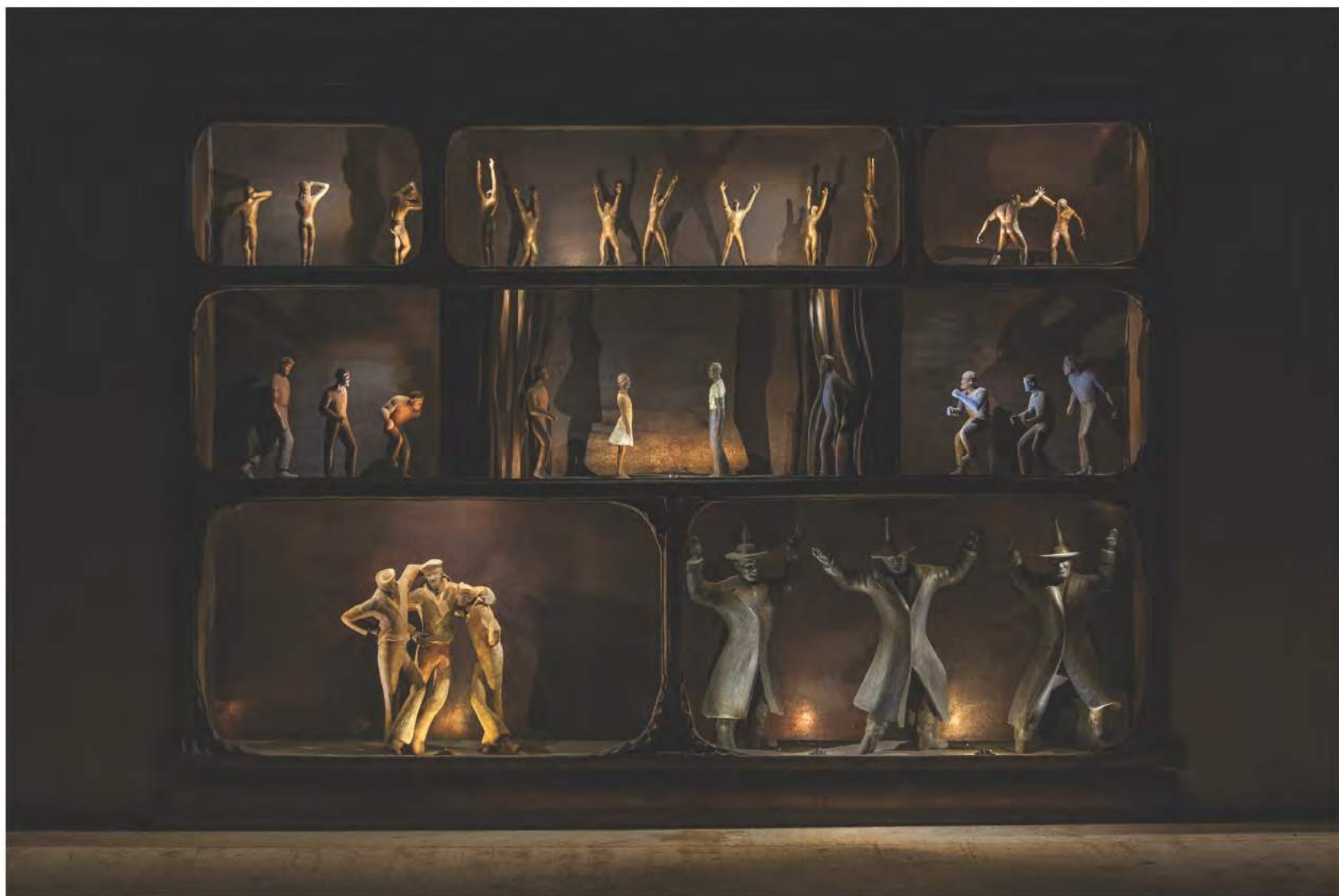


Photo by Stefano Bonilli

La Terrazza Jerome Robbins nel Teatro Nuovo di Spoleto



In the summer of 2009, the city of Spoleto, Italy honored the artistic legacy of Jerome Robbins with a permanent sculptural installation on the terrace of the Teatro Nuovo. At the reception, artist Robin Heidi Kennedy unveiled her life-size statue of Jerome Robbins on the terrace of the Teatro Nuovo, now called the Jerome Robbins Terrace. The sculptures were installed in recognition of Mr. Robbins' fundamental and sustaining relationship with the town and the Festival dei Due Mondi.

Spoleto had always been especially near to Robbins' heart, and he recalled the city affectionately as the site of many unforgettable experiences over the years. During the period in which the Teatro Nuovo was being restored, Mayor Brunini enthusiastically welcomed the idea of a monument to Robbins in Spoleto's main theater. The year dedicated to Jerome Robbins (July 2008/July 2009) by theaters all over the world, and particularly by the Paris Opera Ballet and the New York City Ballet, closed with the inauguration of the Terrace dedicated to Jerome Robbins at the Teatro Nuovo.

The group of sculptures conceived and created by Kennedy for the Terrace includes a life-sized bronze statue of Robbins and a three-level "theatrical book-case" containing twenty-eight figures based on some of the best known characters from Robbins' ballet and theatrical work. Several of these figures were created specifically for Spoleto during past editions of the Festival dei Due Mondi.

Robin Heidi Kennedy was born in Coyoacán, in Mexico. She initially studied Visual Arts, then both scenic and costume design, at the North Carolina School of the Performing Arts. Then she worked, first as a caricature artist and later as a scenic artist in theatre and film, in both the USA and Italy, before dedicating those skills to sculpture. She lives and works in both Red Hook, Brooklyn and the outskirts of Spoleto, Italy.

Photo by Stefano Bonilli



Photo by Martha Swope

The Baryshnikov Archive Finds a Home at the Jerome Robbins Dance Division

by Ariel Davis

The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center is home to the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, the largest and most comprehensive archive in the world devoted to the documentation of dance. Jerome Robbins had a long history of supporting The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. In 1964, the Library established a film and video archive of dance with an endowment set up by Robbins using a percentage of his royalties as author from *Fiddler on the Roof*. On his death in 1998, Robbins bequeathed his personal archive to the Library and with additional financial support from The Jerome Robbins Foundation, in 1999 the Dance Division was named in his honor. The Foundation continues to provide financial support begun by Jerome Robbins to the Dance Division.

One of the most recent acquisitions of the Jerome Robbins Dance Division is the Mikhail Baryshnikov Archive; letters, photographs, films, videos and ephemera from Baryshnikov's personal collection. James Duffy, long-time member of the Committee for Jerome Robbins Dance Division and board member of the Baryshnikov Arts Center, was instrumental in the process of acquiring the archive.

With a legendary career that included dancing with such companies as American Ballet Theatre, New York City Ballet and the Royal Ballet, and becoming the artistic director of American Ballet Theatre and the White Oak Dance Project, Baryshnikov had a well-established relationship with the Library's Dance Division. He was preparing to move when he decided to donate his collection to the Library in July of 2011. "That's usually how it happens," explained the Robbins Dance Division curator, Jan Schmidt. "People start to move and realize they have all this stuff. It's interesting because it's someone mid-career, and a fluid collection. We didn't know what it was, or what we'd find. His wife would call and say she found a box under the bed and we'd take it."

Once all of the material had been gathered, it totaled 34 boxes (13 linear feet). In 2011, the Lincoln Center Library put some of the prominent pieces up for display in an Archival Preview exhibit. However, the curators are still finding things of interest as they process the material, coming across hidden gems in boxes of restored videos.

Video preservation is a separate project, explained Schmidt. With support from the Doris Duke Grant, they have undertaken the task of digitally preserving the entire dance video collection, allowing it to be accessible online in the library. Currently, access to video is given to viewers in the library through a manual process; the preservation project will eventually allow users to view videos at any time.

The videos in the Baryshnikov Archive are the first in the library to be digitally processed, making them the first to be accessible online. "There's a video of Baryshnikov sitting at Martha Graham's feet and talking to her. The variety of people he has worked with, and the way he works with them, is really interesting," said Schmidt. Tara Kelley, who is in charge of viewing and digitizing the extensive Baryshnikov film and video collection is still sifting through the material, in search of dance history treasure. The film and video collection includes a performance by a ten-year-old Baryshnikov and rehearsal sessions with the likes of George Balanchine, Jerome Robbins, Merce Cunningham, and Martha Graham. Kelley is particularly impressed by the rehearsal footage, which, although seemingly technical and not obvious in its entertainment quotient upon first viewing, gives an informative glimpse into the daily life of dancers. There is video footage showing Baryshnikov dancing as a student in Leningrad, as well as video of George Balanchine rehearsing him in the title role of *Prodigal Son*. "He's showing Baryshnikov how to crawl," laughed Kelley, "and there's a humorous exchange with the dancers. There are these girl dancers walking over a fence and he's saying comically, 'No, do it like this, ta-da-da-da.'"

In the Archive are various items related to Baryshnikov's work with Jerome Robbins, including correspondence between the two artists dating from 1983 through 1995. Danielle Castronovo, the librarian in charge of processing the materials, notes that those interested in Baryshnikov's work with Robbins should peruse the Archive's box of telegraphs, letters and other correspondence. There are also several Robbins-related videos. Baryshnikov's unique artistic collaboration with Robbins can be seen in a performance (from 1992) of Baryshnikov in Robbins' *A Suite of Dances*, a favorite for Kelley. "In this video you see Baryshnikov doing these cartwheels and leaping. You can see that Robbins outlined the choreography for him perfectly," she said. In the Archive, there are photographs of Baryshnikov rehearsing Robbins' *Other Dances* (for the Kennedy Center Honors), and a performance video of *A Suite of Dances* on tour in Japan (in 1994). "He kept returning to Robbins," said Kelley.

Those wanting to view the Archive should put in a request at the Lincoln Center Library, which houses the collection at an offsite facility and allows restricted monitored viewing at the branch. The extra effort is worth it, according to Kelley, who notes that "the best is yet to come," referring to the videos that will soon be accessible.

"Baryshnikov is an amazing artist with such a range, everything from classical ballet to modern," said Schmidt of the collection. "He has such an incredible artistry. And now he has shared that with us."

Ariel Davis is a writer living in New York City.

NEWS FROM THE JEROME ROBBINS FOUNDATION

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With respect and admiration for their lifelong contribution and inspiration, we dedicate, in memoriam, this inaugural issue to Jerold Couture, Floria V. Lasky and Daniel Stern.



Floria V. Lasky, a remarkable woman in so many ways, was a leader in the field of entertainment law and a lead partner in the law firm Fitelson, Lasky, Aslan & Couture. She was President and Director of The Jerome Robbins Foundation and Trustee of The Robbins Rights Trust. Floria was a master negotiator, representing a wide range of clients, including Jerome Robbins, Jule Styne, Elia Kazan, Tennessee Williams and Carson McCullers. With a career spanning more than six decades, Floria was an inspiration and mentor to generations.



Daniel Stern, a long-standing friend of Jerome Robbins, was a director of The Jerome Robbins Foundation. Dr. Stern was a world-renowned author and lecturer who worked for more than forty years in research and practice, as well as in developmental psychology and psychodynamic psychotherapy.



Jerold Couture, a prominent lawyer in the theater world who represented many of its biggest names, was a partner in the firm, Fitelson, Lasky, Aslan & Couture. Jerold Couture was a lawyer, trusted advisor and a friend to both The Robbins Rights Trust and The Jerome Robbins Foundation.