

NEWS FROM THE JEROME
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Jerome Robbins





ITALY'S SPOLETO FESTIVAL TURNS 60

The Spoleto Festival—the Festival dei Due Mondi, or the Festival of Two Worlds—was born in 1958, on the impetus of the master composer Gian-Carlo Menotti and his vision: to unite two cultures and two art worlds (hence the name), the European and the American, dedicated to art in all its forms. It is one of the oldest and most important festivals in Umbria. This year, in its 60th edition, the Spoleto Festival takes place from June 30th to July 16th. There will be 17 days of performances, with 90 titles.

After all these years, the Spoleto Festival, which had always been near to Jerome Robbins' heart, continues its original vision as an international meeting place for opera, music, dance, theater, and art. The Festival dei Due Mondi's "duality" is as present onstage as it is in the title; along with unique and original avant-garde performances are also staged works respectful of the classical tradition. Its many venues: the Teatro Nuovo, the Teatro Caio Melisso, the Teatro Romano, the Teatrino delle sei, the Complesso monumentale del San Nicolò, the Cortile della Rocca albornoziana, the chiesa di San Eufemia, the auditorium della Stella and the Square Piazza del Duomo (also home of the traditional closing concert), have all housed some of the world's greatest art and artists.

In 1958, Gian-Carlo Menotti asked Jerome Robbins to bring some dancers to the Festival. Mr. Robbins created several works there for his newly formed company, Ballets: U.S.A., including *N.Y. Export: Opus Jazz* (1958) and *Moves* (1959). Ballets: U.S.A. was a huge success. In the New York Times, critic Howard Taubman wrote about the company's opening performance, "This is exactly the kind of performance that should represent us abroad. It is distinctive and engaging. It gives a refreshing and evocative view of our high spirits and maturity of artistic purpose."

When asked in a 1988 interview where he most enjoyed spending time, Robbins replied: "Number one I would say Spoleto. There's a great sense of always being at home there, which is strange for me because I'm not an expat in any way. I can't see myself settling down in another country. But there, I do feel something that makes me feel like I belong there. I love the sensitive grace of everything there. It's the gesture, the building, the fountain, the mountains, the terrain, the people, the food, the culture—they almost seem one thing. They all blend into each other easily.

"When I went there in 1958, it was the first time that I felt my life and my work were in equal balance. Here in New York, it's the work. It's lopsided. There, I felt I could do my work during the day and go out for lunch, and I was in heaven. Then I could go back to work and then have the evening free. It felt very right to me that way. It still feels that way to me when I go there.



Jerome Robbins in Spoleto. From the collection of Jerome Robbins.

"One year I went there for the Festival and when it was over, I went away for a week. Then I came back to see the place after the Festival had ended. I stayed a week. And then I thought, *Well, I'll stay one more week.* Then, *I'll stay one more week.* And I spent the whole summer there. I realized I might as well be there the whole summer. I examined all of the countryside. Every dirt road I took. Absolutely fell in love with it. There's such beauty to the eye and to the spirit. You arrive and you see all the obvious things: The Piazza del Duomo, the incredible stairs, the Duomo at the far end, the aqueduct, or this or that, but it's only when you live there for awhile that you start to notice the cornices and the lamps and the archways and the alleyways. Everything begins to bloom. I always want to go back and work there again. Gian-Carlo and I always have the same conversation: "You must come back." "Yes, I want to come back."




Postcards collected by Jerome Robbins during his visits to Spoleto, Italy.



The photographs on this page were all taken by Jerome Robbins during his first visit to Spoleto, Italy in 1958.





While our longtime dear friend, colleague, and advisor AIDAN MOONEY (1942–2016) — who not only pushed so many boundaries and unconventional ideas but also forced us to do the same — has left us, his spirit will always remain for us to think and act boldly. A longtime friend of the choreographer and director Jerome Robbins, for whose trust he served as an advisor, and of the legendary ballerina Tanaquil Le Clercq, among others, Aidan was also mentor to a rising generation of new artists in many fields, including the choreographer Benjamin Millepied. All of them, and his host of friends, and those he loved and who loved him, will miss him terribly, for he was one of a kind: generous, tough-minded, tenderhearted, funny, shrewd, indelible, and irreplaceable.

AIDAN

by William Earle

I met Aidan Mooney in 1960. A college sophomore, I was giving a talk to the literary club on the poetry of Berthold Brecht. I had played some Brecht/Weill songs sung by Lotte Lenya and after the talk Aidan asked to borrow the recording. He did borrow it; he returned it; and we became friends. Our friendship prospered and we moved into an apartment in Saint Marks Place in 1963 where we lived happily, not quite ever after, but until his death on December 4, 2016. I met Jerome Robbins in the summer of 1970 in Saratoga, the day that Jerry was presenting part of *The Goldberg Variations* to the Performing Arts Center audience ten months or so before its premiere at the State Theater on May 27, 1971. I think Aidan met Jerry a little before I did. He was introduced to Jerry by Richard Seidel, a leggy blond ex-Ice Capades skater whom everyone fell in love with, at least briefly.

How nice it was to discover that Jerry liked us and to discover that we liked Jerry. Everybody knows all about Jerry being a genius, but only those who got to know him well felt his intense interest in his friends and what they were up to in life and his gigantic ability to listen, to care, and indeed to love. I suppose there is the question of why Jerry liked us, assuming that this is neither inevitable nor inexplicable. I am in my own case agnostic. About Aidan, part of the story is that Aidan took aesthetic questions seriously and thought they have right answers, which means, however socially discomfiting to point this out, that they have wrong answers too and this in turn means that someone who thinks a widely admired item of cultural

junk is worthy of respectful attention is like someone who thinks there are no even prime numbers or that *The Morning Star* is not a planet. You can be simply wrong, so Aidan maintained, where many assumed, with casual relativism, that all there are, and all that there can be, are tolerable differences of taste. Jerry liked this attitude of Aidan's, and while they did not always agree, they agreed there was something real, and really important, that they were disagreeing about. I share Aidan's anti-relativist view and may even have helped foster it. I daily discover new reasons for missing Aidan, but relevant here is the loss of a companion in outrage against the meretricious.

Aidan was also candid. Collingwood said the great thing about Whitehead was that he didn't care what he said so long as it was true. I'd say the same of Aidan who could accordingly be occasionally annoying. Again, Jerry mainly liked this. Jerry confessed to his diary that he depended on Aidan to discuss everything. He knew Aidan told the truth or his idea of the truth, with no thought about what Jerry wanted to hear. It's hard, as Jerry knew, for someone as important as he was to escape yes-men. So, the straightforwardness that could register as alarming Jerry found reassuring.

I've been missing Jerry for a long time and now I have Aidan to miss. I take some comfort — small but significant — in the thought that most people are in no position to miss either of them. Loss is, strangely enough, a kind of luck.

Aidan Mooney. Photograph taken by Jerome Robbins in Spoleto, Italy in 1987.



Lindi Dec (center) as Anita, with company dancers in Jerome Robbins' *West Side Story Suite* at Pacific Northwest Ballet, 2017. Photo © Angela Sterling.



James Kirby Rogers and company in Jerome Robbins' *Interplay* at Kansas City Ballet, 2017. Photo by Brett Pruitt & East Market Studios.



Michiko Iseri as Eliza in "The Small House of Uncle Thomas" ballet in *The King and I*, 1951.
Photo by Vandamm Studio, courtesy of the Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library.

Getting to Know You Broadway Meets Heart Mountain

by Hana C. Maruyama

An earlier version of this article originally appeared in October 2015 on the Asian American Writers' Workshop website: aaww.org

In November, 2015, the musical *Allegiance*, featuring George Takei, opened on Broadway. Set during World War II, *Allegiance* tells the story of the young Sammy Kimura, one of 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry wrongly relocated and incarcerated by the United States starting in 1942. In the musical, Sammy leaves Heart Mountain Relocation Center—the confinement site in the deserts of northwestern Wyoming where he and his family were sent—to fight for the country that imprisoned him, while his sister allies herself with the conscientious draft resistance movement at Heart Mountain.

Around the same time the fictional Sammy would have left to fight with the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, a 21-year-old Japanese American woman named Michiko Iseri also left Heart Mountain. Her destination? New York—and Broadway.

Michiko, as she is known in the dance world, is perhaps best known for her role as a dance consultant and performer in the original Broadway production, and subsequent movie, of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *The King and I*, choreographed by Jerome Robbins. With *The King and I*—a musical whose Orientalist representation of Asians made the arrival of *Allegiance* all the more significant—Michiko helped pave the way for Asian-American performers on Broadway. Even so, most today do not even know her name.

When Michiko left Heart Mountain in October 1944, she moved in with Teiko Ono, a half-Japanese American dancer who sponsored Michiko so she could come to New York. Michiko had studied Japanese dance and kabuki from early childhood, and just before World War II had joined Ono's pan-Asian dance company on the West Coast. With Ono, she learned Chinese, Korean, Javanese, Balinese, Burmese, and Thai dancing, in addition to Japanese dancing.

New York was a vast change for Michiko. In the two years before she moved, she had lived in a horse stall at Santa Anita racetrack—which she remembers today with a faint shudder—and barracks at Heart Mountain. Block leaders approached her and said, "You know, we need some entertainment, otherwise, people start fighting." Wrangling together a Japanese dance troupe behind barbed wire was no easy feat: her costumes and props were a thousand miles away in a garage in California that was being ransacked without her knowledge

while she was living in confinement. She sewed costumes from scraps. Her mother and her old kabuki teacher made dancers' wigs. Michiko learned that some Japanese waitresses—"they're like geishas," she explains—had brought their kimonos to camp. Michiko bought them. "What were they going to do with them there?"

Coming to New York gave Michiko the opportunity to relaunch her fledgling dance career that had been abruptly put on pause during the war. Michiko began helping Ono teach her students, one of whom was Russell Meriwether Hughes, a dancer from Kentucky who went by "La Meri" and made a name for herself in ethnic dance, particularly Spanish and Indian. Michiko also performed across the city. She danced at the Museum of Natural History's ethnic dance programs with others, including Pearl Primus. She also performed with Devi Dja, an Indonesian dancer, and was a guest artist at Jacob's Pillow, a dance center, school, and performance space in Massachusetts. In 1946, she worked with Ono's husband, Yuji Ito, on the costumes for the musical *Lute Song*, based on Gao Ming's play *Tale of the Pipa*. The play tells the story of Tsai-Yong, a young scholar who leaves his family and first wife to poverty and famine in order to pursue his career. It was on the set of *Lute Song* that Michiko first met Yul Brynner, who played the part of Tsai-Yong.

By 1948, Michiko had built a career teaching Japanese dance in New York. Right around that time, word was going around the dance world about a new musical based on the story of Anna Leonowens, governess to the children of King Mongkut of Siam from 1862-1867. Titled *The King and I*, it fictionalized Leonowens' years spent teaching the King's children and his wives about Western culture. She becomes close with the King and his family, even as she and the King disagree on almost everything.

"All my students were going to audition," Michiko says. "You know how many Oriental shows there were?"

But when the cast was developed, it was minimally Asian. Brynner enjoyed claiming that he was born "Taidje Khan" and that his parentage was half Japanese, half Swiss. In fact, he was a quarter Buryat: his paternal grandmother was said to be the daughter of a Mongolian prince, with ancestry going back to Genghis Khan. Doretta Morrow, who played Tuptim, was of Italian heritage. Larry Douglas played Lun Tha. Prince Chulalongkorn was played by Johnny Stewart and later by Ronnie Lee.

Michiko had reservations about this new musical. She felt certain the show would not be authentic, and she felt strongly that it should be. “I learned authentic dancing from the people that came from these places,” Michiko says. “I think it’s a sacrilege to make the dancing like they’re supposed to be ‘Oriental.’ ”

Michiko had no intention of auditioning for the show, but many of her students did. During their auditions, Jerome Robbins, the choreographer, asked with whom they had studied. One by one, they mentioned Michiko. And so Robbins asked to meet her. “So I went to see him,” she says. Robbins hired Michiko as an Oriental dance consultant.

Michiko trained the dancers and tried to get them to stop “jumping around” — something ballet dancers were prone to, but which was not at all characteristic of Thai dance. Robbins told her how he envisioned the dancers’ movements and she would find ways to express that using techniques from the Thai repertoire. Sometimes, though, those movements just weren’t suited for what he had in mind.

Michiko performed a solo dance in the scene when Anna and Louie arrive at the palace. Robbins told her, “I want something very sexy here.” “There’s nothing sexy about Siamese dancing!” she replied. “Look at the way they’re dressed.” Thai dance, she explained, is performed in a temple and in the royal palace. Javanese dancing, with veils, scarves, and bare shoulders, would be better. “Fine, we’ll do that,” Robbins replied.

Robbins was not the only person who felt constricted by Thai culture. “Just call it ‘Anna and the King of Asia!’” burst out composer Richard Rodgers to Michiko at one point. By the show’s brief tryout in Boston, they were “throwing all the pieces together,” as Michiko put it. She was frustrated with the jumble of Asian dance traditions and one of her two solos had been all but eliminated. Michiko decided to quit before the show went to New York. She handed in her notice, but Rodgers, determined not to lose her, took her to dinner that evening and told her, “I’m writing something for you.”

The piece he was referring to was “Getting to Know You,” sung by Anna to the children in Act 1. Michiko was impressed with how quickly Rodgers had composed the piece — until she discovered that he had originally written the song for *South Pacific*. Still, Michiko had her dance, as promised. Robbins told her about his vision for the choreography, saying, “I want something spectacular.” “There’s nothing spectacular about Siamese dancing,” she reminded him. When he insisted, she said she could use a fan number — a dance form from Japan. The dance took place in the schoolroom, so Rodgers wanted it to be playful. “What would these Siamese children look at?” Michiko wondered. She remembered Anna’s hoop skirt — a source of fascination for the women in the Thai palace. “What if we use the skirt and have the children act like the skirt and I will move around?” she asked.

With the addition of her solo in “Getting to Know You,” Michiko had been convinced to follow *The King and I* back to New York. The musical premiered on Broadway on March 29, 1951. In the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, John Chapman wrote that Michiko was “outstanding.” Brooks Atkinson, writing for the *New York Times*, said that Michiko’s “limpid inscrutable grace” was “the quintessence of Eastern art and it tells more about these people than a writer can.”

Ultimately, Michiko followed *The King and I* on its national tour, and to Hollywood for the film adaptation. Afterward, she used the money she had saved to travel to Asia to study dance. In 1956, she spent six months in Japan, where she saw an old dance teacher. Next, she went to Hong Kong, where she was supposed to get a visa to go to Vietnam and Laos. With the Vietnam War underway, however, that was not feasible, so instead she went to Thailand.

One morning soon after she arrived in Bangkok, Michiko was in the hotel lobby, her eyes swollen from mosquito bites, when a man entered. She could barely see him pacing back and forth. Then she noticed the manager of the hotel was on his knees. Prince Bhanubandhu Yugala, a cousin of the king of Thailand, had come to see her. The Prince was a friend of Mori Iwao, a Japanese movie producer Michiko knew. The film *The King and I* had been banned in Thailand, but the Prince told her he would be traveling to Hong Kong in the near future and he would see it while he was there. When he returned from Hong Kong several months later, the first thing he asked was, “Who dressed you in that blue coolie costume?” Michiko laughed. The costume designers hadn’t known that Thai laborers wore the color blue. “It’s no laughing matter,” the prince said. “It’s a coolie costume. You’re supposed to be a princess.” But he liked her dancing, so the prince got in touch with the best dance teachers in Thailand, launching Michiko’s schedule into more rigorous day-long sessions. One of her teachers had been a renowned Thai temple dancer. (Thai temple dancers quit when they start menstruating, so she had become a teacher.) She taught Michiko the classical mask dance — one rarely taught to anyone outside of Thailand, so Michiko’s other Thai dance teachers came to watch her lessons.

Broadway has changed a lot in the seventy years since Michiko first arrived there. *Allegiance* made its debut at the Longacre Theatre just eight months after *The King and I* returned to the Vivian Beaumont Theater for its fourth Broadway revival. *Allegiance* had the first Asian-led cast on Broadway (featuring George Takei, Lea Salonga and Telly Leung) since a revival of *Flower Drum Song* in 2003. It seems fitting that this new musical should take place at Heart Mountain — the place where Michiko lost her freedom and the place that led her to Broadway. Seventy years later, *Allegiance* places Michiko’s story, and the stories of 120,000 Japanese-Americans, front and center.

“It’s about time,” Michiko says.



Hana C. Maruyama is the granddaughter of a former Heart Mountain incarcerated. She is a first-year American Studies doctoral student at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. Previously, she worked for the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center and the Heart Mountain Interpretive Center.

left:
Michiko Iseri’s dance class with the Heart Mountain Mandolin Band at Heart Mountain in Wyoming, 1944. Photo courtesy UCLA, Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library.

Accompanying Robbins

A Conversation Between Musicians

ANN KIM and CAMERON GRANT

New York City Ballet cellist Ann Kim and pianist Cameron Grant share their experiences playing for ballets in the Jerome Robbins repertoire. (Ann has played onstage in *A Suite of Dances* and Cameron has played *Dances at a Gathering*, *The Goldberg Variations*, and more.) Portions of this conversation appeared in the previous issue of this newsletter.



Ashley Bouder in Jerome Robbins' *Dances at a Gathering* at New York City Ballet.

Ann Kim Tell me about your first experience playing *The Goldberg Variations*.
Cameron Grant That was three and a half months of pure terror. When I was learning *Goldberg*, I would play a show with the company and then come home and practice it after the show.

AK That truly is a marathon, playing that whole piece. **CG** It is.

AK You mentioned that you had to attend all of the *Goldberg* rehearsals, in order to really learn the choreography. You had to really learn it.

CG If you're playing that piece, you do a lot of rehearsals. You do most of the rehearsals leading up to the performance.

AK Are there any changes once you are in the actual performance?

CG Well, what Gordon taught me, and what I learned well—he said, “Learn the choreography, and then learn what the dancers need from you, and then make music within those parameters.” Don't just bang it out, but really make it convincing. But you have to know what they need. So what happens over the course of years of rehearsal is that you start to know exactly where you need to be careful. You might glance up at that point and see if they're with you, or a little behind or ahead. But you know where you can err. You can know, “Oh, this is a place, if I err anywhere, I should go a little faster or the reverse.” As scared as I was, often, to play that piece—and I did it over the course of twenty-one years or something—I kept thinking, *Next year, when I do it, or a couple of years from now, when I do it, it won't be so nerve-racking*. Then, standing backstage for the first performance every time, you're like “Oh, my God! It's me, only me for the next hour and fifteen minutes!” But I'll tell you, when you get to the end of that piece and you play the *Aria* for the second time, which opens the piece and closes the piece, I would have tears in my eyes sometimes. I just felt like that hour and fifteen minutes had changed my life because it's such an incredible piece, you know. It's really Bach at his best. To me, that ballet pushed Robbins. It stretched him and he had to find ways to keep it interesting for an hour and fifteen minutes. I think some of the most beautiful spots of that ballet are subtle and his choreography at its best. I mean, you think of beautiful spots in *Dances at a Gathering* and yeah, they're beautiful and they're great and they're exciting. But the Bach, being more spare and more simple, you can't just do a lot of swoops and dashes.

AK And musically speaking...you felt he really understood the music.

CG He understood the music about as well as anybody except Balanchine. I think Balanchine understood at a deeper level. But Jerry was smart. I have to hand it to him, when we did Berg's “Violin Concerto,” he was in the piano room consulting with Gordon, so Gordon could explain, at a deeper level, what was going on in the music. He went after really depth.

AK And how has your experience playing *Dances at a Gathering* and *The Goldberg Variations* evolved over the years?

CG Well, *Dances* was really interesting because the better you know it, the more you understand what Jerry was going for. He loved putting the rhythm obviously in the steps, but kind of playing against the basic rhythm. There are a lot of pieces in three in *Dances*. Jerry would often put steps in twos and fours, to create a tension with the music.

AK Oh, against the three that you're playing—

CG Against the three that I'm playing. He would create steps in twos or fours. The hard thing about *Dances*, I would say, is that when you think of Chopin, you think of a lot of rubato and a lot of sweep and a lot of impulsiveness. Most of that you have to leave in the past, when you start to play *Dances*, because *Dances* works best if it's almost metronomic—except that you have to hide that. It has to be very steady. The last words that Gordon Boelzner, who premiered it, heard from Jerry when he went out onstage were, “Just like class, baby. Just like class,” which meant playing it straight. Gordon was such a great musician and had a very quirky sense of time, but he had to discipline himself—which he passed along to the rest of us—that you have to play it very straight, without a lot of rubato, and then, spend a lot of time in the practice room making it sound like that's the way it should go. Making it sound natural, with your dynamics and with your phrasing and things like that, without using the rubato that so many of us are used to when we learn Chopin as kids. That was the biggest challenge, I would say, over the years.

AK It's similar to what you were saying about his choreography. Just like with *A Suite of Dances*, where it's all about the movement. You have to dance within the constraints of that, of his choreography, yet once you've gotten his steps down, it's all about making it seem casual, sort of effortless.

CG The other tricky thing about Jerry's choreography in *Dances at a Gathering* is that most of the fast tempos are slightly slower than is comfortable, or that you would play them in a concert. But when you add the visual, they sound natural. Generally, the tempos are a little slower, which, of course, makes it twice as hard. Not only are you being steady, you're also being slightly slower than your fingers want to go. It takes a ton of discipline and a ton of practice to make that happen, and then to make it sound convincing. There was a pianist at the School of American Ballet who heard me play it one night and she said, “It's so fantastic, because you don't really have to compromise on the music.” And I thought, *Well I guess I did my job*.

AK Because to her it sounded natural...

CG And it's not at all, but the synthesis...

AK The synthesis between you and the dancers...

CG Exactly. It works fantastic, if it all comes together. It's such a visual medium that if you're really collaborating successfully, the music really does take a back seat. But at its best, they both seem thrilling.

AK *One enhances the other.* **CG** Yes.

AK *Is it a two-way street when you're collaborating, in terms of how your playing affects their interpretation of the dance?*

CG Definitely. Especially after you've been playing it for a few years. You start to realize what they need, and they begin trusting you... that you're not suddenly going to leave them in the dust onstage, or take some tempo so slowly that they're just suffering. With a lot of communication in the rehearsal room, you start really knowing what to expect from the other person. I've asked, "Can I take less time there?" There's a famous place at the end of the Grand Waltz where you have to spread out the ending so much that at times I've said, "Come on, guys, I could have a cup of coffee before I play the last note!" You have to figure out how to make that sound convincing. The dancers have no problem telling you what they need. Once they trust you, you can tell them what would be good for you.

AK *Right. So that trust factor is just as important with the pianist as it is between the dancers. They have to trust each other not to drop each other, or miss something...*

CG Well, the women are totally in love with partners who they fully trust.

AK *I can imagine.*

CG If they know that that guy is going to be there and put them in the right place and hold them the right way and give them the right support, they can totally let go.

AK *The same goes with the pianist. If they totally trust that you're going to be there when they need you—*

CG They can go for it.

AK *Tell me about playing Ives, Songs.*

CG *Ives, Songs* uses a singer, a piano and dance. I love the ballet, but I'd done it a lot and I was out there, and my page-turner was my regular page-turner, and I was kind of phoning it in, I thought, at one point. It's a very long ballet and at a certain point I thought, *Come on, let's get into this!* And so I did. It was like a performance without the dance. I was totally involved. The music is a whole bunch of Xeroxed sheets. Some of them are one page and some of them are up to four pages. I set it all on the stand and the page-turner peels one off after the other after we're done. So I get to the penultimate piece and I look up and I see the last piece in my vision. The penultimate piece starts—thank God—without the singer. So I look down and I start playing the last piece, which is slow. Luckily, so is the next to the last piece. But the next to the last piece is supposed to start with the dancer. When he lands, you start. I didn't even pay attention to that because I thought I was on the last piece. So I start playing and my page-turner reaches up and starts moving the music, like "Hello! Hello!" And I thought, *What the hell is*

she doing? Then I looked up and thought, *Oh my God! What do I do?* I probably lost ten years off my life. Later, I thought *Oh, Jerry's just going to come and say 'He's fired!'* But Gordon used to say, "Choreographers hear with their eyes." If it's going well, they assume the music was good. Because what they're seeing is good. I quickly, seamlessly phased right into the next to the last piece. But he was such a Broadway veteran—Tim Nolen—he'd probably seen everything. So he comes in, and he starts singing. At a certain point, in the middle of the piece is the first time that we coordinate, really, with the dance. I get there and I think, *That should be about it.* And I look up, and I only had to finesse a little bit, and we were right with the dancers.

AK *Amazing.*

CG After we finished, I get backstage and I'm waiting for the pink slip, right? Victor Castelli, who was coaching the ballet, was there. But I didn't hear anything. Nobody said anything. It didn't ever occur to me to ask the singer what had been going on in his mind. But later I asked Victor, "What did Jerry say?" Apparently, Victor had asked Jerry, "Wasn't that kind of funny near the end?" And, because the ballet went so well, Jerry only said, "I don't know. That was kind of crazy," or something. That's all he said. Because he thought the performance was so good.

AK *Wow.* **CG** So I escaped with my life!

AK *How would you describe what it was like to work with Jerome Robbins?*

CG Not fun. Not fun.

AK *He was a taskmaster?*

CG He was really difficult. He was the meanest guy that I'd ever met.

AK *To you?*

CG To dancers. He was just difficult, but I must say, his ballets looked spectacular. When we had worked together for years and he was at the piano once, before a *West Side Story Suite* rehearsal, I walked onstage. He was sitting there, playing a little Bach, and I said, "Jerry, why don't you play today and I'll yell at the dancers?" He looked at me like, *What?!*, and then he kind of smiled and laughed. *West Side Story Suite* was amazing when it was being put together for the first time. We'd do "Dance at the Gym" at the Rose Building and I have to tell you, the electricity in that room was unbelievable.

AK *Really?*

CG I mean fifty percent was fear. But the other fifty percent was because he had a way of making that part of the ballet—and the whole ballet—electrifying in those rehearsals. It was amazing. Whatever else you can say about him, he was a genius.



Ann Kim and Damian Woetzel in Jerome Robbins' *A Suite of Dances* at New York City Ballet. Photos with this article by Paul Kolnik, courtesy of New York City Ballet/Communications and Special Projects.



Dancers from Ballets: U.S.A. in Jerome Robbins' *N.Y. Export: Opus Jazz*, 1958. Photo by Jerome Robbins.





Lydia Nelidova and Vaslav Nijinsky in Nijinsky's *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, 1912.
Photo by Adolf Gayne de Meyer.

“A Different Faun and a Different Nymph”

The Lavender Scare and Jerome Robbins' *Afternoon of a Faun*

by Jennie Scholick

Author's note: This essay is a condensed and adapted version of a paper presented at the 2016 Cold War Narratives Reimagined conference at Yale University, which was in turn based on a chapter in my dissertation, Choreographing the Age of Anxiety: Dancing Poetry at the New York City Ballet.

On May 5, 1953, Jerome Robbins testified in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee, finally bringing three years of fear and anxiety regarding the consequences of his one-time membership in the Communist Party USA to a traumatic close. Nine days later, on May 14, 1953, his ballet, *Afternoon of a Faun*, premiered.

This essay, in its longer form, suggests that *Afternoon of a Faun* responds in oblique ways to the various traumas Robbins endured during the height of McCarthyism and that this work might even be read as Robbins's articulation of a gay aesthetic in a moment when the United States' homosexual community was under siege. In this abbreviated version, however, I suggest that in its relationship to Vaslav Nijinsky's 1912 ballet, *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, Robbins's *Afternoon of a Faun* opens itself up to two separate, but interrelated readings, which, taken together, articulate a particular kind of Cold War aesthetic. On the one hand, in reworking a dance by an artist strongly identified with homosexuality and grounding that dance on the bodies of young, heterosexual American dancers, Robbins seems to contain the disruptive sexuality of Nijinsky's original work, creating in its place a ballet representative of the cultural norms of mid-century America. On the other hand, *Afternoon of a Faun* might equally be read as playing off the original work not to sublimate or neutralize its exploration of explicit sexuality, but rather to make manifest those very ideas. In this way, the ballet, like much artistic production in the period, manages both to conform to the strictures placed upon Cold War-era art and artists and to open up a space for tension, complexity, and dissent.

The Lavender Scare: McCarthyism's Attack on Gay Citizens

In the early years of the 1950s, many artists, writers, and performers were feeling the far-reaching effects that a previous affiliation with the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) would have on their careers, as McCarthyism and the Second Red Scare took hold of the American psyche. Yet, it was not so much the fact of his former CPUSA membership that seemed to weigh on Robbins in the period during which he choreographed *Afternoon of a Faun*, but rather, a fear of being publicly outed as homosexual, which Ed Sullivan had reportedly threatened to do if Robbins did not cooperate with the authorities.

Such fear was well-founded, especially as by 1953 the alignment in the public (and governmental) eye of homosexuality with communism was well-established. Moreover, as anticommunism gained momentum in the early 1950s, so too did active persecution of the homosexual community—with homosexuality still punishable by jail time—as communists and homosexuals were considered equal “security risks” by the government.¹ The rhetorical parallelism of the government's charges against communists and homosexuals—they both could hide in plain sight; they both could infiltrate government and schools; they both lacked the “vigor” and masculinity of true American men—made the merging of the two identities almost inevitable.² As a result, as Christopher Reed phrases it, homosexuality became “the paradigmatic secret” of the 1950s and one which Robbins himself was eager to keep, if not from his close artistic community, then at least from the government and the general Hollywood-watching public.³

A Different Faun and a Different Nymph: Reading Nijinsky's Ballet into Robbins's

It was at this particular historical moment that Robbins choreographed his *Afternoon of a Faun*, turning to the Claude Debussy score and Stéphane Mallarmé poem that had inspired Vaslav Nijinsky in 1912. Robbins was always clear that *Afternoon of a Faun* arose out of his “fascination with the original,” by which he meant Nijinsky's *L'Après-midi d'un faune*.⁴ In an interview with Nancy Reynolds, he said:

Faun came out of a couple of sources...I grew up on all those legends of Nijinsky in *Petrouchka*, *Schéhérazade*, *Faune*. And then watching it. That dropped somewhere into my head. Then one day in class, little Eddie Villella, who was standing next to me as a kid, suddenly began to stretch his body in a very odd way, almost like he was trying to get something out of it. And I thought how animalistic it was...he didn't know what he was doing, and that sort of stuck in my head. At another time I walked into a rehearsal studio where Louis Johnson was practicing the *Swan Lake* adagio with a student girl, and they were watching themselves in the mirror, and I was struck by the way they were watching that couple over there doing a love dance and totally unaware of the proximity and possible sexuality of their physical encounters. And that was curious to me. The combination of all those things—even Edwin Denby talking once about how long the phrases were in the original choreography—sort of stuck in my head. And then I started. I wasn't ever quite sure whether the mirror should be straight front or offstage, right angles. I rehearsed it both ways and each way is interesting. When the dancers' attention is to the side, it's easier for the audience to watch—they are sort of looking in—but when it's straight front, I think something much more arresting happens...I always thought the girl had just washed her hair and just had on new toe shoes and a new clean practice dress and came into the studio to preen and practice.⁵

In another interview, with Rosamond Bernier, Robbins again noted Denby's comment that there were “such long phrases” in the original work, and commented, “In a way it's the same story as the Nijinsky ballet, with a different faun and a different nymph.”⁶

Formally, Nijinsky's ballet is perhaps best known for two things: its two-dimensionality (with its dancers only ever seen in profile) and its lack of virtuosic ballet steps (the dancers barely exceed a walk).⁷ But the ballet is equally, if not better known for its autoerotic, orgasmic final image, for the ways in which, as Kevin Kopelson writes in *The Queer Afterlife of Vaslav Nijinsky*, “Nijinsky, like Wilde, haunts gay identity.”⁸ Nijinsky was, quite famously, Sergei Diaghilev's lover, prior to his sudden marriage to Romola Nijinska. The creation of *Faune* coincided with this break, with his shift from “homosexual hero” to “homosexual turncoat” as Lynn Garafola writes in *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes*, and this ballet is often read in relation to Nijinsky's own sexual identity and has become, in many ways, a touchstone of gay aesthetics.⁹ Against 1953's backdrop of institutional anticommunism and homophobia, that Robbins chose to transform Nijinsky's faun and nymph into a pair of American dance students seems to invite further reading.

In Robbins' version (as most readers likely know), the curtain rises upon a single male dancer, dressed in practice clothes, reclined on the floor, his back to the audience, at center stage. As the lights come up, a silken dance studio, with ballet bars along the walls and windows, and a door in the upstage right corner, is revealed. Where the mirror in a dance studio should be, is a silk drop across the downstage edge of the stage. It rises, leaving only the invisible fourth wall as imaginary mirror.

As the music begins, we see the dancer stretching, dancing, and admiring himself in the "mirror" of the studio. He dozes off just before a female dancer enters. She dances, gazing at herself in the mirror the whole time, never noticing the young man on the floor until, finally, their eyes meet through the mirror. They dance together, always turning their heads to note their positions, to admire their bodies, to adjust a position into something more precise, more perfect. Eventually the male dancer kisses her cheek as she watches him in the glass. She brings her hand to the spot he kissed and turns to look at him. They turn and gaze at themselves in the mirror once more, the spell broken. She stands and backs out of the studio, her hand leaving her cheek to stretch outward, but not toward him, toward her own reflection. Touching her cheek again, she leaves. He lies down, stretches his leg up toward the ceiling as at the beginning, and, rolling over, falls back to sleep.¹⁰

On the one hand, this dance—in its beauty, its simplicity, its heterosexual love story—might be easily read as Robbins's "containment," to borrow from literary scholar Alan Nadel, of the disruptive sexuality of Nijinsky's original ballet into a safe, conventional narrative. Nadel argues in *Containment Culture: American Narrative, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* that Cold War literary texts "equated containment of communism with containment of atomic secrets, of sexual license, of gender roles, of nuclear energy, and of artistic expression," and Robbins's work, by turning the faun and nymph into American dance students—American teenagers on a hot summer day—operates similarly.¹¹ Robbins transforms the work from a scandal-inducing spectacle into a quiet reverie, neutralizing the potentially disruptive otherness and autoeroticism embedded in the original ballet.

On the other hand, this reading seems, in a way, both too easy and too out of touch with the rest of Robbins' oeuvre up to this point. Rather, I want to suggest that Robbins's work engages with Nijinsky's ballet in ways that trouble the seemingly safe narrative of boy and girl in dance studio and that gesture toward the disruptive sexualities and bodies present in Nijinsky's work.

Reflections and Refractions: Robbins's Mirror and Cold War Aesthetics

Robbins most clearly engages with Nijinsky's work and with its uncontainable possibilities through the imagined mirror and the dancers' fascination with it, referencing not only the formal innovations in Nijinsky's ballet, but also, by extension, the mythos and scandal surrounding the 1912 *L'Après-midi d'un faun*. In so doing, he creates a work that does not simply contain the ideas encoded in Nijinsky's ballet, but rather creates a space for their dissemination and interrogation.

At the most literal level, Robbins's mirror aligns his work with the two-dimensionality of Nijinsky's: As the dancers gaze at themselves in the mirror, their bodies, as in Nijinsky's ballet, are twisted into flattened shapes. Movements that would be circular, become linear; the three-dimensionality of the ballet body becomes reduced to the two-dimensions of the mirror.

But the two-dimensionality of Nijinsky's ballet was not a purely formal exercise, rather, in his reduction of ballet technique to its most basic form—a walk—and his pushing of the flattening aspect of the proscenium stage to its apex by twisting the body such that the largest amount of it could appear to the audience in any moment, he created a kind of allusive kinesthetic. Watching Nijinsky's ballet, it is as if the audience sees only the aspect of these mythic creatures visible to man; the third dimension, remains visible only to other demi-gods. The knowledge that the dancers are capable of more movement, but are restricted, as if gods forced into human shape, brings emphasis to what is not in fact there, to a dimension of movement beyond the scope of the danced text.

Robbins's mirror also picks up on this idea, alluding, like Nijinsky's dance, to a world that exists beyond both the confines of the dancers' studio and the literal stage space of the theater. It turns the fourth wall into a mirror and the audience into denizens of a world beyond that crafted onstage. For the dancers, what is reflected in that mirror is more real than what occurs in the room. It is the "couple over there" to quote Robbins, who are real, who have the possibility for love, for lust, for transcendence, who open the dance up into a different plane, articulating the possibility for dance to craft alternate realities, both for its audience and for its dancers, even when they are one and the same. For the audience, this idea is doubled: the dance creates a first new world onstage and a second new world in the mirrored dance.

At the same time, however, this is not an uncontested or utopic space, for, unlike Nijinsky's faun who performs his masturbatory act to end the tension of unconsummated desire, Robbins's faun remains without such release. In a way, Robbins's faun and his nymph—neurotic and provocative but chaste—have been divorced, by that same mirror, from their bodies, seeing themselves as art rather than as sexual, desiring beings. What brings pleasure is no longer the act of dancing and moving, the act of sexual consummation or discovery, but the image, the aesthetic, the picture in the mirror. The sexual, physical body has been evacuated and only the aesthetic body remains.

In this way, Robbins's imagined mirror not only creates a second world of possibility, but also changes, alters the dancers' worlds, their bodies and physicalities. As their bodies flatten, as in Nijinsky's ballet, a touch of their humanity seems lost, as their eyes fixate on themselves rather than on their community or their partner. Every moment of connection—when they nearly kiss at the outset, when she sits upon his knee, when a cheek is kissed—is interrupted by the mirror, by the need to see if it "looks" rights. The kind of self-surveillance that appears in this ballet replicates the everyday action of the ballet studio, which, through a combination of training and discipline, transforms adolescents' bodies into dancers' bodies, New York teenagers into nymphs and fauns. The mirror trains and distorts; creates beauty and curtails human connection.

Moreover, Robbins's ballet raises questions about who or what is evoked in this alternate, mirrored world. What are its possibilities? Is it full of other fauns and other nymphs? Or simply other dance students? Whose bodies are the dancers looking at, and whose are they so enraptured by? The answer seems not to be that of his or her partner, but rather of his or her own. They are each absorbed by the possibility for his or her own body to achieve perfection in that mirrored place. The interest is never in their partner's corporeal body—only in the imagined body in the mirror and in the shapes their bodies might make together. The dance—like Nijinsky's final masturbatory image—thus becomes more auto- or homoerotic than it is heteroerotic, although that eroticism is couched in heteroerotic terms, creating a space, limited though it may be, for a non-normative sexuality within the context of a heterosexual *pas de deux*.



To push these ideas a touch further, if we think, as literary scholar Donald E. Pease does in *The New Exceptionalism*, that during the early 1950s, as “liberal anticommunism” became a “homogenizing political ethos,” U.S. citizens increasingly began to “reperform . . . the state’s surveillance practices,” both upon themselves and upon their neighbors, then this sense of watching oneself dance, watching this erotic moment, and then backing away from the consummation of that moment—out of fear, out of a sense that it all is just too real, too dangerous—seems to take on a kind of secondary implication.¹² This kind of surveillance—by self, by partner, by audience, by audience behind a mirror or through a doorway—changes one’s own relationship to body, changes the way one moves through the world. Read this way, rather than expressing a full embrace of Containment culture, a total sublimation of homosexual desire into a heterosexual narrative, the dance creates a (small) critical distance both by suggesting how surveillance—by self and by state—distorts, warps, transfigures, turns into citizens, the bodies it subjects and by gesturing toward the continued presence of autoerotic, even homoerotic, sexuality in the midst of this surveillance. It even may suggest how this kind of surveillance might force the homosexual subject to perform heterosexual desire.

It is thus through the combination of both readings—*Afternoon of a Faun* as both containing and perpetuating the sexuality evoked in Nijinsky’s *L’Après-midi d’un faune*—that its particular “Cold War aesthetic” emerges. This ballet, even as it seems to conform to the sexual and aesthetic mores of Containment culture, acts as a kink in the smoothly running machinery of the aesthetic by gesturing back to the disruptive sexualities of Nijinsky’s ballet, by exploring the impact of surveillance and self-surveillance, and by creating the possibility for alternate worlds and realities. Read this way, *Afternoon of a Faun* might be the very epitome of everything the United States’ government feared: that deeply hidden in the bodies of American boys and girls lived the very kinds of disruptive thoughts and desires they sought to suppress.

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Notes

1. David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 2.
2. John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940–1970*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), Kindle Location 1084-89.
3. Christopher Reed, *Art and Homosexuality: A History of Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 159.
4. Jerome Robbins, interview by Nancy Reynolds, 1974.
5. Ibid.
6. Jerome Robbins, interview by Rosamond Bernier, 1986.
7. Vaslav Nijinsky, *L’après-Midi D’un Faune*. (1912), videotaped onstage 11 December 1989 at Julliard Theater, New York, performed by Julliard Dance Ensemble.
8. Kevin Kopelson, *The Queer Afterlife of Vaslav Nijinsky* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 5.
9. Lynn Garafola, *Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 51; Kopelson.
10. Jerome Robbins, *Afternoon of a Faun* (New York City Ballet, 1953), filmed from the wings during a performance in Trieste, Italy, performed by Tanaquil LeClercq and Francisco Moncion; “Annotated Piano Transcription of ‘L’après-Midi D’un Faune,’” in *Jerome Robbins Personal Papers* (Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library, n.d.).
11. Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narrative, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age*, New Americanists (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 6.
12. Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism*, Critical American Studies Series (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 27, 32.

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Alexandra Silber's After Anatevka

Alexandra Silber’s new novel, *After Anatevka*, is an evocative sequel to the beloved musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. In the book, Ms. Silber imagines the plight of Hodel as she searches for her fiancé Perchik in a Siberian work camp. The publisher is World Rights/Pegasus, with a release date of July 4, 2017. A few early reviews:

“*After Anatevka* serves not only as a fitting sequel to a beloved tale, but as a new classic of its own. Alexandra Silber is a masterful storyteller with a poet’s gift for language and a romantic’s heart. Her novel is pure joy. I can only hope that a musical version is already in the making and that this old actor might have a moment with her onstage as her ‘Papa.’ Enjoy this amazing tale and let your heart sing. L’chaim! To life!”
—**Jason Alexander**, Tony Award-winning and Emmy-nominated actor

“It’s no secret that Alexandra Silber is one of our theater’s finest singing actors. But who knew she was a thrilling novelist as well? *After Anatevka* does *Fiddler on the Roof* proud.” —**Terrence McNally**, Tony Award-winning playwright

“While most actors do research for a role, Alexandra Silber has gone above, beyond, and below as she follows these characters out of the story of *Fiddler on the Roof* and into the wider world. Who knew this accomplished actress was an equally accomplished spinner of tales? Told with skill and depth of emotion, *After Anatevka* is something quite miraculous.” —**Ted Chapin**, President of Rodgers & Hammerstein

In March 2017, a unique evening at Symphony Space in New York City celebrated the accomplishments of Ms. Silber, who played Hodel on London’s West End and Tzeitel on Broadway in the recent revivals of *Fiddler on the Roof*. Alongside excerpts from the novel read by the author, eight text-inspired songs were premiered by theatre songwriters including Julianne Wick Davis and Maggie-Kate Coleman, Oran Eldor and Adam Overett, Lance Horne, Will Reynolds and Eric Price, Matthew Sklar and Amanda Green, Jeffrey Stock, Joseph Thalken, and Ben Toth. The musical interludes were sung by performers including Jessica Fontana, Santino Fontana, Daniel Rowan, Isabel Santiago, Ryan Silverman, and Broadway legend John Cullum. Grant Wenaus music directed (and performed on the piano), supported by cellist Mairi Dorman-Phaneuf and clarinetist Steven Lyon.

The evening was blessed with a special introduction by *Fiddler on the Roof*’s Pulitzer Prize- and Tony Award-winning lyricist, Sheldon Harnick: “Over half a century ago, Jerry Bock and I wrote songs inspired by the characters and situations of Sholem Aleichem’s *Tevye’s Daughters*. I find it fascinating that all these years later, a group of young songwriters has created songs inspired by the characters and situations in Alexander Silber’s *After Anatevka*.”



Above: Alexandra Silberman (center) and performers in *After Anatevka* at Symphony Space.

Left: Sheldon Harnick, Alexandra Silberman, and John Cullum.

Photos by Rahav Segev/Photopass.

Floria V. Lasky Award Presented to Oskar Eustis



Photo by Aislinn Weidele.

On Friday, April 21, 2017, the Jerome Robbins Foundation presented the Floria V. Lasky Award, given in tribute to one of the most influential and successful entertainment attorneys in the world of dance, theater, literature, and music, to Oskar Eustis, in recognition of his invaluable and indelible contributions to the cultural life of New York City. Throughout his career, Oskar Eustis has been dedicated to the development of new plays as a director, dramaturg, and producer. He has served as the Artistic Director of The Public Theater since 2005. In addition, he is a Professor of Dramatic Writing and Arts and Public Policy at New York University. He has also held professorships at UCLA, Middlebury College, and Brown University.

What follows are highlights of remarks from some of those who paid tribute to Mr. Eustis at the event.

Laurie Eustis "Oskar's enormous heart, his inexhaustible supply of energy, and his passionate curiosity and intelligence enrich the two spheres of his life: the theater and his family. I know the Floria V. Lasky Award, in its wisdom, is honoring Oskar tonight for his significant contributions to the arts, and I applaud that decision. I also want to take this moment to applaud the remarkable Oskar Eustis for his devotion and generosity and love and support that he has unflaggingly given to Kylie and me and Jack every moment he has been in our lives. I think that it is rare for a person who has reached the heights of success that Oskar has attained to do so without sacrificing, at some level, the ones he loves for the field he loves. In this, Oskar is exceptional."

Jeremy McCarter "The Public Theater is a kind of fulcrum. There's a lever, and you can pull on that lever and you can cause things to move. You really can change the world. You spend time with Oskar and you're reminded that the politics of the Left might correspond to certain tax rates, or legal choices, or statutes—wherever it ends it begins with this large and generous affection for individual men and women, and an optimism about what those people can do together. If you want to be reminded of that, just spend time with Oskar."

Suzan-Lori Parks "He helps us to become better writers, and when we become better writers, we are able to create work that serves people better—the whole world—when our plays are done all over the world. We thank you for that.... You give us a sense that things are possible. That positive change is possible. That good will amounts to something. That artistic excellence is a national treasure. He reminds us that things like success and hardship might both be met with courage and grace, and they might be met with an unfathomable generosity of spirit that makes the whole world wake up and listen just a little bit more. A kind of bold and radical passion for excellence and justice that extends far beyond the confines of a single person or a single city, to become a unifying element that's bigger than love."

Oskar Eustis (upon receiving the award) "I come from a Socialist tradition and what I was taught—how I was raised—is that much of what is not right about the world is the private appropriation of collective creation. I'm so grateful for all of the wonderful things people have said about me, but I am in a room full of people who have made everything that got said about me possible.... I'm incredibly proud and humbled and honored to get this award, but I really mean it—I'm accepting it on behalf of all of my friends, my colleagues, the people I love, who have helped make this work possible. Thank you very much."

The Business of Show

In addition to the presentation of the Floria V. Lasky Award, the Jerome Robbins Foundation also hosted the Floria V. Lasky Symposium. As described by Robbins Foundation Co-Director Ellen Sorrin, "The Symposium invites members of New York's cultural community to gather and discuss issues important to their work and future." The title of the 6th Lasky Symposium was "Shifting Strategies in Times of Change."

We thought we would approach the Business of Show corner a bit differently in this issue. At the recent Symposium, many interesting questions were raised. We thought in the constantly changing world environment, with the ground continuing to shift in the non-profit space and based on concerns raised at the symposium that we would pose some questions to you—presenters and audience members—regarding the country's current political polarization.

We hope you will reply to newsletter@jeromerobbins.org with your thoughts and questions. Please respond in as much detail as possible and provide questions that you may wish us to pose in future issues. Your feedback will not only be shared in future issues, but may well be a source of further exploration in our Business of Show corner.

What should be the response of cultural organizations to the current political polarization?

If you believe that cultural organizations have responsibility in light of the current political polarization, what should they be doing?

Do you believe cultural organizations should adjust programming as a result of today's polarization? If so, how?

How has the current environment impacted the amount and allocation of your support to cultural organizations?

Thank you for responding to the above questions. Look for follow-up in our next newsletter.



Doris Roberts On Working at *The Office*

After directing and choreographing *Fiddler on the Roof* in 1964, and after staging *Les Noces* at Ballet Theatre in 1965 — both great successes — Jerome Robbins was interested in directing an adventurous new play. As his next project, he chose *The Office*, written by Cuban-born playwright Maria Irene Fornés. The play began previews at the Henry Miller's Theatre on April 21, 1966. Scheduled to premiere on May 12, 1966, *The Office* never officially opened. Following *The Office*, Robbins established the American Theatre Laboratory, Inc., where he worked on experimental theater in a workshop environment through 1968. In April of 2011, actress Doris Roberts, who was in the cast, shared her thoughts on *The Office* with Bernard Carragher as part of the Jerome Robbins Oral History Project. With Ms. Roberts' passing in 2016, we appreciate even more her having shared her experience working on the play.

The Office synopsis: In this satire, the story centers on Pfanco (Jack Weston), an office manager in an import-export firm. He is as ambitious as he is naïve, and is something of an idea man who expects others at work to carry out those ideas. Pfanco sneaks Shirley (Elaine May) into the firm. Even though Shirley cannot type and doesn't know her ABCs very well, Pfanco hopes that Princess (Ruth White), the widow of the firm's founder, will hire Shirley and fire Miss Punk (Doris Roberts). In this office, nothing is efficient, yet everyone works hard at what they do. Ultimately, in an attempt to take over the company by marrying Princess himself, Pfanco attempts to upset her wedding plans with Gucci (Tony LoBianco), a stylish Italian salesman.

Bernard Carragher *What can you tell me about The Office?*

Doris Roberts I thought it had great appeal. It was a metaphor of a kind. How society is coming in on us and making life difficult and frightening. But what I think was frightening to the audience was the set was put on a hydraulic lift and it kept leaning forward, toward the audience, as if it might fall on them. It scared them. At the first performance we got booed.

BC *How was the rehearsal process?*

DR Chaotic. Jerome Robbins never kept things. He kept changing things and looking for other things, new things. I can't remember who the actor was who told

Left to right: Doris Roberts, Ruth White, Jerome Robbins, Elaine May, Maria Irene Fornés, and Jack Weston at a rehearsal for *The Office* in 1966. From the Friedman-Abeles collection in the Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library.

me this, but an actor who had worked with Jerry Robbins told me, "Whatever you do, remember what you first did, because that's what you'll go back to. Remember what you did to get the job. Whatever you did to get the part, that's what you'll get back to. But you'll be trying all kinds of other approaches to it, the way a dancer does." That gave me an insight to how Jerry worked, so I just accepted it as if I were a dancer. I'd just assume position four, eight, ten — whatever it was he was asking of me. Whenever he asked me to do something, I just did it. I got along very well with him. He was very pleased with me.

BC *Had you taken dance?*

DR No.

BC *Did he talk to you at all about the character you played, Miss Punk?*

DR No. What he did, which was wonderful, was on the first day of rehearsal, my desk was filled as if it would be on opening night. It had all my little notepads, with my name, Miss Punk on it. Once I started rehearsing, I was right into character. He just made it very positive and comfortable for me, so I was free to experiment and explore.

BC *Had you ever had an experience being in a play as avant-garde as The Office before?*

DR Yes, and Maria Irene Fornés was known for that. Of course, Jerry Robbins was very well known. People feared him, I think, more than anything else. There was always some kind of anger in him.

BC *Did he ever let it out during rehearsals?*

DR Sometimes. He would let it out by hitting the floor with his foot, like a bull does.

BC *Was he looking for realism in the play, or do you think he wanted absurdity?*
DR I think he wanted it to be quite real. I think he worried that, otherwise, the audience wouldn't identify with it.

BC *Did he talk to you much about the character of Miss Punk?*
DR No. One of the funniest things that happened was once I put my shoes on the wrong feet, so I had a funny walk, like a duck. It was my mistake. I didn't do it deliberately. But it became my character. He has us do insane things. For instance, I had little rollers on my chair, and I'd roll all the way up to a cabinet, which I opened with my right hand, and then with my left hand took out a folder, and then with my right hand closed the door, and then, again, scooted all the way down stage right, put the folder on the desk, stamped something on it, and then scooted clear across the left side of the stage, back to my desk. If I had missed my mark, I would have either broken my neck or my back because there was an orchestra pit, with no way to protect me from falling down into it. We had little suction cups on our chairs and we had to push a lever to hold our chairs in place.

BC *Did anybody ever get hurt?*
DR No. But it was obvious that we could have.

BC *Would Jerry show you what to do? Would he demonstrate?*
DR Not necessarily. But you understood very clearly what he wanted. If you didn't understand it, then that's when he would get very upset. But he created, in the rehearsal period, a place that guaranteed it wouldn't be a new place when you got onstage. It would all be stuff that you were accustomed to using and it was a part of your life. He created an atmosphere in which you were that character. He gave you freedom to use the stuff on the set, use the stuff on your desk, and create behavior. Which I thought was fabulous.

BC *You worked with Lee Strasberg and Sanford Meisner before this. Sanford Meisner directed The Time of Your Life, which was your first Broadway play, right?*
DR Yes.

BC *And then you were at the Actor's Studio after that, right?*
DR For a bit, yes, after Marathon '33. After that I didn't go back.

BC *Did any of that help you work with Jerry?*
DR All of it helps, sure. The great one was Milton Katselas.

BC *Did you work with him in New York, or Los Angeles?*
DR When I got to Los Angeles I went to his classes.

BC *What made Milton a great acting teacher?*
DR His insight into human nature. He could look at you and say, "Stop the drugs." He could look at you and ask, "Who is it in your family that offends you and makes you feel that you're not important? Write them a letter. Don't even send it but write the letter." He was fabulous. He helped me tremendously in my life as well as my acting.

BC *Working with Robbins, did you feel there was a genius at work?*
DR He had great authority and he was exciting. He was a very sexual man.

BC *Could you explain that a little? What do you mean, his masculine presence?*
DR In his being totally in charge, and making you feel that he knew how to help you. Making you feel that he was in charge and that he could help you. And he could. If you were willing to try all the things that he asked you to do, and be open to those things, he just adored you. I had a great time with him. I know people talk about how difficult he was, and how emotional, but I found that exciting. Because when he told you to do something, and you did it, it worked.

BC *Did the other people in the cast feel that way?*
DR I don't think so. I don't know about Elaine May, but certainly not Jack Weston. I think Jack Weston was frightened by him. I think he was terrified of Jerry Robbins. Jerry could be very strong in that department because he was so demanding of what he wanted. He didn't have too much time to waste.

BC *Did he ever tell you why he picked The Office to direct?*
DR No.

BC *Was Irene around much?*
DR Not very often. If so, I'm sure they had meetings by themselves.

BC *Were you surprised when it closed?*
DR Well, it ended so abruptly.

BC *After ten performances?*
DR Yeah.

BC *Was there any warning that it would close?*
DR I think the opening preview boos might tell you something! *(laughs)* I still remember Elaine May yelling to the audience, as she bowed, "Author! Author!" We, the cast, didn't feel that we should get the boos!

BC *Have you ever had an experience like it since?*
DR No. And I hope never to! *(laughs)* That's frightening, when you hear boos at the first performance. When the curtain comes down, the first applause is for the play. So, if you boo the play, and then the curtain comes up and the actors come out and then you get booed, you say "Whoa! Wait a minute!"

BC *What was the character of Miss Punk? Why was she named Miss Punk?*
DR I have no idea. No idea whatsoever. I played her as a woman who was alone — without any relationships of any kind, not married, no children — and who was very efficient and who lived for her work. She wasn't very social.

BC *I guess it was partly based on Irene's life when she first came to New York from Cuba. She worked as a secretary in an office.*
DR She was never very close to us.

BC *Do many people ask you about The Office?*
DR No, because we ran for ten performances!

BC *Did you see Jerry afterward at all?*
DR Never again, because after that, I was in California. And that was the last thing he ever did on Broadway.

BC *Until, I guess, Jerome Robbins' Broadway.*
DR That was with Jason Alexander, wasn't it?

BC *And a whole new generation of actor-dancer-singers.* **DR** Right.

BC *Did you ever work with anyone after Jerry who was as demanding a director?*
DR Maybe Phil Rosenthal on *Everybody Loves Raymond*. Well, Phil wasn't as charismatic as Jerry, or as sexual. I just assumed I was a ballet dancer with Jerry, and that the things he asked me to do were different steps. I never questioned it. I just went with it. He was ready to explode with ideas and creativity. He was very exciting to be around.

Bernard Carragher is a theater critic for *New York Theater News* and *The Catholic Transcript*. He has written for *The New York Times*, *Playbill*, and *Show* magazine. He was one of the producers of *My One and Only* and *Chita Rivera: The Dancer's Life*.

Doris Roberts was born in St. Louis, Missouri. After numerous roles on the stage and in film, in 1979 she was cast on the hit TV series *Angie*. In 1983 she joined the cast of *Remington Steele*, and in 1996 she first appeared in the part of Marie Barone on *Everybody Loves Raymond*, a role for which she won four Emmy Awards for best supporting actress.

“No one actually can be blamed. The theater is a collaborative enterprise. It was just too many things went wrong.” — **Jerome Robbins** (New York Times, May 8, 1966)



PICTURE PERFECT

Martha Swope, an Icon Who Captured Icons Onstage

by Carol Rosegg

I was two years out of school, unemployed, when a press agent friend told me Martha Swope was looking for someone.

"Who is she?" I asked. Shaking his head in wonder, he replied, "Pick up any *New York Times* and look at the theatre photo credits." Luckily for me, I did not realize that Martha was *the* preeminent dance and theatre photographer in the world. Had I known that she photographed every major dance company (New York City Ballet, American Ballet Theatre, Martha Graham) and every Broadway show (*A Chorus Line*, *Pippin*, *Annie*, *For Colored Girls*)—well, I never would have had the moxie to go and meet her. Sometimes ignorance really pays off.

I called her and she asked me to come to her studio in a brownstone on 72nd Street. The darkroom was the bathroom. The film developing room was a closet. She showed me in, and the first print I ever made was of Louis Jourdan in *13 Rue de l'Amour*. She offered me a job, but in reality she gave me my future. George Balanchine, Michael Bennett, Joe Papp, David Merrick—Martha photographed them and their productions, on the stage and in the studio. Every night was another show or another dance performance.

Those were the days of four-hour setup photo calls, of processing the black-and-white film at midnight, printing contact sheets the next morning. Martha watched the show and made stick-figure drawings of possible setups. The show came down, and we would set up two quartz lights on either side of the stage. Martha's shooting style was unique: She would stand onstage in fourth position and shoot—no one else did that. She'd create a pose, a big fat close-up of the "star," and the rest of the cast in total focus spanning out behind the main character. No one ever looked bad in a Martha Swope photo.

Of course, her timing was impeccable. Before digital, before auto-focus cameras, Martha would hold her Leica camera and shoot a dance's perfect moments. Baryshnikov leaping. Donna McKechnie, electrifying in the iconic "Music and the Mirror" from *A Chorus Line*. Arthur Mitchell, Edward Villella, Gelsey Kirkland—ballet superstars all. Few people realize that the white-suited John Travolta, with his hand raised and his hip cocked on the disco dance floor from *Saturday Night Fever*, was a Martha Swope original.

When actors and dancers knew it was Martha coming to take their picture, there was a communal sigh of relief. They knew they would be protected and cared for. No dance photo with a badly turned foot would ever see the light of day. She taught me never to shoot anyone *en pointe* until they had fully extended over their arch. Fingers, hands, necks—all perfect.

And there was another side to Martha—her love of animals. At her house in Atlantic Beach on Long Island, she rescued and neutered every stray cat she could catch. One day, while the studio was still in the 72nd Street brownstone, she brought a litter of stray kittens to her apartment bathroom upstairs to be socialized. My job was to sit on the floor and pet them so she could find them homes. And she did! She took in stray dogs that others would have abandoned. Topo, the dog who shared the 72nd Street studio, was terrified of thunder and lightning. He would hide out in the darkroom with his head up the skirt of whoever was in there printing. Later, when we moved to Manhattan Plaza, Bert, the greyhound mix, joined us. A messenger who also worked for a vet told Martha that the owner was planning to put Bert to sleep; would she take him? Bert lived a long and happy life on West 43rd.

Martha loved to travel and took many exotic vacations with her friends: Africa, Switzerland, Italy. Work also included traveling. Washington, D.C., every year for ABT at the Kennedy Center. Travel with Martha always included a lovely hotel and a great meal. She was up for anything. Once in Milwaukee, we went on a Pabst Blue Ribbon Brewery tour, drinking beer samples at 10 a.m. so we could make our airplane home. Long before Chicago deep dish pizza became available in NYC, we had it delivered to the stage door of the Shubert Theatre in Chicago to eat on our way to the airport.

As long as I knew her, she lived above her studio. On 72nd Street, her apartment was upstairs. Later, Manhattan Plaza gave her an apartment in their 9th Avenue building—just an elevator ride away from her ground-floor studio. She was never far from her work, both physically and spiritually. She leaves us a legacy of beautiful moments caught on film. She invited me in, and I owe her my path in life. I didn't even know a career in theatre photography existed until I met Martha. She took me under her wing as a teacher, mentor, and friend. For that I will be forever grateful.

Prolific theatre photographer **Carol Rosegg** frequently works on Broadway.

From "Picture Perfect: Martha Swope, an Icon Who Captured Icons Onstage" by Carol Rosegg. Originally appeared in *American Theatre* magazine, Vol. 34, No. 3. Used by permission from Theatre Communications Group.

above left:
Photo of Martha Swope by Jerome Robbins.
From the collection of Jerome Robbins.

below:
Photo of Jerome Robbins by Martha Swope.
From the collection of Jerome Robbins.





Kathleen Breen Combes in Jerome Robbins' *The Concert (Or, The Perils of Everybody)* at Boston Ballet. Photo by Igor Burlak Photography.



Arcadian Broad and Kate-Lynn Robichaux in Jerome Robbins' *Fancy Free* at Orlando Ballet. Photo by Michael Cairns.



2018 is lining up to be a spectacular year full of performances, discussions, exhibits, screenings, and tributes to Jerome Robbins in his centennial. For example, here is a preview of an event that will honor Jerome Robbins throughout the year at the New York Public Library:

Jerome Robbins and New York (September 2018 – March 2019)

As a creative center and a permanent home for irreplaceable records for the entire performing arts community, the Lewis B. Cullman Center at the Library for the Performing Arts will draw from its world-class collections for *Jerome Robbins and New York*, a major exhibition to document and illuminate the achievements of Jerome Robbins. Curated by Julia Foulkes, professor at The New School and author of *A Place for Us: West Side Story and New York*, the exhibition will create a connected educational experience to introduce Robbins to a new generation and inspire visitors to use his works as a springboard for artistic reimaginings of the City. Jerome Robbins was a leading advocate for the creation of a performing arts research library in the 1960s, and his vision underscores LPA's essential mission. The Jerome Robbins Dance Division—named in his honor—is the home for his rich archive of manuscripts, diaries, photos, artwork, and moving image recordings. The exhibition will not only showcase treasures from his life and work, but open up the process of creativity and collaboration.

Upcoming Performances of Jerome Robbins Works

A SELECT LIST

July 11 & 13, 2017

DANCES AT A GATHERING/THE CONCERT
New York City Ballet, Saratoga Springs, New York

August 22, 2017

AFTERNOON OF A FAUN
Ballet Sun Valley, Sun Valley, Idaho

ongoing
THE KING AND I
National Tour

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newsletter@jeromerobbins.org

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Cover: Statue of Jerome Robbins on the terrace of the Teatro Nuovo (now called the Jerome Robbins Terrace) in Spoleto, Italy by Robin Heidi Kennedy. Photo by Stefano Bonilli.