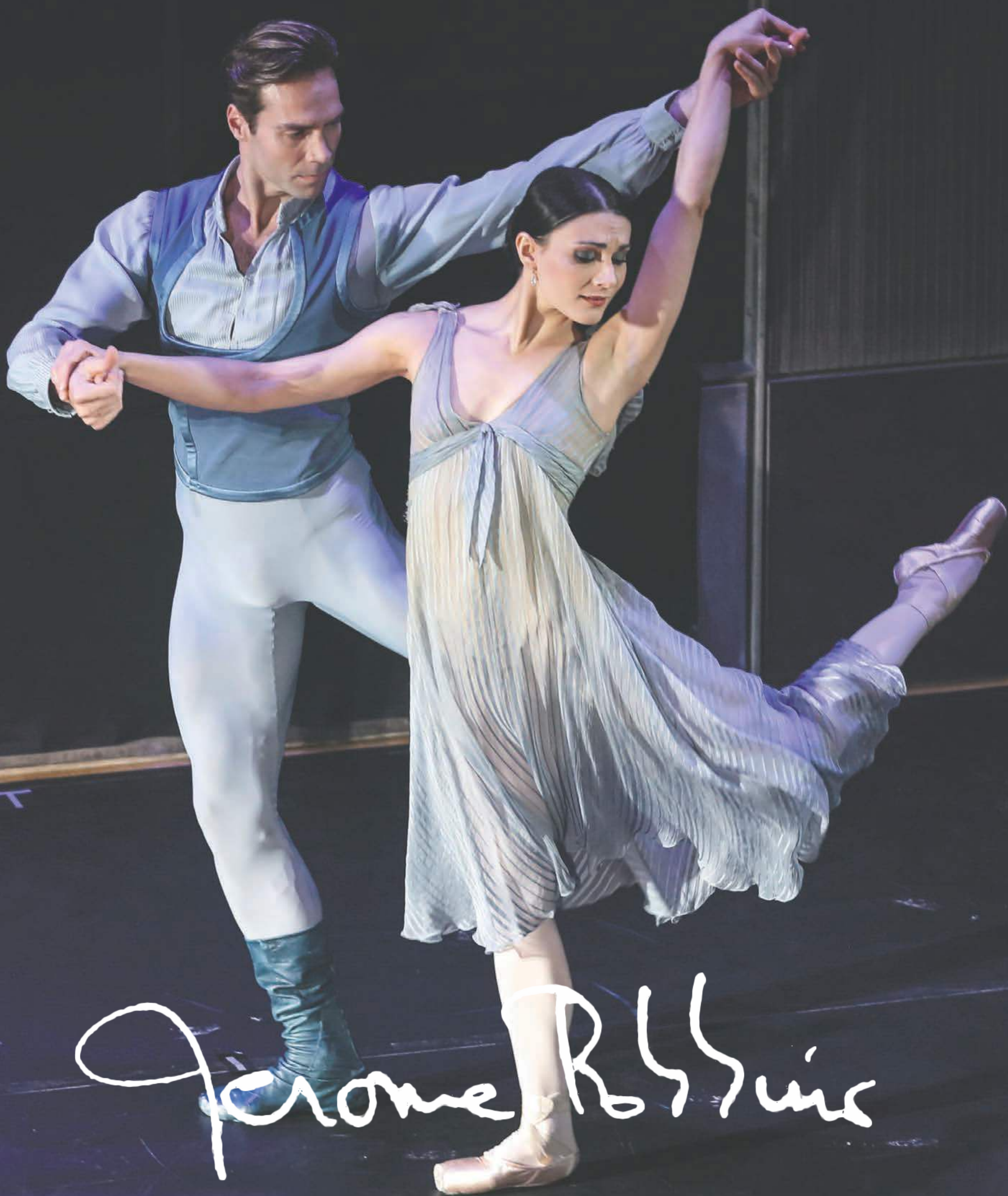


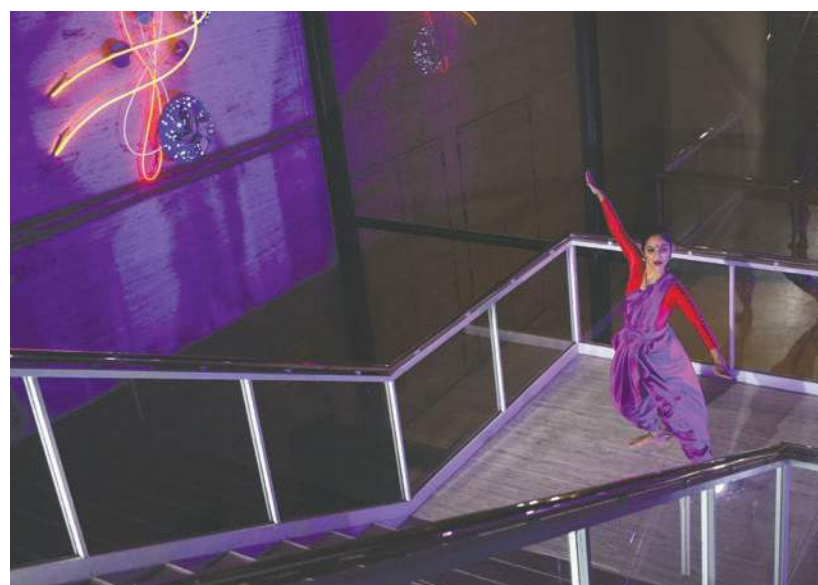
**NEWS FROM THE JEROME
ROBBINS FOUNDATION**

VOL. 7, NO. 1 (2020)



Jerome Robbins

75th Anniversary Gala of New York Public Library for the Performing Arts' Jerome Robbins Dance Division



On Wednesday, December 4, 2019, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts celebrated the Jerome Robbins Dance Division's 75th anniversary with a unique gala that raised more than \$723,000 in critical funds that will help the division document, collect, and preserve the history of dance and provide free services and programs for all.

More than 200 dance-loving attendees moved through the Library for the Performing Arts in Lincoln Center viewing site-specific movement pieces created specifically for the occasion by Ephrat Asherie, The Bang Group, Jean Butler, Adrian Danchig-Waring, Heidi Latsky, Michelle Manzanales, Rajika Puri, and Pam Tanowitz. Staged in unexpected spaces (among the stacks, on reading room tables, through hallways, and on stairways), these brief performances featured dancers including Chelsea Ainsworth, Chris Bloom, Jason Collins, Shelby Colona, Lindsey Jones, Jeffrey Kazin, Victor Lozano, Aishwarya Madhav, Georgina Pazcoguín, Nic Petry, Jaclyn Rea, Tommy Seibold, Amber Sloan, Gretchen Smith, Leslie Taub, Melissa Toogood, and Peter Trojic.

The evening's performances culminated in the Library's Bruno Walter Auditorium with an excerpt from Jerome Robbins' *Other Dances*, featuring American Ballet Theatre Principal Dancer Sarah Lane and New York City Ballet Principal Dancer Gonzalo Garcia. Jerome Robbins originally created the work in 1976 for a fundraiser to support the Library.

The Jerome Robbins Dance Division's 75th Anniversary Gala was chaired by Caroline Cronson & The Jerome Robbins Foundation. The Committee for the Jerome Robbins Dance Division includes Charles Adelman, Dr. Jeffrey Borer, Beverly D'Anne, Hubert Goldschmidt, Perry Granoff, Allen Greenberg, Caroline Hyman, Peter Kayafas, Nancy Lassalle, Kate Lear, Marion Martin, Alison Mazzola, Madeleine Nichols, Dr. Meryl Rosofsky, Elizabeth Simpson, Edward Villella, and William H. Wright II.



Far left: Ephrat Asherie in her *Riff this Remix*

Left top: Aishwarya Madhav in Rajika Puri's *A West/East Song and Dance*

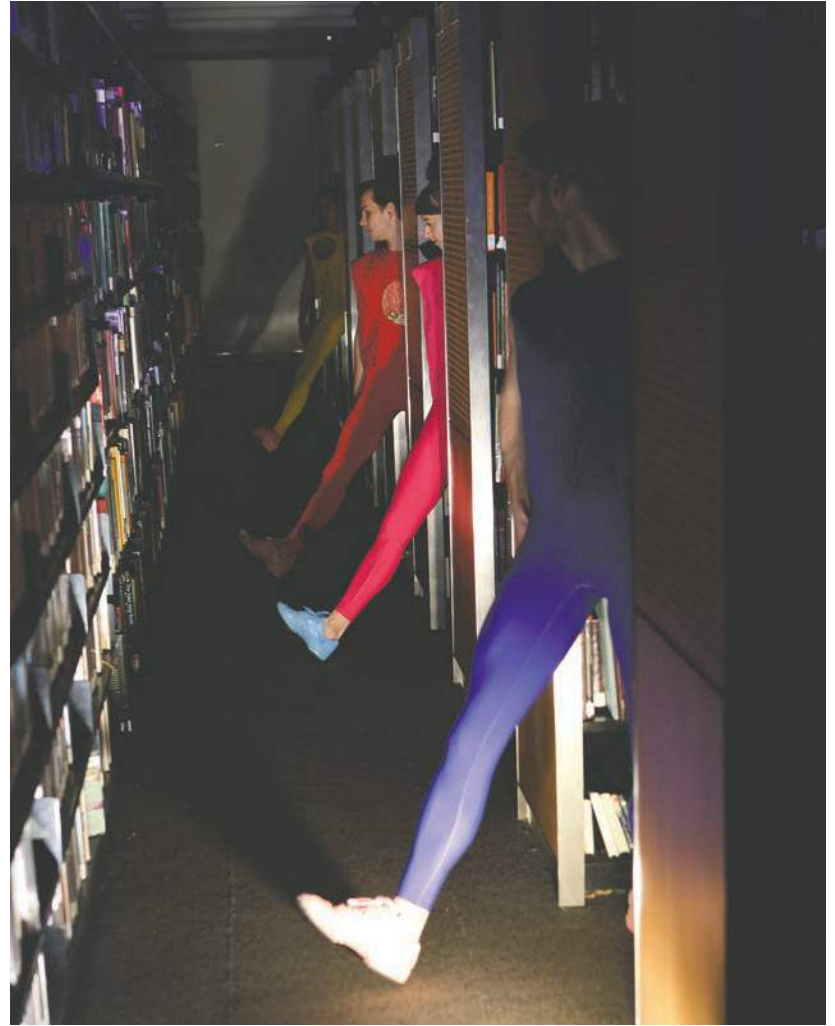
Left middle: The Bang Group in David Parker's *12x4*

Left bottom: Chris Bloom in Michelle Manzanales' *If By Chance...*

Right: Pam Tanowitz's *Library Dance*

Below: Heidi Latsky's *D.I.S.P.L.A.Y.E.D.* (excerpts)

All photos © Julie Lemberger [www.julielemberger.com]



THE JEROME ROBBINS DANCE DIVISION
75TH ANNIVERSARY GALA



The Jerome Robbins Dance Division protects the history of dance. We support the future of the field by providing dance artists with studio space, residencies and documentation of their lives and work and we assist scholars by underwriting research through fellowships. We are committed to education and offer professional support and resources to K-12 and 3rd level dance educators in New York City and beyond. Finally, we serve the greater public through public programming, exhibitions and stellar reference service by dedicated specialist dance librarians. Most importantly, everything we provide is offered free of charge.



Recollections and Impressions of Jerome Robbins' Photography

by Julie Lemberger

In 2017, I spent the hot summer inside the cool dark offices of the Jerome Robbins Foundation in New York City, looking at vintage photographs. As a New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Jerome Robbins Dance Division Research Fellow, my quest was to seek the influences Jerome Robbins had on the discovery and work of performing arts photographer, Martha Swope, one of my predecessors, in the field of dance photography. There, I was privileged to view Jerome Robbins' personal photography collection, which had been digitized to be viewed on the computer. Like many of his followers, I had no idea he was a photographer in addition to being a great choreographer and director for stage and screen. He was also a great photographer too. Similar to all his artistic efforts his photographs resonate with his personal perspective and creativity, of course.

Jerome Robbins was always an artist, as was manifested while growing up in Weehawken, NJ, when he studied and practiced visual arts: drawing, painting and other forms, besides performing arts. He focused on realistic, imagined, and abstract subject matter, taking what he personally admired and changing it to make it his own. He was a great observer of life, and interpreted and manipulated what he saw, felt, and thought—encapsulated and framed it onto a rectangle, albeit a stage, movie screen, or photograph. His milieu of artists and creative people likely encouraged him to cultivate a practice of making art, including photography—a controversial medium, debated upon its merits as to whether it was art or simply reportage.

My research focused on the 1950s, when Robbins choreographed *West Side Story* (the only time Swope and Robbins photographed simultaneously). This period coincided with the proliferation and popularity of photography, due to the affordability and portability of cameras available. Hobbyists, serious amateurs, and full-fledged artists alike populated the urban streets and tourist areas worldwide, perhaps a precursor to today's saturation of picture takers. *The Family of Man* photography exhibition opened at the Museum of Modern Art, celebrating *everyday* life experiences from around the world in beautiful, bold black-and-white pictures. Along with the picture-based *Life Magazine*, this exhibition helped to legitimize and popularize photography as an art form. In this Robbins was in step with his time and artistic atmosphere. Photography was an expression of his life, as an artist, and not merely a record of a moment in time; the pictures were intended to transcend time.

The more pictures I looked at, the more transported I became, as if to another time. I began to feel as if I knew Jerry (and therefore began referring to him informally) personally. I imagined that I walked beside him also taking pictures of places, people, and occasionally things. What resonated with me are images with a sense of uniqueness and personal history as well as exquisite examples of form, pattern, and design.

Below: Photos by Jerome Robbins, circa 1950s. Facing page: All photos by Jerome Robbins.

Jerry was a *citizen of the world*, as conveyed in images from his many jaunts locally, nationally, and internationally, touring for both work and pleasure. He photographed what interested him—what ignited his need to frame, compose, and show his unique perspective: relationships of objects and people in scenarios that made sense to him. Of course, dancing and celebrations were included. He photographed what aesthetically, culturally, and socially delighted him, revealing interesting patterns, shapes, and tonal play between values. For example, his picture of the Copenhagen rooftops, with a cacophony of triangles, diamonds, squares, and rectangles in various hues of black, white, and grey depicts order within chaos, a theme he had returned to in abstraction and portraiture. He chose a variety of points of view from high angles looking down, a *bird's eye view*, as in the rooftops image and low angles looking up, a *worm's eye view*, as well as portrait and normal to wide angles. His subject matter portrayed life in the city and humanized off-duty performers. He had a straightforward, documentary style and yet his images are often enigmatic, as in a picture of a woman, curled catlike on a chair, sleeping; or a young boy, standing beside a bull's eye symbol, eyes downcast, as if he were waiting for something to happen. Additionally, he composed and framed natural scenes, all sorts of landscapes from wherever he happened to be: New York City, Long Island, Puerto Rico, Barcelona, Florence, Israel, etc.

For Jerry, photography was an art form, *while at rest*, that is, when he was not working on dances or Broadway or Hollywood musicals. However, occasionally he documented rehearsals and activities of intimacy from backstage, in the wings, and in the dressing rooms, but primarily his interest was the world away from the theater.

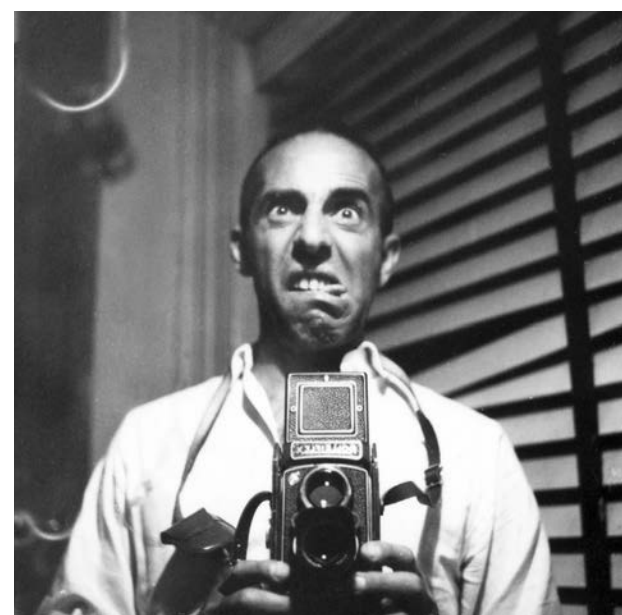
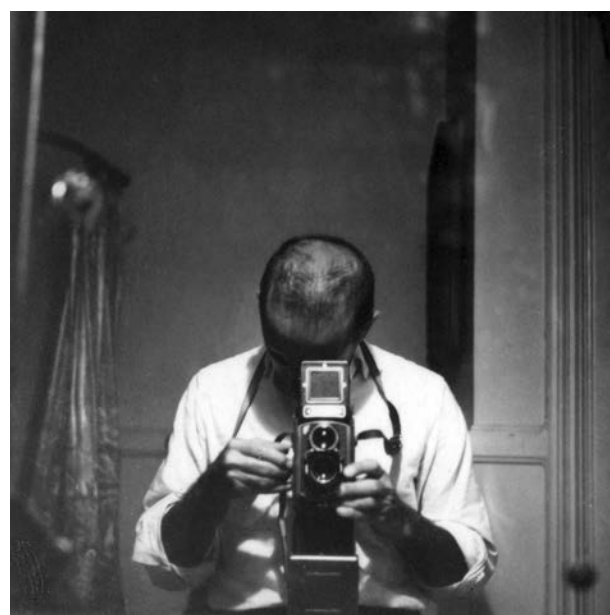
Robbins' documentary style and skill are comparable to any working photo-journalist. In fact his photography was published in *Life Magazine* in 1957, of the backstage antics during *West Side Story*. A visionary and natural storyteller, his framing of a news story showed both the big picture to set the scene and the small details that flesh out the story, giving his pictures a point of view and an affinity. His photographs resonate with the human experience with tenderness, whimsy, and grace while drawing attention to his acute sense of taste and artistry. They are timeless.

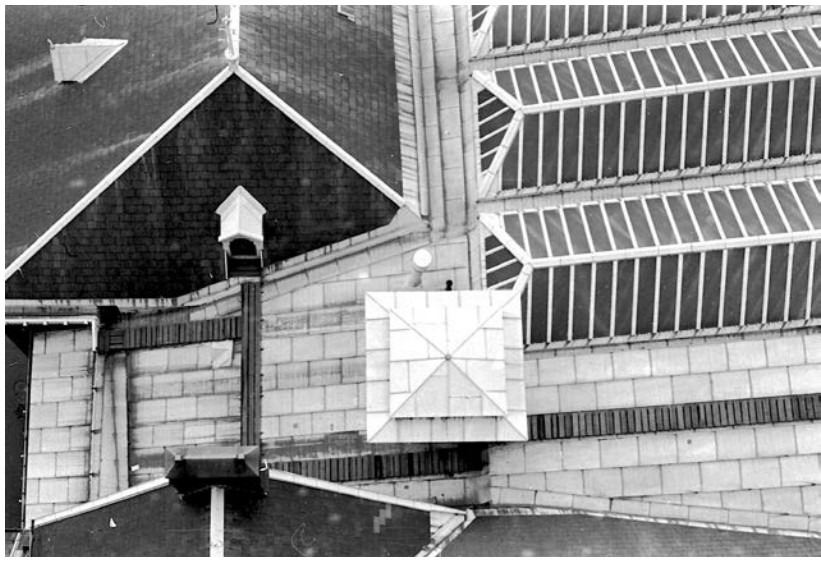
© 2020 Julie Lemberger

Julie Lemberger, a former dancer originally from Berkeley, CA, has been photographing dance since 1993. Her photographs have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Village Voice*, *Dance Magazine*, and numerous books, journals, blogs, and websites. She has worked closely with many dancers and choreographers including Molissa Fenley, Stephen Petronio, Edisa Weeks, Alonzo King's Lines Ballet, Tiffany Mills, and Carlos Fittante Balam Dance.

Lemberger is a Jerome Robbins Dance Division Research Fellow at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. She holds a BA in Fine Art from Brooklyn College, a BA in Dance Studies from Empire State College, and a MA in Dance Education from Hunter College. She also practices yoga and is learning synchronized swimming. Julie lives in Brooklyn with her husband and two daughters.

www.julieleberger.com





Top: Nora Kaye, on tour in Europe with New York City Ballet, 1952.

Middle: Francisco Moncion, New York City, 1956.

Bottom: George Balanchine and Tanaquil Le Clercq, Snedens Landing, New York, 1951.



Top: Rooftops in Copenhagen, Denmark, 1956.

Middle: Venice, Italy, 1955.

Bottom: Israel, 1953.

The Original Production (by the choreographers themselves) by Gregory Victor

In an article titled “Recording the Dance” that appeared in the New York Times in 1965, Jerome Robbins explained the urgent need to create and maintain an archive of dance on film: “We must be able to observe works in their original state and be able to watch the specific, subtle and elusive qualities of performance and performers which are outside of the actual choreography itself, and which no system of dance notation or verbal description is ever able to realize.”

This visionary statement reflected Robbins’ keen interest in developing a dance archive at the New York Public Library. The Moving Image Archive of the Jerome Robbins Dance Division began in 1965, when Robbins donated six cans of film, along with the gift of a percentage of his royalties from the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. Over the years, Robbins’ gift has generated millions of dollars for the Dance Division and continues to provide significant support. These days, the archive has grown to over 25,000 titles of moving image materials.

Continuing Robbins’ vision, Tony-winning director and choreographer Jerry Mitchell and Broadway dancer Paul Canaan have created a solution to dance’s resistance to becoming a reproducible object. Using modern technology, they have teamed up to bring Broadway choreography to regional, community, and educational productions nationwide. The Original Production (TOP) is an online resource that offers step-by-step instructional choreography videos led by the choreographers themselves [www.theoriginalproduction.com].

TOP was co-founded by Mitchell and Canaan in 2017 by making Mitchell’s choreography from the musicals *Hairspray* and *Legally Blonde* available. Since then, they’ve added musicals licensed through Music Theatre International [MTI] and Theatrical Rights Worldwide [TRW], including *Annie*, *The Addams Family*, *All Shook Up*, *Guys and Dolls*, *The Music Man*, *Freaky Friday*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *The Little Mermaid*. For schools and young performers, MTI offers TOP videos as an add-on resource for companies producing Broadway JR editions of *Annie*, *Guys and Dolls*, *Hairspray*, *Legally Blonde*, and *The Music Man*. Choreographers for these “junior” editions will discover ways to adapt the original Broadway steps to meet their young dancers abilities.

Jerry Mitchell has significant experience preserving original Broadway choreography. He assisted Jerome Robbins on his 1989 retrospective *Jerome Robbins’ Broadway*, and he went on to re-create Robbins’ choreography in the 2003 Broadway revival of *Gypsy*. He has also worked with the choreography of Michael Bennett, staging “Turkey Lurkey Time” (from *Promises, Promises*) for the 2003 film *Camp* and dances from *Follies* for Paper Mill Playhouse’s 1998 revival production. TOP offers choreography from a slate of Broadway choreographers, including Tony Award winner Sergio Trujillo (*The Addams Family*, *All Shook Up*) and Beetlejuice choreographer Connor Gallagher (*Miss Nelson is*

Missing, How I Became a Pirate). The resource has also commissioned new choreography for shows including *The Music Man* and *Guys and Dolls*, both created by choreographer Parker Esse.

Before TOP, choreography was available to license for just a handful of musicals, and usually only in a form called Labanotation, which made authentically re-creating complex dances a challenge. Choreographers generally prefer videotaping to using written systems of dance notation. The best known of the written systems, Labanotation, developed in 1928, has not caught on with most choreographers and dancers. It is a fairly arcane system; few dancers can read or write it.

Mitchell has said, “If I have a style, I hope it is to be a good storyteller.” Working with Robbins, Mitchell learned the importance of storytelling over style. Robbins told Mitchell, “You’re not here to impose your style on a show. You’re here to tell the story.” “Dance is never about the steps, but about the story behind each step. Why were they chosen, what did they mean to [the choreographer], and how did [they] want them executed by the dancers? This is what The Original Production is here to do—to collaborate with up-and-coming artists, choreographers, and directors, and share the ideas behind the steps that serve as the foundation for the story,” Mitchell added.



Jerry Mitchell is a director and choreographer and the proud founder of The Original Production. He received the Tony Award in recognition of his choreography for the 2013 Tony Award-winning Best Musical, *Kinky Boots*, for which he was also nominated as director. He was recently nominated for an Olivier Award for his choreography in *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*, which he also directed and co-produced in the West End. In the 35 preceding years, Jerry has been involved with more than 50 Broadway, Off-Broadway, West End and touring productions, starting as a dancer for Agnes de Mille in *Brigadoon* and thereafter assisting Michael Bennett and Jerome Robbins. His Broadway debut as choreographer, *You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown*, was followed by *The Full Monty*; *The Rocky Horror Show*; *Hairspray*; *Gypsy*; *Never Gonna Dance*; *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*; *La Cage aux Folles*; *Imaginary Friends*; *Legally Blonde*, which he also directed; *Catch Me If You Can*; and *Kinky Boots*.



Paul Canaan Broadway credits include *Kinky Boots* (dance captain/original Angel), *Miss Saigon*, *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, *La Cage aux Folles*, *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, and *Legally Blonde*. He recently partnered with director/choreographer Jerry Mitchell to launch The Original Production Inc., a dance licensing company that offers high schools and theaters the opportunity to learn and perform original Broadway choreography. He founded the arts organization Take It From The Top, which provides professional mentoring to aspiring young artists. He has served as artistic director of The Broadway Dreams Foundation and also serves as a judge for The National High School Musical Theatre Awards (The Jimmy Awards).

Jerry Mitchell On Working with Jerry Robbins

Gregory Victor Can you tell me when you first met Jerome Robbins? When and where did you first encounter him, and what was your first impression?

Jerry Mitchell When I was first auditioning for *The Robbins Project*—that’s what it was called—and when I was chosen, it was very interesting. I had auditioned, and Jerry had left the audition, and none of us heard anything. The next day I got a phone call from Jerry Robbins and he asked if I would meet him at a dance studio, and I said, “Sure.” He would pay me \$100 for the day. I went to the studio and one other person was there, Cynthia Onrubia, and we started working with him on lifting choreography from tapes—*Fiddler*, *West Side Story*, any videotape he had. That went on for six months under the auspices of *The Robbins Project*.

Then it was Manny Azenberg who convinced Jerry Robbins to put Cynthia and me on a weekly contract, as the project moved forward, and it was looking like we were actually going to try to turn this into some sort of a Broadway musical.

GV When you first got hired as Robbins’ assistant, *Jerome Robbins’ Broadway* was still a project in development. Can you describe your audition?

JM I was returning from London, where I had been working with Bob Avian on a production of *Follies* for Cameron Mackintosh. I was the Associate Choreographer on that. As soon as I landed, I went to 890 Broadway to audition for a new project called *The Robbins Project*. I didn’t really know anything about it. I walked into the room and every dance captain and Associate Choreographer who was working on Broadway was in the room, learning the combinations from Grover Dale. We learned something from “Cool,” and the beginning of *West Side Story*. Then, Jerry Robbins came into the room for about 30 minutes. He watched all of us do the combinations in small groups, and then he left the room. That was the first time I met him. He couldn’t have been sweeter or kinder to all of us.

GV You had already danced in four Broadway shows. Which choreographers had you worked with? Had those experiences prepared you to work with Robbins?

JM By the time I had auditioned to be Jerry Robbins' assistant, I had already danced for Agnes de Mille, Ron Field, Joe Layton, Peter Martins – doing Balanchine's original choreography in *On Your Toes*, and Donald Saddler. I had also assisted many of those choreographers, Michael Bennett and Bob Avian included, so I was prepared to meet Jerry Robbins. You know, in meeting Jerry Robbins, and knowing how prolific he was, of course as a director and a choreographer, and how in awe of him I was, I think the reason he chose me to work with him was because I didn't act any differently than I do now. I loved him, I loved the work, and I was honest and ready to do whatever he asked me to do, and I think he saw that in me right away.

GV You assisted director/choreographer Michael Bennett [who himself was a Robbins dancer in the international tour of *West Side Story*] on the workshop of *Scandal*. Were there any similarities between the two?

JM Yes, I had assisted Jerry Robbins after I had worked with Michael Bennett and Bob Avian on *Scandal*, and with Bob Avian on *Follies*. The thing about all three of those gentlemen, as directors and choreographers, was that they were very precise and very accurate about what they wanted to do, and how they wanted it to be accomplished. Some people mistook their passion for anger at times, but when they were angry, they were usually just frustrated with themselves.

GV As Robbins' assistant, what was your role? Were there other assistants as well?

JM When we started working, finally, on *The Jerome Robbins Project*, it was myself and Cynthia from the beginning. We were the only two who were there from day one until the end, and [dance captain] George Russell. We each had different parts of the show that we were in charge of with different groups of actors. I was in charge of all of the singing actors – Jason Alexander, Faith Prince, Debbie Shapiro. I was in charge of those actors who were singers, and I think that was probably because, of the three of us, I think I might have been the dancer who was more the actor. I'm certainly the one who was more interested in direction and choreography. Jerry really kept me close to his side, and I worked with him quite a bit on notes and all of that stuff as we were creating the show, and doing previews, and setting it. That was a big part of it.

GV What were the first steps in the two-year-long process for creating *Jerome Robbins' Broadway*?

JM Meeting with dancers who had previously been in the original shows, who were by then all well into their sixties, seventies, eighties, nineties, and meeting with them and learning what they could remember of the choreography – Nanette Fabray, Nancy Walker, [Betty] Comden and [Adolph] Green. I came to London to



Cynthia Onrubia, Jerry Mitchell, Jerome Robbins, Victor Castelli, and George Russell in a rehearsal of Jerome Robbins' Broadway on Halloween day in 1988. Photo from the collection of Jerry Mitchell.

meet with the original "Scream Girl" from the [*Billion Dollar Baby*] "Charleston" ballet, who had created a Labanotation choreographic record of the number. Of course, we also found a recording from the *Ford 50th Anniversary Show*, and when I showed it to her, she was able to remember a lot more than from her Labanotation. A videotape far surpasses Labanotation, as a tool. Labanotation is a terrible way to notate Broadway choreography, which is something that Jerry Robbins and I had a long discussion about. His advice was, "Buy a video camera and tape everything you create," which I've done to this day. I've taped everything that I've ever created as a choreographer on video, and I have records of everything. If he would have had that while we were trying to create *Jerome Robbins' Broadway*, think of how much faster the two-year process of creating that show would have gone.

Originally titled *The Astaire Variations*, the Jerome Robbins ballet *I'm Old Fashioned* pays tribute to a dance segment performed by Fred Astaire and Rita Hayworth in the 1942 musical film, *You Were Never Lovelier*. The Jerome Kern-Johnny Mercer song they perform, "I'm Old Fashioned," eventually became the title of the ballet. In the years since its premiere, it has been performed frequently by New York City Ballet. In January 2020, Miami City Ballet became the first company to perform it outside of New York City Ballet.

Getting the ballet from idea to premiere was, as with most Robbins productions, a precise and lengthy process. In 1981, Robbins wrote to Astaire to tell him that the "I'm Old Fashioned" dance sequence had inspired him to choreograph a ballet:

It is a jewel, and I was bowled over by the succinctness, form and invention. There is so much play, delicacy and relationship within its simple confines. The fact is I was so moved and delighted by that dance that I want to make a whole ballet about it, using that dance as its core and springboard. It would be in the form of a classic theme and variations, starting with a statement of the dance as it is, and then going on to the classic variations on it, first with a series of couples, then in solo variations and duets, trios, etc., a real fugue and as a finale, a recapitulation by everyone of the original dance. All those variations would be based on the steps and cadences of the materials presented in your original dance.

Astaire wrote back, "Of course I would be pleased to approve of whatever idea you have of using 'I'm Old Fashioned' as the basis for a ballet production... I'm honored that you want to do what you suggest."

I'm Old Fashioned Conceiving the Astaire Variations

BY GREGORY VICTOR

Music "I'm Old-Fashioned" (music by Jerome Kern, lyric by Johnny Mercer); ballet score ("I'm Old-Fashioned, variations based on a theme by Jerome Kern") by Morton Gould, commissioned by New York City Ballet

Premiere June 16, 1983, New York City Ballet, New York State Theater

Original cast Joseph Duell, Judith Fugate, Sean Lavery, Kyra Nichols, Bart Cook, Heather Watts, with Renee Estópinal, Alexia Hess, Antonia Franceschi, Elizabeth Irwin, Lisa Jackson, Margo Krody, Jerri Kumery, Catherine Morris, Shawn Stevens, Cornel Crabtree, Christopher Fleming, Espen Giljane, Douglas Hay, Laurence Matthews, Carlo Merlo, Afshin Mofid, David Otto, Michael Puleo

Costumes Florence Klotz

Lighting Ronald Bates

In the ballet, the Astaire/Hayworth number, which lasts three minutes on film, is mined by Robbins into a series of choreographic variations that expand on the film's steps, and the song inspires a thirty-minute score of variations by composer Morton Gould. Robbins establishes the theme and variations structure by showing the film scene as the ballet's opening, followed by choreographic variations. In his first letter to Gould, he explained, "The ballet is composed on the classical theme and variations structure ending with a fugue. The theme is a dance from the Columbia picture "You Were Never Lovelier," choreographed by Astaire and Val Raset. The variations are based on the material of that dance, music, + atmosphere." Robbins worked closely with Morton Gould, developing the commissioned score over a period of several months.

In March 1981 Robbins had begun keeping a journal that logged the ballet's inception. (The ballet's creation is also logged and is another story.) Obtaining permission from Astaire, researching the film's choreography, and Robbins' original collaborative communications with Morton Gould were all included in the journal. What follows are selections from those notes:

- I watch "Change Partners" – the second half of the channel 13 program on Fred Astaire. I had been interviewed briefly for some comments and sure enough there I was: beard, voice and eyes and mercifully brief. But wait. They had attached my comments into a little history of Rita Hayworth and from that they went into a sequence from "You Were Never Lovelier" called "I'm Old Fashioned."
- What a simple, clear and miraculous dance. How lovely, how easy, and most of all how choreographically delightful. Not one of the flashier dances or one of those filled with his cinematic and furniture climbing or prop handling inventions – it was pure dance and, although brief, wonderfully satisfying. It struck a deep response in me and more than anything I wanted to use it, study it, become a part of it and in my way dance it. It could be a ballet – Theme and Variations – ah – The Astaire Variations.

- I've gotten channel 13 to send me a clip of my appearance, but more importantly, to send me the "I'm Old Fashioned" also.
- No, it doesn't disappoint. As a matter of fact, I am to find that it only invariably gives more pleasure and more admiration. What most appeals to me is its simpleness: rocking back and forth and use of the second beat of each bar rather than the downbeat on one. The tap steps, easy to see and grasp and there it comes – what a source for dance material – what a wealth of choreography – and what a joy it would be to take it and develop it – using it as the theme for a series of variations – I must indeed – for the form and action of the steps are magisterially, eloquently, classical.
- I do some research. The picture is by Columbia. The choreography is credited to a Mr. Val Raset. The Kern music was written for the picture.
- I decided to write Astaire himself and do so telling him of my idea – how I'd love to do the ballet and hope he'll give permission.
- I try to copy the dance and manage the first eight bars – the simple rocking back and forth broken up by some simple, ballroom dancing. Oh, I see room dancing. Oh, I see, aha – it's 6 steps the first time – 8 the second – it also takes longer to figure out how he gets the weight where and when. Strange that it took that long!
- Permission granted from Astaire and Columbia. Now for a musician. I contact Morton Gould and explain it. Sounds good to him.
- I meet with Morton Gould and show him the clip and try to explain what I'm after. Why a real musical theme and variations. How classical? How popular, how period? How formal? Should we state it first? First idea was to state it with one couple as originally danced, or should we first project the film itself? Somewhere I realize I've found a scheme that works with all couples dancing together as a finale – or perhaps it's done at the same time a huge screen shows the original, or like Nutcracker – as they exit through French windows, should the windows grow, part, and let us enter a world of ballet – I guess it's termed neo-classic – but at any rate tights, toe shoes and clean lines.
- I take the clip to the theatre, where I have a rehearsal scheduled for Sally [Leland], Bart [Cook], Richard Moredock, a TV set and myself. I figure the dance is so short – 2½ choruses – we'll be able to copy it and get it down in 1–1½ hours. After an hour we've only gotten 16 bars in and we are still not sure of them. Four people watching and differences are apparent. We have to play the first 16 bars over and over. When we look at it, it is so simple. He just walks from moment to moment. When we try to get steps pinned down, it doesn't work. Finally, Sally has the solution. She's got a set at home that can slow the film down (being a ballet rehearsalist she has the technique down fine and she is exceedingly musical and a demon on counts, it couldn't have been in better hands).
- (Sally and Bart work in two sessions) Sally says she worked on it for hours and couldn't get past 20 bars. I can't believe it. It looks so effortless, clean and simple. True, Rita's skirt hides a lot and because it's black and white the separation of bodies and legs becomes confusing – but still –!
- We have an hour rehearsal today. After 1 hour I think we've got the first 24. We push on and run 4 bars – 2 bars – 1 bar over and over. No the foot goes behind, not in front. Yes, but the weight is on the other foot! It looks like a walk step but it's not and he speeds it up a little. Hey, their arms are down here not up – and on and on and on we go over 4 bars each seeing something else, adding, modifying, clarifying till after an hour and a half, we've got one whole chorus done. We go over and over it. I'm right. The material is wonderful and once we've got the physical technique accomplished, and even though we do not have any style, dynamics, phrasing correct – the dance is beginning to come through. What seems to be happening is that by doing the steps accurately in time and space, the "style" begins to come through by itself. As in Mr. Balanchine's works, the material is the message!

August 20, 1974

Dear Mr. Astaire,

This is a big fan letter and it is really just part of a continuity of enormous admiration I've had for you and your work spanning the years from "Flying Down to Rio" to today. The thing that sparked this note was seeing "Follow the Fleet" and "Carefree" this past weekend. I haven't had such a fine time at the movies in ages. The pure artistry, the sense of delight and exhilaration, plus the true thrilling quality of your work has lifted me up on a beautiful high for days. But even more was the confirmation of something I've always felt and that is how deeply influential and inspiring to my own career and work you have been.

Well - this is to thank you (something I should have done years ago) and I guess there is no way for the millions of us all over the world to thank you for the things you've given us, - the beautiful gift of joy, the belief that living is lovely, and that man is good.

With warmest regards.

Sincerely,

Jerome Robbins

A letter Jerome Robbins wrote to Fred Astaire a decade before creating *I'm Old Fashioned*, the ballet he dedicated to Mr. Astaire. From the Jerome Robbins Collection at the New York Public Library.



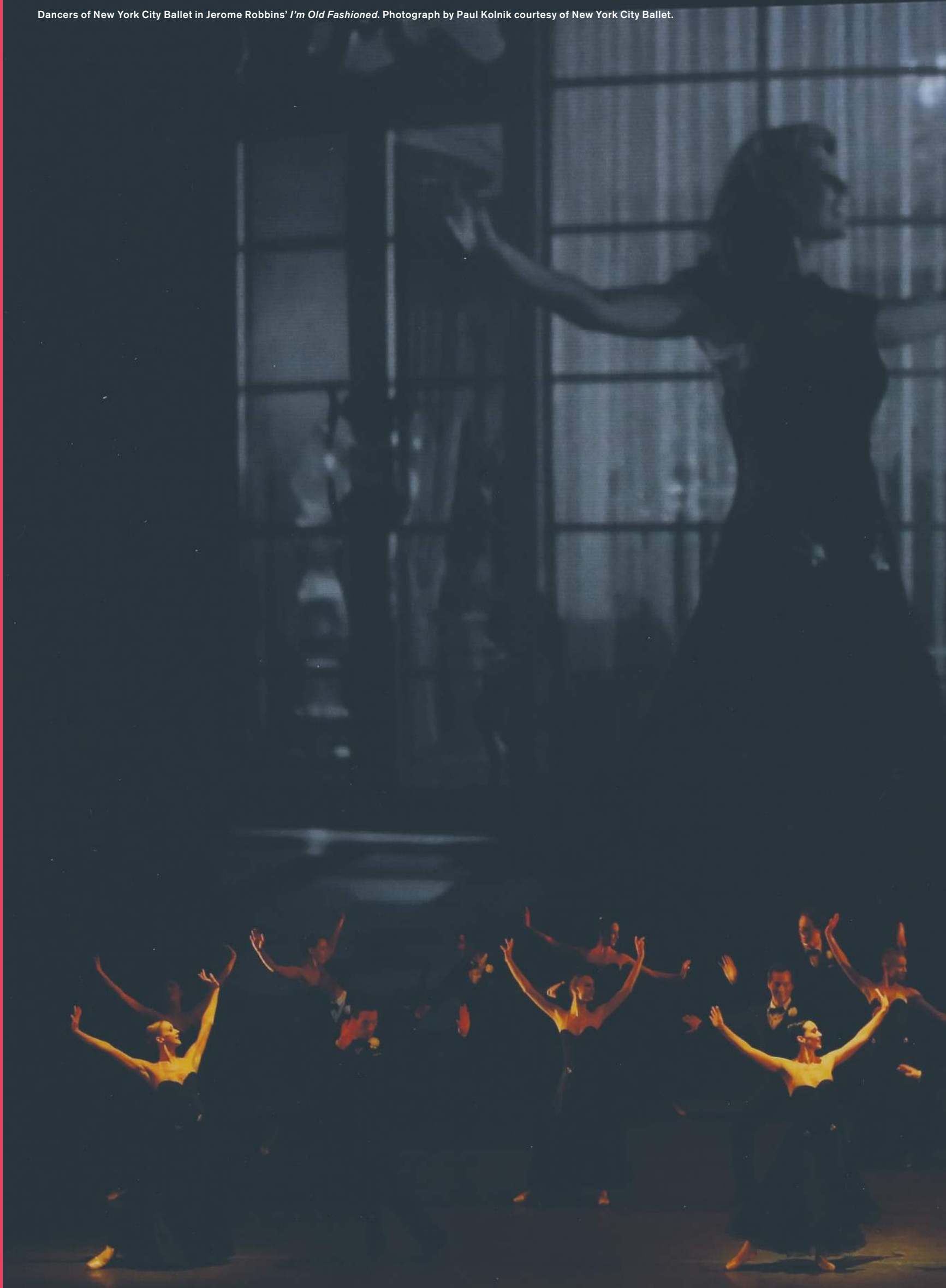
Jordan-Elizabeth Long and Aaron Hilton in Jerome Robbins' *I'm Old Fashioned* at Miami City Ballet, 2020. Photo © Alexander Iziliaev.

- We are all staggered by the extreme difficulty of learning it, of deciphering it. How strange, for we can pace out a complete, classic ballet fairly easily—and this, which still continues to look very easy and uncomplicated, is taking enormous work to get correct. And so it becomes apparent that under what seems to be a veneer of sophisticated and romantic, fairly simple ballroom dance is a complex understructure of tensions on rhythms, counterpoints, complexities of timings and physical relationships which we trained and experienced professionals are having a hell of a time reassembling, and once assembled it appears effortless and serene. But each dance phrase is in and of itself rich material for variation. Each rhythmic bar is material. Incredible!
- I call Morton. We push around ideas he's gotten started and I too in my head. Discussed: how about first showing the dance slowly and simply (after stating theme) almost single line melody and clear practice clothes demonstration? I propose doing variations on sections of the original dance and musical material (i.e., the chassé turn step, the chaîné step, the tour jeté step) using just the basic material. He talks of the work in this stage as classical. I suggest I haven't yet found how far to popular-classical I'd go—but know that the roots of the piece must never be lost.
- It soon became apparent that unless the material could pertain to not just the musical base but the choreographic base, it was divergent and useless. The essence of the piece is romantic and elegant with the undercurrents of popular music and Astaire's own sophistication and rhythmic styles. If I could use a dance section or step as basis for a variation, it worked. If not it did become organic.
- Had four hours rehearsal today. Decided beforehand that I would try some variations on my own—i.e., not use any music but the original and take off from the text of the original dance. I started to sketch one very close, then stopped and started another back to back and did about a chorus and a half. It was exciting to start to play with the material, and I could begin to see lots of possibilities.
- Started Bongo Variation finding my way through counterplay between accompanist and rhythms tapped out by a dancer. Questions—maybe it is all too pop, too non-classical. Who will be dancing? What is its form? What kind of variations are we missing—musically, choreographically?
- Spoke with Morton about making the Tango the finale—which builds and builds more girls, more (all girls like Hayworth, wigs etc.) and then synching in the film and exiting with the film only.
- Energy very low—big cold, headache, sore throat—the works. Finished the Bump Variation. Can't see or judge it yet. Has nice moments but may be too cute. The final bump of heads comes from the Astaire-Rogers first picture, "Flying Down to Rio." Fun to put it in as it fits nicely.
- Morton Gould seems to relish being at rehearsal and needed—he's so wonderfully laid back and incredible humor—ironic and self-mocking.
- Home—I run original sequence again and think: Open only with Astaire's face and then credits as a movie—"The Astaire Variations"—etc. to movie music, and then into a film clip as in a movie house, followed by the original version on film and then the live orchestra picks up with a transition into the 1st Variation. Set? Black and white? Like a movie screen? Elements of original version of set? Palm trees? Door upstage? At any rate, as in the beginning, the screen is down front, but at the end of the ballet, when we return to the film and the dancers, it's projected on the back wall and then, by film printing, the image diminishes in synch as they exit.

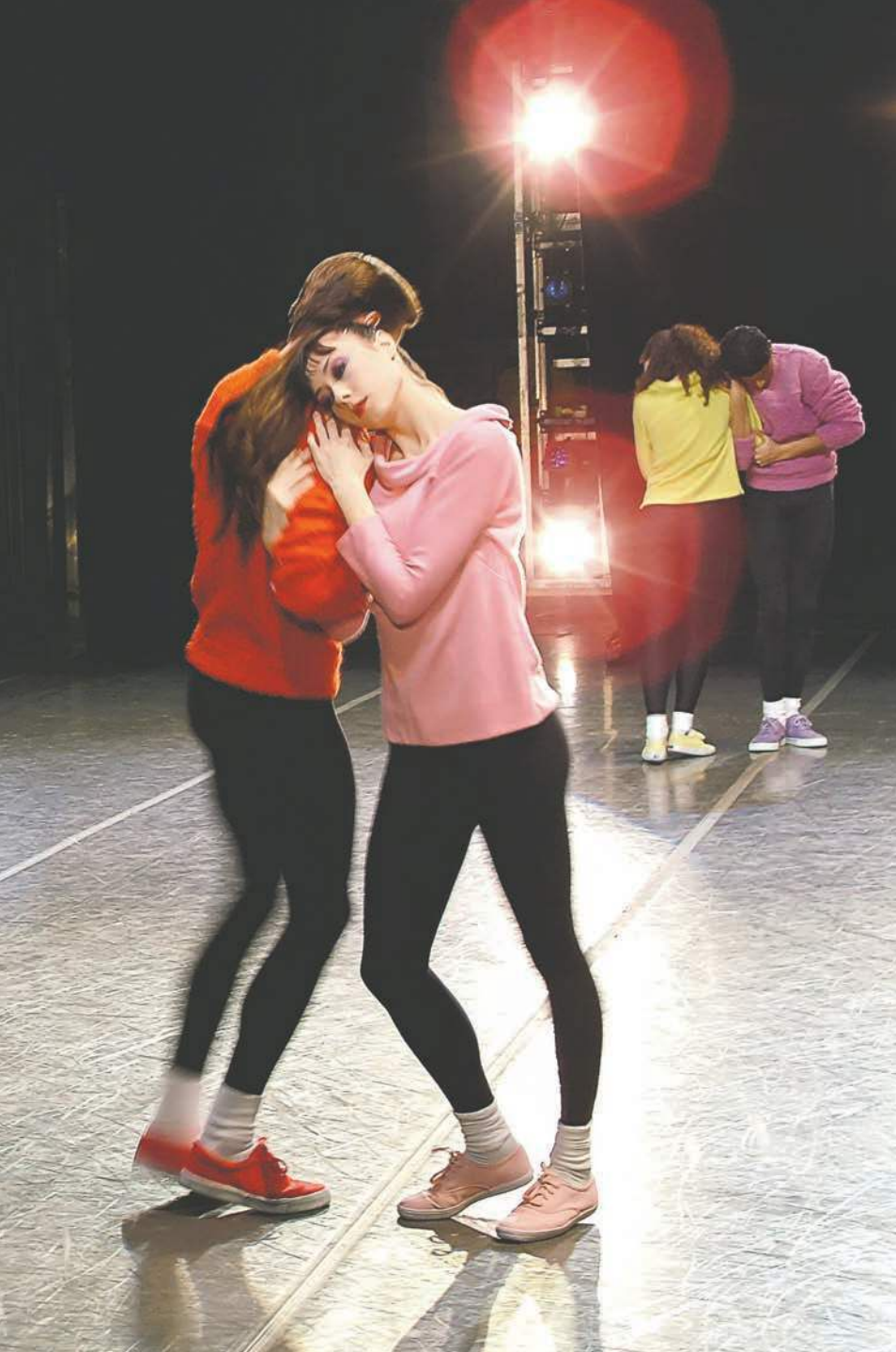
In a career full of experimentation, *I'm Old Fashioned* was one of Jerome Robbins' more courageous artistic ventures. The ballet is dedicated to Fred Astaire. In his tribute to the greatest popular music dancer of all time, Robbins set out to achieve the nearly impossible—choreographing a work that lives up to Astaire's joy, elegance, and wit. Determined to avoid imitation, Robbins sought inspiration from Astaire's moves. What he achieved was a series of choreographic variations evoking the spirit of Fred Astaire and displaying his admiration for Astaire's dancing and musicality.

Twenty minutes into *I'm Old Fashioned*, the onstage pairs of dancers mimic the steps being effortlessly performed by Astaire and Hayworth on the screen, until they cannot quite keep up. The dancers suspend their movement while facing the upstage screen, mesmerized momentarily by the towering presence of Astaire and Hayworth who continue to dance. It is a moment of Robbins genius, and a reverence to the dance legend who inspired Robbins throughout his life. The ballet couples resume their promenade as the light on them fades to black. The flickering image shows Astaire and Hayworth strolling off, arm in arm, as "The End" appears on the screen.

Dancers of New York City Ballet in Jerome Robbins' *I'm Old Fashioned*. Photograph by Paul Kolnik courtesy of New York City Ballet.







A Dancer's Life, Shaped by Jerome Robbins

by Ellen Bar

Ellen Bar trained at the School of American Ballet, joined New York City Ballet as a member of the corps de ballet in 1998 and was promoted to Soloist in 2006. While dancing, Ellen developed and produced the narrative dance film *NY Export: Opus Jazz*, which premiered at the 2010 SXSW Film Festival and aired on the PBS series *Great Performances*.

In this blog post, Ellen recalls her first encounter with Jerome Robbins' work at age seven with her mother, a Soviet-era ballerina, and her changing relationship with his works as she becomes a professional dancer, then a filmmaker, and finally a mother herself.

When I was 7 years old, my mother took me to see New York City Ballet for the first time. It was an all-Robbins program: *Dances at a Gathering* and something else I can't recall. It's an odd choice for a child's first ballet but, then again, the choice wasn't about me. My mother is a former dancer from the Soviet Union and the evening was meant to be a rare treat for her. My parents had emigrated to the United States ten years prior, and they'd only recently begun to permit themselves small luxuries.

We sat in the fourth ring, where the dancers were distant and tiny. I remember examining the program, enjoying the simplicity of the character names—Brown, Pink, Yellow, after the color of their costumes—which made sense to my seven-year-old brain. I spent the first few minutes happily connecting the figures on the stage to the characters in the program, trying to remember from my Crayola box what color was “brick.” Solo followed solo, duet followed duet, and it all began to look the same. Every now and then, someone did a long balance, or a dizzying amount of turns, and I perked up. But mostly it was just dance after dance after dance, set to a gentle piano score. I was bored. So instead of watching the stage, I watched my mother.

Like most former ballerinas, my mother was not easily impressed—she had been brought up in the proud Russian tradition, trained by Vaganova's own students. At home, I was always treated to a running commentary of criticism when we watched ballet videos. But at the theater, she'd completely forgotten I was there, absorbed in what was happening on stage. She sat perfectly straight with that unmistakable dancer's posture, leaning as far forward as she could without falling, literally on the edge of her seat. Every now and then she let out a rapturous sigh or a little laugh, clapping vigorously in between dances.

I was fascinated by her reaction and frustrated too—because whatever it was that was so remarkable to her was invisible to me. I knew that I was missing something, that this ballet contained some profound truth that I couldn't grasp. I filed it away with all the other mysteries I planned to solve once I was grown up.

Eight years later, having followed in my mother's footsteps, I was an advanced student at the School of American Ballet, living in the dormitories across the plaza from the New York State Theater. During the winter season, New York City Ballet performed every night for weeks on end. If there were any vacant seats, the house manager sometimes let in a few students. The house manager's name was Mr. Kelley, and he was a forbidding-looking man, with colorless eyes and a brusque manner. Every night, the students would ask him about tickets, and every night he'd turn them away—“nothing for you,” he'd say, waving us off.

The faint-of-heart would leave, but not me, and not my close circle of friends. We stayed and stayed, as the last bells rang, sometimes even after the orchestra had begun. We learned to play up our disappointment, to plead and beg and moan, and Mr. Kelley's cool facade would crack. “Alright,” he'd say with a little bit of grudging respect, as he wrote us a pass for the last row of the orchestra. I remember how magical and powerful those passes felt, like keys to the kingdom, though they were just little white cards with the seat numbers hastily scribbled on.

This was how I saw *Dances at a Gathering*, I mean, really saw it, for the first time. The music and the choreography which had been white noise when I was younger suddenly emerged as a language I could understand. Not just a language, but poetry; satisfying on the surface for its rhythm and melody, but also rich with a deeper meaning. Like my mother all those years before, I sat on the edge of my seat, relishing the nuance of small gestures, the unexpected musicality, the way the movement personified joy. The dancers were there only for each other, a community united by a common passion. They were me and my friends, navigating art, friendship, rivalry, and love on a daily basis, our relationships continually forming, shifting, breaking. This is where my own love affair with the Robbins works began. For the rest of my time as a student, I made sure not to miss a single Robbins ballet—with Mr. Kelley's help, of course.

During those student years, I often saw Jerry (I took the liberty of calling him that in my head) in the audience and I dreamt of telling him what his work meant to me. Time and again, I circled him, shark-like, at intermissions, but either the right moment never presented itself or I was too scared to seize it when it did. I doubt my compliment would have meant much—he'd received far more important ones than mine. Then again, no one understood the vulnerability of adolescence better than Jerry.

I joined New York City Ballet as a corps member in 1998, just two months before Jerome Robbins died. I got to know his ballets in a new way,



A rehearsal of Jerome Robbins' *The Cage* at New York City Ballet, with Ballet Master Jean-Pierre Frohlich and dancers Glenn Keenan, Georgina Pazcoguin, Ellen Bar, Sophie Flack, Faye Arthurs, and Savannah Lowery, at New York City Ballet, 2006.



Ellen Bar, Rebecca Krohn, and Saskia Beskow in Jerome Robbins' *Antique Epigraphs* at New York City Ballet, 2007.

from the inside out, by dancing them. When choreography feels right, when it embodies the music perfectly, when it becomes ingrained in your muscle memory, it brings you closer to the creator. Dancing Robbins' ballets in the company where he created them was enough of a gift for me. But Robbins would continue to give in ways I could never have predicted.

In 2005, I was part of the original cast of New York City Ballet's revival of *NY Export: Opus Jazz*, which had not been performed in decades. I was just one of the ensemble, yet it was one of the most satisfying experiences of my dancing life. Just like *Dances at a Gathering*, I found my youthful struggles, my deep connection to my city, my complicated relationships with my friends inside the dance. And I saw something else too—I saw how this particular ballet, which in so many ways was a product of the late 1950s, could be updated for a new era without losing its essential nature.

Along with my fellow soloist and best friend, Sean Suozzi, I developed an idea to reimagine *NY Export: Opus Jazz* as a film, shot on location in present-day New York City, with scripted narrative scenes to weave the different movements together. During his life, Robbins rarely allowed anyone to alter his work in any way. To protect his legacy after his death, he left strict requirements about how his ballets should be rehearsed and performed. Naturally, the Robbins Rights Trust was wary when we approached them. But—inexperienced filmmakers that we were—we made clear that it was Robbins himself who had planted the seeds of our project. The fact that we could envision *NY Export: Opus Jazz* as a film was only possible because of what Robbins had done with *West Side Story*, shooting dance in a visceral, cinematic way at gritty, urban locations. And despite his own inexperience directing major motion pictures, he won an Oscar for his very first one. He showed us what was possible, even if it was improbable.

Five years later, with a lot of help, hard work, and more than a little luck, *NY Export: Opus Jazz* aired on PBS, bringing what was once a little-seen ballet to millions of people around the country. It went on to play film festivals and arthouse cinemas, and was broadcast on foreign television networks around the world. Together with the Robbins Trust, we created a curriculum to accompany the film, which has been used across the New York City public school system. Because of *NY Export: Opus Jazz*, I found a new career as a film producer after I retired from dancing. And I met my future husband, Jody Lee Lipes, who co-directed and shot the film.

Last month, we sat beside our three-year-old daughter at a children's program at New York City Ballet. Like all the other doting parents, we watched her more than we watched the stage, finding joy in her joy, as she bounced in her seat to *Fancy Free* and *West Side Story Suite*. For now, she loves the sailor costumes and all that snapping but, someday, she will see so much more. When that day comes, I'll tell her all about Jerome Robbins, and how he changed the shape of our lives, starting with *Dances at a Gathering* all those years ago.

This writing first appeared in the New York Public Library blog in November 2018.



Ellen Bar and her daughter Kay Lipes enjoy reading a recent issue of the Jerome Robbins Foundation newsletter together.

A Conversation with Sono Osato



Sono Osato and Jerome Robbins in rehearsal for *On the Town*, 1944. Photo by Eileen Darby/Graphic House.

SONO OSATO (1919–2018) began her career as a dancer at the age of fourteen with Wassily de Basil's Ballets Russe de Monte-Carlo. She was the youngest member of the troupe, and their first American. In 1941 she left to study at the School of American Ballet in New York City. Soon thereafter, she joined Ballet Theatre, where she danced [often onstage with Jerome Robbins] in ballets such as *Sleeping Beauty* (chor.: Kenneth MacMillan), *Pillar of Fire* (chor.: Antony Tudor), and *The Beloved* (chor.: Bronislava Nijinska). In 1943 she performed in the Broadway production of *One Touch of Venus* (chor.: Agnes de Mille), and received the Donaldson Award for Best Female Dancer. Next, she starred as Ivy Smith in the original production of *On the Town*, choreographed by Jerome Robbins. On film, she appeared with Frank Sinatra in *The Kissing Bandit* (1948), and she made guest appearances on television in the following years. In 2006, she established the Sono Osato Scholarship Program for Graduate Studies at Career Transition for Dancers. Her autobiography, *Distant Dances*, was published in 1980.

In 2009, Bernard Carragher interviewed Sono Osato as part of the Jerome Robbins Foundation's Oral History Project. What follows are excerpts from that conversation.

Sono Osato I was born in Omaha, Nebraska in 1919. My father was a Japanese person who arrived here when he was nineteen, not speaking the language. He picked strawberries in California, and his salary was twenty-five cents a day. My mother's father was Irish and her mother was of French origin. My mother took us to France, while my father stayed behind in Chicago and supported us with small amounts. By that time, he was a photographer. My mother wanted very much to go to France, the country of her ancestors. From the beginning, I was fascinated with all the beauty, because we lived in Chicago in a very dark, railroad-type apartment. But in France we had a lovely house. Then we moved to Saint-Jean-de-Luz, which was in Basque country. There was a town festival with dancing and singing. I watched the townspeople dancing together and I got up and I went into some kind of group and I stared at their feet and watched what they were doing, and I began dancing with them. I got carried away because I had never experienced that. Apparently, I danced quite a lot by myself.

Then, in 1927, we moved to the cheap part of the Riviera – to Menton – which was near Monte Carlo. One day Mother said, "We're going to go to a performance of The Ballets Russes." Well, we went to Monte Carlo and walked into a beautiful theater. The only ballet I remember – because it was so dramatic – was [Michel] Fokine's *Cléopâtre*. [Léon] Bakst had done the décor. I remember a queen, a majestic woman with a gold goblet, and a slave – [Leonide] Massine – in bare feet, with body makeup all over. I remember I could see the muscles of his feet

quivering with fear as he approached the queen. Then he took the goblet and he drank, and he stiffened, and fell backward. Then someone came—his lover, originally played by [Anna] Pavlova—with something and covered him and began sobbing on his body. Well, when I came out of that theater, I said, “I want to do that with those people!”

Then, we came home in 1929, just in time for the Wall Street crash. We went back to Chicago and mother continued to take me to dancing. At the Auditorium Theatre, I saw—all due to Sol Hurok—Mary Wigman and her company from Germany, [Vicente] Escudero—a marvelous flamenco dancer, and [La] Argentinita, who was superb. We went backstage after her concert, hoping to get her autograph. I remember looking at her. I'd never seen theatrical makeup. It was very startling. On the stage she looked very tall, but she wasn't much taller than I was. So I went backstage, and there was a little, blonde lady who said, “Little girl, do you like to dance?” I said, “Yes,” and she said, “Oh, you must come to our Christmas party.” Her husband was Adolph Bolm, who had been with [Serge] Diaghilev. He was a wonderful character dancer who had decided to stay in Chicago and open a school. So I went to the Christmas party and I danced with his young son. Then I started my first lessons with Adolph Bolm. He left the studio and went to San Francisco, where he got a job as choreographer for the San Francisco Opera, so I studied with his ballerina—a beautiful dancer named Berenice Holmes. She was my real teacher. I remember on a night in February of 1933, the phone rang and it was my teacher. “Bring your practice clothes. We've arranged for you to audition for the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. So I went to the theatre—it was their last night in Chicago—and I saw *Les Sylphides*, my second ballet, which was overwhelming with its beauty, its moonlight, and all these gorgeous dancers in white costumes dancing to Chopin music. I went backstage, which was tremendously active. It was the last night of the ballet, so the place was a madhouse, with scenery being put away, and people running around. Someone led me to an empty space in the back. I wasn't nervous. I did a little toe thing that Berenice had arranged at the studio for the end of class. Then, I stopped and went over to my mother. She was next to this tall man in full evening-wear—tails, white tie, eyeglasses, and smelling very nice. With a thick Russian accent he said, “Madame. We'll take her for three years. Go home and reflect.” I was dumbfounded. They told me that the man was Colonel [Wassily] de Basil, who was the director of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. Of course, I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat, I had to continue going to school, and then something very strange happened. Mother took us to eat in a restaurant on Michigan Avenue, and there was a woman who did horoscopes. My mother gave her my name and date of birth, and two weeks later a big envelope arrived, and in the envelope it said, “You will travel over a great body of water and you will sign some important papers.” Then Col. de Basil said, “You come to Philadelphia.” So mother and I took a bus to Philadelphia, and the company was rehearsing *Swan Lake* in some ballroom of the Sylvania Hotel. Someone said to me, “You go and follow those people.” So I tried to imitate the steps, and those were my first steps of dancing in that company. Looking back, it was phenomenal. All these wonderful dancers, and all of them so young. When he was in the company, [George] Balanchine had gone to the studios and he found Tatiana Riabouchinska—she was sixteen or seventeen. Irina Baronova was six months older than I was and she was dancing in *Aurora's Wedding* and *Swan Lake*. She was a major ballerina. Beautiful Tamara Toumanova—“the black pearl of the Russian ballet”—was also fourteen or fifteen.

Bernard Carragher After six years you decided to leave?

SO After six years I was exhausted. By then, I was in the corps de ballet and beginning to have small parts. I wrote a note to de Basil in New York. At the time I was rehearsing Balanchine's new ballet, *Balustrade*, set to Stravinsky's Violin Concerto. I asked for a fifteen-dollar raise, to seventy-five dollars instead of sixty, and I asked to be let out of *Les Sylphides* and *Swan Lake*, which opened the evening. Then they'd put a dramatic piece in the middle, and then something gay at the end. Well, I knew a lot of the repertoire because [Serge] Grigorieff would come to me, poke me in the shoulder and say, in French, “Osato. Vous pouvez!” That means, “You can.” What he meant was, “You must,” but he didn't know French well enough to say, “Vous devez!” He'd say, “Vous pouvez danser...” such and such. I'd say, “No, no. Sergei Leonidovich, I can't. No rehearsal. I don't know that ballet.” “Yes, yes. You know.” So I'd go on, not knowing. It's happened to many dancers who are in the corps. There's no time or money to have a rehearsal for a corps member. You just had to learn as you went. I did a lot of that.

BC Did they give you the raise?

SO I thought to myself, *Today's the second day with no news*. At the fifth day, still no news. Then a week, no news. It got to be the twelfth day and I was really angry. I was so upset at not even hearing one word. We were performing at the

Mark Hellinger Theatre. I gathered all my old toe shoes and makeup, and I packed them, and I said, “Well, so long,” and I walked out the stage door. I didn't know what I was going to do, but I knew that it was getting to be too much.

BC So how did you get to Ballet Theatre?

SO German Sevastianov had been de Basil's assistant for a number of years, and he married [Irina] Baronova. She became one of the ballerinas of Ballet Theatre in the early days. I knew him, so I went to him and said, “I need a job. Could I join this company?” He said, “Yes, I think so.” “What do you think they'll be able to pay me?” He said, “Sixty dollars.” Gratefully, I accepted.

BC This was 1941?

SO 1940 or '41. By then I had absolutely no hope of any career. I just had to work. It was hard to leave the Russian ballet because I'd grown up in it. The Russians were such wonderful, unusual people. I've always had this great respect and love for them because they were homeless, they were all children of refugees, they were all poor, and I never heard them sit around and mope and complain. They were very interested in America, and they had a wonderful sense of humor.

BC But when you got to Ballet Theatre it was an entirely different world.

SO Yes, it was. Not the repertoire, but the whole entourage was different—all very young and all American. [Anton] Dolin came into the company, and he was in charge of classics like *Sleeping Beauty*.

BC Tudor?

SO Yes, Antony Tudor was there, and Agnes de Mille joined us from time to time.

BC What was it like when you first met Jerry [Robbins]?

SO Well, I'll tell you my first memories. I don't know *how* I met him. I remember him mainly on the train. He seemed to wear the same green corduroy suit all the time. He didn't seem to be always with people. On the train, Nora [Kaye] was always so funny, so we would all sort of surround her and be with her. Then I'd look down the aisle and I'd see Jerry all alone in his green suit and, to me, he looked as though he was saying, “That's enough of your talking. I'd like you to leave so that I can talk to Nora.” He was quiet. He was a good dancer. In *Three Virgins and a Devil*, I saw him do only one walk across the stage in which he actually made the audience laugh out loud. Agnes gave him a walk—a funny, kind of jerky walk—where he had to be whistling. When he got center stage, he turned to the audience, and he had a flower. He twirled the flower, did a small look, a gesture, turned, and did the same kind of walk off. Terrific style, terrific humor. That was the beginning of his real dancing career.

BC And you danced with him—

SO Well, when Tudor did *Pillar of Fire*, he cast Jerry as a Lover-in-Experience. There were three men—Frank Hobi, Donald Saddler, and Jerry. The three girls were Muriel Bentley, Rosella Hightower, and me. Tudor sometimes arranged a passage or a lift that I would dance with Jerry. I remember that dancing with Jerry felt very good. It was really a pleasure. I never knew that he was even faintly interested in choreography.

BC Do you think he wanted to get into choreography because he didn't think he was a good enough dancer?

SO I have no way of knowing. I don't remember Jerry talking about it. I thought he was a very good classical dancer. He was very graceful. He had a creative impetus for a very long time. When I saw his *Fancy Free* I was just knocked out.

BC Now you had left the company.

SO I'd left the company. By then, I had children and I couldn't see any possibility of doing it. So I went to Broadway.

BC How did you do that?

SO I went to Nora. Nora seemed to know everything that was happening in the theater. I told her that I needed to go back to work, but that I couldn't go back to ballet. I didn't want to tour. She thought awhile and then she said, “You know, Agnes is doing a musical. Why don't you write to her and see if there's something for you?” So I wrote to Agnes and asked her if there was anything for me in the new show she was doing. And I added, “Not in the corps.” So she said, “Come to rehearsal in September,” and I went into *One Touch of Venus*, as a dancer—no talking.

BC No talking.

SO Not a word. I did that for ten months.



BC With [Elia] Kazan directing.

SO I had nothing to do with Kazan. He was really molding Mary Martin into a character. She played Venus, coming down from the heavens.

BC And Jerry sent you a note.

SO Oh, yes. On opening night I got a hand-written note. It was from Jerry, wishing me good luck. I couldn't believe it. I didn't realize that he even knew where I was, let alone doing this show. It just made a wonderful impact on me. Then, the whole going into *On the Town* was extremely strange for me.

BC How did that happen?

SO Well, my husband and I—at the end of the run of *Venus*, someone said something about a show that to us sounded like a good idea. It was the Queen of Sheba meeting King Solomon. Of course, my husband and I were very young, and completely inexperienced in Broadway shows. And I went to Tudor and asked if he might be interested in choreographing something for commercial theater. I told him the theme of the show. He didn't say no. Then we went to Boris Aronson, a marvelous set designer who was a friend, and he was interested. Then we went to Lenny [Leonard Bernstein], who we didn't know well, and he came over to our little apartment. One of the first things he said was, "I was born to do this show!" Then he started naming these strange musical instruments that he was going to use in the orchestrations. But we still had no play. We only had an idea.

BC No libretto.

SO Because many of the writers in the theater were working in the Armed Forces, writing for the Army or the Navy. So there were not too many playwrights in New York. So Lenny said, "Listen. While we're waiting to get an author, why don't you do the show that I'm doing with some friends?" I said, "Oh, what is it?" He said, "It's a full version—with words and a score—of *Fancy Free*. It's Jerry's idea, and Jerry's going to do the choreography. It's just an enlarged version of the three sailors and their experiences." But I'd never auditioned. I'd never spoken a word, like most dancers. I'd never trained my voice. I was not particularly interested in talking anyway. But there I was. And I remember the first rehearsal with Nancy Walker. Nancy Walker was our real professional. She had been in *Best Foot Forward*, she'd gone to Hollywood, she'd made a film. She was just marvelous.

BC What else do you remember about rehearsals?

SO I remember Jerry had already choreographed my part, Miss Turnstiles. He danced it and I learned it. He did a solo for me and Oliver [Smith] did a set showing studios in Carnegie Hall. By that time, Jerry was creating big dances, for the whole company. He'd do something for me and then stop. Then he'd go to the corps and choreograph for them. I'd be waiting for him to get back to me, and that went on for awhile. And the solo that he did for me, it was not good for me. It consisted of doing little runs, putting my hand to my ear, and listening to the sign that said "Violins." Then I'd tippy-toe to another door that said "Tubas" or something. This was all "in one."

BC While they were changing the scenery.

SO Yes. So that was my solo. And all during the show they talked a lot about my character, Ivy Smith, but Ivy Smith was usually backstage. I didn't make any effort to try to make my part realer. But Nancy was terrific. I always went to the wings to watch her do her number, "I Can Cook Too."

BC Did George Abbott direct your scenes?

SO He mainly said, "Sono, speak up." All my effort within the show was always with Jerry. My acting part was just a kind of ingénue – so much so that I decided I would try to tell Betty [Comden] how I felt about my part. So I did. I said, "I don't want any elaboration on my part. I don't want my part to be bigger. But I wish that I had a character that has more strength, and I don't care even if she says nasty things, but I just hope that you can somehow alter her to be someone with more force. She's earning her living doing the Hoochie Coochie number at Coney Island so she can go to Carnegie Hall to study ballet. She's not a pushover." So I tried to make the girl as real as I could make her, and not just an innocent ingénue. Looking back, I really loved the ballet more.

BC Did you?

SO Broadway, for me, was a very gratifying ego kind of thing. I was fortunate to get good reviews. But in terms of really being interested in a form, whether it was at Ballet Theatre or at the Russian Ballet – I mean the making of *Pillar of Fire* with Tudor was fantastic.

BC Do you think that Jerry learned a lot from Tudor?

SO I think he thought Tudor was very, very good. Tudor was very probing. He was very interested in the psyche of a character. Lucia Chase as the older sister, Nora Kaye as the middle sister who felt awkward and unattractive, and then Annabelle Lyon as the younger sister – she was so pretty, so frivolous, and so, kind of, mean to Nora. There was a part they had to dance together and she took her hand and she pushed Nora off balance. You could see this girl, having all this success with men, and you could see what kind of a woman she would become. And Lucia was marvelous. She was so conscious of society, and what society would say. She was very nervous with Nora's behavior. And Nora was – well, she became a star on opening night. The curtain went down and there was a kind of silence, and then people realized what they had seen and felt and the applause began to build. I think she got something like seventeen curtain calls. Maybe even more. She and Tudor had been working for a long time. The sisters in the ballet knew the color of the wallpaper in their bedroom. That's how deeply Tudor went into the characters.

BC He talked to you about that?

SO He talked to them. Since I was playing a Lover-in-Experience, in what I guess was supposed to be a brothel, he didn't have to talk to me too much about my character. I could see what he was drawing out with the movements.

BC While rehearsing *On the Town*, did Jerry talk to you about Ivy Smith – Miss Turnstiles?

SO I don't think so. He had the whole company to choreograph for, with no assistants. He had to do everything. And then, he was so funny and so talented in the theater, that George Abbott asked him, "Jerry – do some business in the nightclubs, at the table, with the leading characters." He had to create funny business while the singer sang the same song in three nightclubs. It was very funny. Meanwhile, I was still asking, "Do I do anything else?" He said, "I'll think of something." One day he came in and said, "I've got it! You're going to be wearing a long red scarf that winds around your waist, up your shoulders, and onto your head. Then, Ray Harrison," – my leading male in this dream sequence, which was set in a boxing ring – "will come over and he'll pull on the scarf and then your hair will fall down." So that was the dance in the dream scene.

BC Did you find Jerry very demanding?

SO Not to me. In that show, I never saw any real nervousness. I never saw any anger. I never saw any of the things that people reported to me of how he was later, in *Bells are Ringing*. With *On the Town*, he was the way he was at the ballet. He was very serious, very thoughtful, and very, very creative. He had a fantastic ability to create... funny things... lovely things... tender things. He was just an amazing person. He really had an absolutely fantastic mind –

BC More that de Mille, do you think?

SO Yes. I think so. Her real talent was in theatricality. But the intensity of his work was unmatched by anybody. No one had more real power.

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*.



Jerome Robbins, Ruth Mitchell, and Gerald Freedman in a rehearsal for *West Side Story*, 1957. Photo by Martha Swope, from the collection of Jerome Robbins.

IN MEMORY OF... Gerald Freedman (1927–2020)

Theater director, educator, and longtime collaborator with Jerome Robbins, including the original Broadway productions of *Bells Are Ringing*, *West Side Story*, and *Gypsy*.

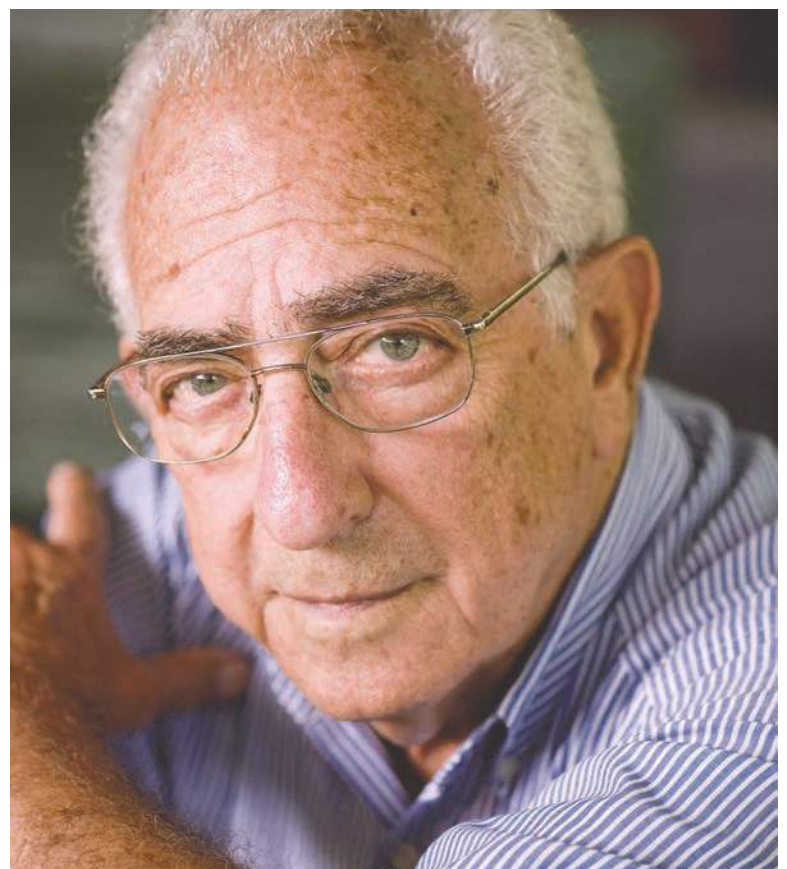
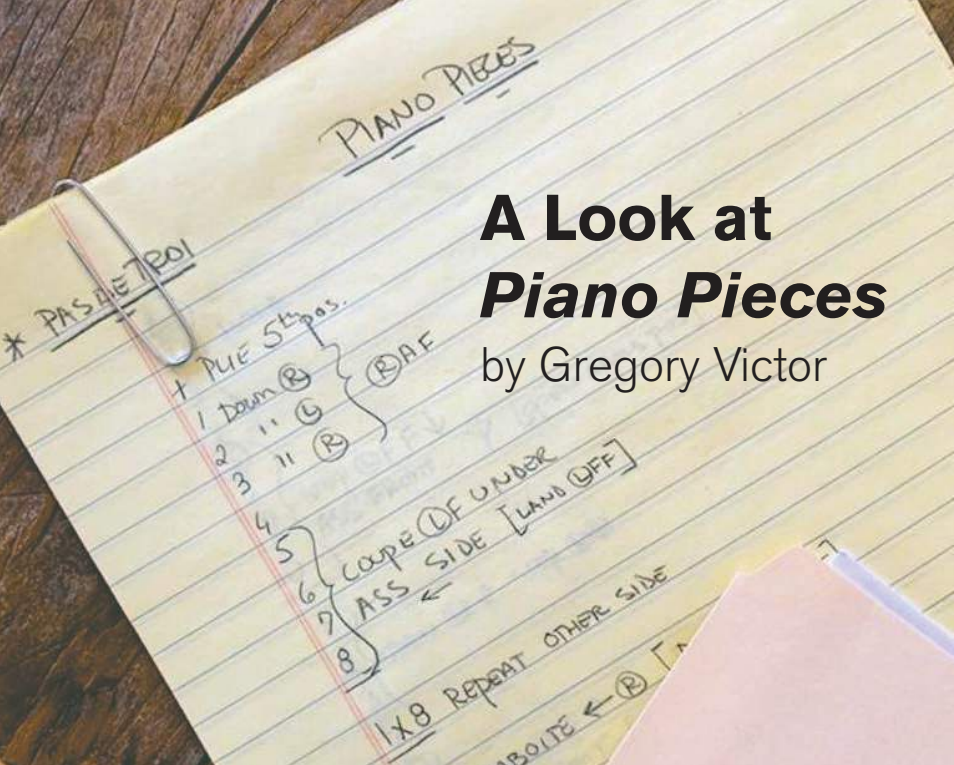


Photo courtesy of Great Lakes Theater.



A Look at *Piano Pieces* by Gregory Victor



Two months before the Tchaikovsky Festival, I thought, I don't like Tchaikovsky. Why should I do Tchaikovsky? Because Mr. Balanchine wants me to do Tchaikovsky? But you don't necessarily have to enjoy doing something for it to be good.
—Jerome Robbins (New York Times, July 12, 1981)

Choreography Jerome Robbins

Music Peter Ilyitch Tchaikovsky

Premiere June 11, 1981, New York City Ballet, New York State Theater

Original cast Maria Calegari, Kyra Nichols, Heather Watts, Ib Andersen, Bart Cook, Daniel Duell, Joseph Duell, with Antonia Franceschi, Melinda Roy, Stacy Caddell, Susan Gluck, Julie Kirsten, Roma Sosenko, John Bass, Paul Boos, Christopher Fleming, Douglas Hay, Kipling Houston, David Otto

Costumes Ben Benson

Lighting Ronald Bates

Piano Pieces, set to Tchaikovsky piano solos, premiered at New York City Ballet as part of the company's 1981 festival honoring the composer. Last performed in the 2008 Jerome Robbins Celebration, the ballet makes a welcome return to New York City Ballet during the company's Spring 2020 season.

Throughout the charming ballet, Robbins crafts an entrancing, folk-tinged mood. From moment to moment, the ballet contrasts gentle sincerity with good-natured distraction. Like one of Robbins' earlier piano ballet masterpieces, *Dances at a Gathering* [1969], the atmosphere of *Piano Pieces* is achieved by relying predominantly on the technical and emotional display of the dancers. The ballet is a collection of ensemble dances and solos, with an emphasis on pas de deux, all expressing Robbins' enduring love for choreographing a folk-dance ambiance at the ballet.

During the ballet's creation, Robbins felt a rush of confidence in the process and its outcome, writing in his journal on April 12, 1981, "The work streak continues. A high like I can't recall since *Dances* [*Dances at a Gathering*] and *Goldberg* [*The Goldberg Variations*]. Not sure yet what I'm making except the piano pieces have turned me on & I'm in tune & unafraid."

This ballet with an unassuming title was one of the highlights of the Tchaikovsky celebration, receiving a standing ovation at its premiere. Dance critic Clive Barnes described it as "very probably the most significant work to come out of this festival," adding that it was "Robbins at his most fluent and ecstatic." Set to fifteen small piano works, it is a ballet full of wit and invention.

Jean-Pierre Frohlich, the ballet master responsible for staging the upcoming performances of *Piano Pieces* at New York City Ballet shares his thoughts on the process:

As I start my work to reconstruct Jerry's *Piano Pieces*, which has been absent from New York City Ballet's repertoire for twelve years, I find myself falling back to the time when this piece was created, with Jerry in the studio. His creative juices were at a very high level, with ideas just pouring out.

The simplicity and storytelling without ever having a story to tell, the relationships between the dancers and the music, and the pure joy of dancing, to me, is remarkable. I find myself from time to time stopping my work to just watch what is unfolding on my computer screen.

To be able to teach another generation of dancers about Jerry through his ballets is a gift that I have received—a wrapped box that you slowly open to see what's in it, and then share.



Left: *Piano Pieces* staging notes, courtesy of Jean-Pierre Frohlich.

Top right: At the premiere of the New York City Ballet production of *Piano Pieces*, dancers Kyra Nichols, Ib Andersen, Joseph Duell, Heather Watts, Daniel Duell, and Bart Cook take a bow with Jerome Robbins. Photo by Martha Swope, ©The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Bottom right: Sara Mearns and Jared Angle in Jerome Robbins' *Piano Pieces* at New York City Ballet. Photo by Paul Kolnik.

NYC Schools Chancellor Announces Record Investment in High-Quality Arts Education by NYC Department of Education

In December 2019, New York City Schools Chancellor Richard A. Carranza released the 2018–19 annual Arts in Schools Report and announced a record \$447-million citywide investment in arts education, up \$14 million from the 2017–18 school year, and from \$336 million at the start of this administration in 2013–14. The \$111-million increase in annual citywide arts education spending under this administration includes school-based spending, as well as the administration’s annual \$23-million investment to expand programming, renovate arts spaces, and hire new teachers, which began in the 2014–15 school year.

Other highlights from the 2018–19 Arts in Schools Report include:

- A record 2,849 full-time certified arts teachers in New York City schools, representing a 19 percent increase from 2013–14.
- Approximately 5,000 teachers, school leaders, and arts education liaisons participating in a comprehensive arts professional learning series designed to support Equity and Excellence for All.

“Our students are incredibly talented, and with a high-quality arts education, we have the opportunity to cultivate a passion or a career,” said Schools Chancellor Richard A. Carranza. “Whether our students are learning a new musical instrument, painting a canvas, or rehearsing for a play, arts education has a powerful role in teaching them to think critically and creatively and is linked to improved math and English proficiency. This is deeply personal to me—the arts changed my life—and I am proud of the record investments we’ve made to bring the arts to New York City public schools.”

New York City has increased the number of full-time certified arts teachers citywide by 456 teachers over the last six years. In 2017–18, the Department of Education [DOE] had 2,837 full-time teachers serving students in grades pre-K through 12, up from 2,770 in the previous year, and 2,393 in 2013–14.

Over the course of the 2018–19 school year, approximately 5,000 teachers and school leaders participated in professional learning in a wide range of rigorous settings. These include the Shubert Arts Leadership Institute for principals and assistant principals, Arts Monday, and the Connected Learning Communities federal grant. All professional learning is aligned to advance equity and excellence in the arts for students citywide.

Beginning this school year as part of the administration’s Strategic Art Plan, 15 Staten Island (District 31) elementary school teachers who currently teach dance, music, theater or visual arts and do not hold a certification are able to participate in the Accelerated Arts Teacher Certification Program for free. These teachers receive free tuition and testing fees to support them in gaining their Supplemental Arts Certification from the College of Staten Island on an expedited timeline. The pilot comes as the administration continues to invest in our arts teachers and focus on increasing the number of full-time certified arts teachers in New York City schools.

The DOE continues to advance equity for Multilingual Learners and students with disabilities through partnership grants, including Arts for English Language Learners and Students with Disabilities. These grants grew to serve 303 schools in 2018–19—with approximately 62 arts organizations providing services—up from 76 schools when the grants were launched in 2014–15.



The 2018–19 Arts in Schools Report also highlights a number of new and expanded arts initiatives that are reaching students across all five boroughs: family engagement activities including Borough Art Festivals, High School Audition and Application Workshops, and additional professional development for arts educators. During summer 2019, the DOE served 292 students through the Middle School Arts Audition Boot Camp, up from 252 the previous year and 98 in summer 2014. Sponsored by the DOE and hosted by Lincoln Center Education, the Audition Boot Camp provides intensive support and targeted training to students auditioning for and applying to arts-based high schools in New York City. The program works to level the playing field by helping students from Title I middle schools prepare for auditions at competitive arts high schools.

Together, the Equity and Excellence for All initiatives are building a pathway to success in college and careers for all students. Our schools are starting earlier—free full-day, high-quality education for three-year-olds and four-year-olds through 3-K for All and Pre-K for All. They are strengthening foundational skills and instruction earlier—Universal Literacy so that every student is reading on grade level by the end of 2nd grade; and Algebra for All to improve elementary- and middle-school math instruction and ensure that all 8th graders have access to algebra. They are offering students more challenging, hands-on, college and career-aligned coursework—Computer Science for All brings 21st-century computer science instruction to every school, and AP for All will give all high school students access to at least five Advanced Placement courses. Along the way, they are giving students and families additional support through College Access for All, Single Shepherd, and investment in Community Schools. Efforts to create more diverse and inclusive classrooms, including Equity & Excellence for All: Diversity in New York City Public Schools are central to this pathway.

This information appeared on the Dance/NYC website, www.dance.nyc.

Our students are incredibly talented, and with a high-quality arts education, we have the opportunity to cultivate a passion or a career. Whether our students are learning a new musical instrument, painting a canvas or rehearsing for a play, arts education has a powerful role in teaching them to think critically and creatively and is linked to improved math and English proficiency. This is deeply personal to me—the arts changed my life—and I am proud of the record investments we’ve made to bring the arts to New York City public schools. – Chancellor Richard A. Carranza



Dancers of the Rome Opera Ballet in Jerome Robbins' *Glass Pieces*, 2020. Photo by Yasuko Kageyama.



Dancers of the Rome Opera Ballet in Jerome Robbins' *In the Night*, 2020. Photo by Yasuko Kageyama.

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