
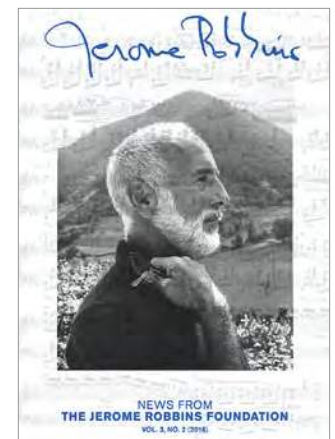
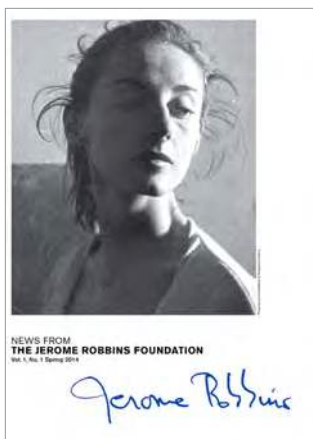


NEWS FROM
**THE JEROME
ROBBINS
FOUNDATION**

VOL. 11, NO. 1 (2024)

Jerome Robbins





News from the Jerome Robbins Foundation

Selected highlights from the first 20 issues

This newsletter began as an idea of longtime friend of Jerome Robbins, Aidan Mooney. At Jerome Robbins' direction, Aidan served on the Advisory Committee to The Robbins Rights Trust until his passing in 2017. With the steadfast support of the Jerome Robbins Foundation, Aidan's vision continues, and with this—our twenty-first issue—I thank Aidan for his vision, the Jerome Robbins Foundation for their continuing guidance, and you, for your ongoing readership. —Gregory Victor, Editor-in-Chief

Vol. 1, No. 1 (2014)

- Mindy Aloff: "Setting a Gold Standard—Jerome Robbins, Bach, and *The Goldberg Variations*"
- Jerome Robbins: "Some notes on ballets"
- Amanda Vaill: "Jerome Robbins in Spoleto"
- Joshua Bergasse (interview)
- Nancy Buirski / Ellen Bar (conversation)
- Judy Kinberg (interview)

Vol. 1, No. 2 (2014)

- Joshua Ellis: "Celebrating *Fiddler on the Roof's* 50th Anniversary"
- Allen Greenberg: "Making Your Board of Directors Part of Your Development Effort"
- Paul Kreppel: "*Jerome Robbins' Broadway* at 25!"
- Jerome Robbins: "I Get Dances from Two Sources"
- Sheldon Harnick (interview)
- *NY Export: Opus Jazz*—A Resource Guide for Dance Teachers
- Wendy Whelan / Jenifer Ringer (conversation)

Vol. 2, No. 1 (2015)

- Ted Chapin: "Remembering the Brilliance of Jerome Robbins"
- Yuriko Kikuchi: "How He Got What He Wanted"
- Jerome Robbins: "Thoughts on Choreography"
- Randi A. Schuster: "The Art of Charitable Giving"
- Sandra Hochman / Barry Primus (conversation)
- Christopher Wheeldon (interview)

Vol. 3, No. 1 (2016)

- Ben Redmayne: "A Desire for Authenticity in Style in *Billion Dollar Baby*"
- Jerome Robbins: "This is the story of three sailors who are out on the town..."
- Erik Gensler: "What Arts Organizations Can Learn from SoulCycle"
- *Circus Polka*
- Arthur Kopit / Gregory Fletcher (conversation)
- Donald Saddler (interview)

Vol. 3, No. 2 (2016)

- Randall Bourscheidt: "Jesse Gerstein"
- Wendy Lesser: "Enchanted Evening—*The Goldberg Variations*"
- Hiie Saumaa: "We did trees, clouds, storms..." (Robbins' training with Alys Bentley)
- Bang Group Honors Allen Greenberg
- Marvin Hamlisch (interview)
- Cameron Grant / Ann Kim / Kurt Nikkanen (interviews)
- Jerome Robbins Award (Stefanie Batten Bland / Alex Timbers)

Vol. 4, No. 1 (2017)

- William Earle: "Aidan Mooney"
- Hana Maruyama: "Getting to Know You: Broadway Meets Heart Mountain"
- Carol Rosegg: "Picture Perfect (Martha Swope)"
- Jennie Scholick: "A Different Faun and a Different Nymph—*The Lavender Scare* and *Faun*"
- Cameron Grant / Ann Kim (conversation)
- Doris Roberts (interview)

Vol. 4, No. 2 (2017)

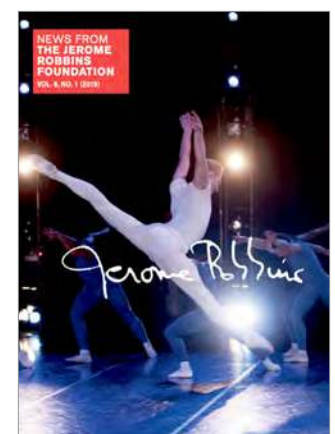
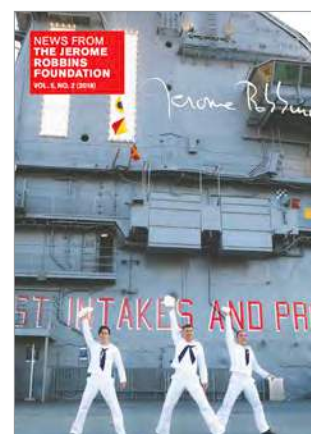
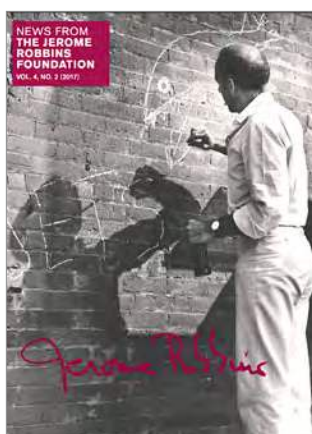
- Joel Dinerstein: "*West Side Story* and the birth of cool"
- Sondra Lee: "Jerome Robbins, in my mind's eye..."
- Ellen Sorrin: "Dancing for Life"
- Austin Pendleton / Gregory Fletcher (conversation)
- *Moves: A Closer Look*
- Seth Rudetsky / Martin Charnin / Harvey Evans / Scott Wise / Liza Genarro / Andrea Burns (conversation)

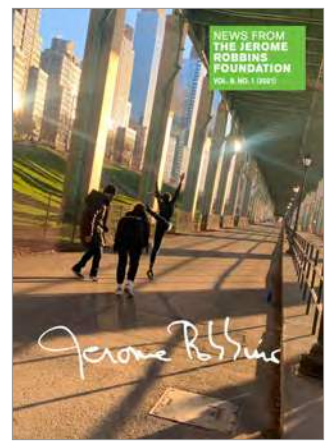
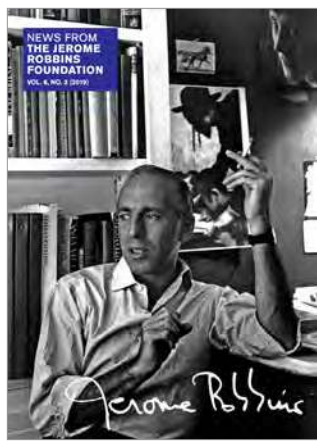
Vol. 5, No. 1 (2018)

- Chris Massimine: "National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene's *Fiddler*"
- Kimberly Maynard: "Put a Trademark Where Your Dance Is"
- Jerome Robbins: "Recording the Dance"
- 100 Years of Robbins (Timeline)
- Robbins on Television

Vol. 5, No. 2 (2018)

- Mindy Aloff: "Not-thinking about *The Cage*"
- Barbara G. Fleischman: "A Primer for Trustees"
- Julia Foulkes: "Robbins and his Muse"
- Hiie Saumaa: "Robbins' Love Lessons"
- Clifton Taylor: "*Watermill* at BAM—A Design Meeting"
- Amanda Vaill: "Geography Lessons"
- Allyn Ann McLerie (interview)





Vol. 6, No. 1 (2019)

- Aliénor de Foucaud: “Jerome Robbins — Tributes and Testimony from Paris Opera Ballet”
- Arlene Yu: “The Jerome Robbins Dance Division”
- Jennifer Eberhardt: “Celebrating 75 Years — Treasures from the Jerome Robbins Dance Division”
- Barbara Harris (interview)
- Pacific Northwest Ballet: Misha Berson / Peter Boal / Isabel Guerin / Franca Russell / Stephanie Saland (conversation)

Vol. 6, No. 2 (2019)

- Brian Meehan: “Jerome Robbins, Traveler”
- Farhad Ostovani: “Ostovani / Bach”
- Jerome Robbins: “Watching the World Pass By”
- *Antique Epigraphs*
- Peter Boal (interview)
- *Fancy Free’s* woman with the red purse

Vol. 6, No. 3 (2019)

- Stephanie Jordan: “Celebrating the Composer’s Voice — Robbins’ Chopin Ballets”
- Kathleen Leary: “Jerome Robbins Dance Division’s Digital Footprints Projects”
- Ed Brill / Max Lewkowicz (conversation)
- *Opus 19 / The Dreamer*
- Harold Prince (interview)

Vol. 7, No. 1 (2020)

- Ellen Bar: “A Dancer’s Life, Shaped by Jerome Robbins”
- Julie Lemberger: “Recollections and Impressions of Jerome Robbins’ Photography”
- Jerry Mitchell / Gregory Victor (conversation)
- *I’m Old Fashioned*
- Sono Osato (interview)

Vol. 7, No. 2 (2020)

- Emma Brown: “Jerome Robbins Dance Division Documents Dance Workers’ Experiences of the Pandemic”
- Hugo Marchand: “A Suite of Dances”
- Brian Meehan: “My Date with Slim”

- Stacey Prickett: “Ballets: U.S.A. — Dancing the Nation during the Cold War”
- Eric Bentley (interview)
- Susan Hendl (tribute)

Vol. 8, No. 1 (2021)

- Emma Brown: “Complicating the Narrative — Dance Workers in their Own Words”
- George Chakiris: “My *West Side Story*” (excerpt)
- Phil Chan: “The Problematic Oriental”
- Sergey Konaev: “Teaching to Survive — Catherine Devillier, Black History in Dance”
- Sophie Redfern: “Bernstein and Robbins: The Early Ballets (excerpt)”
- Joseph Stein (interview)

Vol. 8, No. 2 (2021)

- Charlotte d’Amboise: “My Father”
- Julia DeRosa: “Thoughts on Reopening”
- Maria DiDia: “Whatever Jacques wants...”
- Jean-Pierre Frohlich: “One year and counting...”
- Allegra Kent: “Remembering Jacques”
- Erinn E. Knyt: “Jerome Robbins and J. S. Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*”
- Benjamin Ryan Nathan: “He had the vision...”
- Daniel Ulbricht: “Good luck...”
- Duke Dang (interview)
- Nancy Lassalle / Anna Kisselgoff (conversation)
- Helgi Tomasson (interview)
- Edward Villella (interview)

Vol. 9, No. 1 (2022)

- Gregory Victor: “Sometimes, a whip is just a whip...”
- Ellen Bar / Connie Hochman (Making *In Balanchine’s Classroom* conversation)
- Paul Gemignani / Margaret Hall (conversation)
- Kristie Macosko Krieger (*West Side Story* film interview)
- Jerome Robbins’ continuing influence
- Stravinsky Festival Semicentennial

- *West Side Story* symposium: Leonard Bernstein / Arthur Laurents / Jerome Robbins / Stephen Sondheim

Vol. 9, No. 2 (2022)

- Sarah Marlin: “There’s a Place for Us — Dance and Performance at Yaddo”
- Barbara Bayes / Jan Lisa Huttner (conversation)
- Sammy Dallas Bayes (interview)
- *Fanfare*
- Edward Villella (*Watermill* interview)

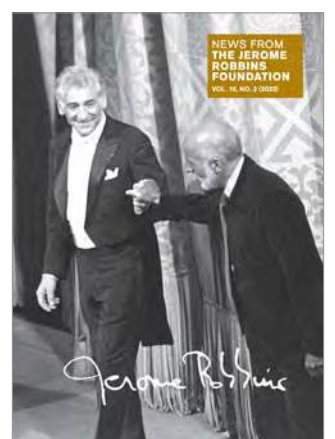
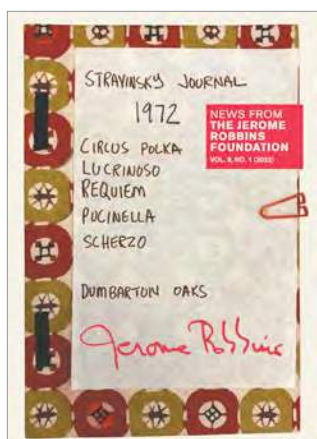
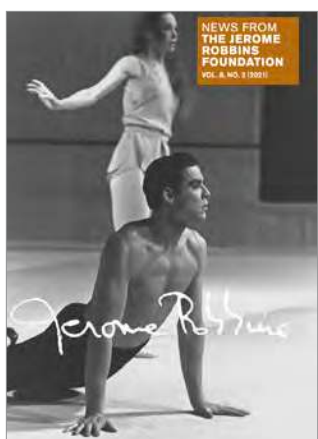
Vol. 10, No. 1 (2023)

- Jean Butler: “Dancing with Ghosts: Legacy and Lineage”
- Liz Carlson / Isabelle Sanatdar Stevens: “New York Stage and Film — Haven for the Unfinished Story”
- Sonja Kostich: “Baryshnikov Arts Center — Moving Forward”
- Miriam Landis: “A Robbins Dance at a Pacific Northwest Ballet Gathering”
- David Saint: “StageAround in Japan — A perspective”
- Ed Brill / Jennifer Homans (Mr. B interview)
- Lynn Garafola: *La Nijinska* (excerpt)
- Julio Monge / Lonny Price (*West Side Story* conversation)
- Jennifer Tipton / Dana Reitz (conversation)

Vol. 10, No. 2 (2023)

- Tanisha Jones: “In Development — The Robbins Repertory Resource”
- Sondra Lee: “*Peter Pan*”
- 92NY
- Charles Adelman / Lourdes Lopez (conversation)
- Larissa FastHorse (*Peter Pan* interview)
- “On Till Morning — the Creation of *Peter Pan*” (symposium)
- Jean-Pierre Frohlich (*Maestro* interview)
- Luca Veggetti (*The Mourning Dove* interview)

Previous issues can be found online at: <http://jeromeroobins.org/about/newsletter/archives>



Capacity Interactive

Digital Marketing Consulting for the Arts connects with Dance Theatre of Harlem

The Jerome Robbins Foundation has underwritten participation in Capacity Interactive's annual digital marketing Boot Camp for Dance Theatre of Harlem. Two days of actionable strategies alongside your colleagues await!

Boot Camp 2024 is in the works. The dates have not been announced yet, but will be soon. See capacityinteractivebootcamp.com/schedule.

In this article, Dance Theatre of Harlem's Sharon Duncan [Director of Development], Keyana K. Patterson [Marketing Manager], and Seth Bauer [Manager of Individual Giving], discuss Capacity Interactive's Boot Camp Digital Marketing with Ellen Sorrin [Secretary and V.P. of The Jerome Robbins Foundation].



Ellen Sorrin We wanted to talk about a couple things — one, having to do with the Boot Camp that you attended last year. I know Keyana, you've been part of it for a very long time. I think you've been with it right from the beginning, and Sharon, you've been with it for quite a while. So, I just want you to talk a little bit about what that experience has been for you.

Keyana K. Patterson You're right. I do go way back, and I can definitely talk about all of the years I've been there, both in person and online. For me, because I came into the marketing position already at DTH starting as a receptionist, I had to learn a lot on the job. I've always felt so comfortable with Capacity because they're just great people to work with. There was a large amount of handholding — especially for someone like me, who did not know the digital marketing landscape at all. We originally didn't use Capacity the first couple of years that we returned the company to the New York season. We got with Capacity for our first season back at City Center, the 2015 season. That was when Sharon Luckman and Anna Glass came to the organization. They gave us, who were all learning the field, so much information — how to handle the website, how to do emails, how to do social media, and even Google Analytics.



Keyana K. Patterson

Sharon Duncan I think I started attending Capacity because of Keyana, because she would come back and say that it's open to the organization to participate. I like to take advantage of anything that is related to professional development. It's not always in our budget, so when you can do it, you take advantage of it. The first time, I went in person. It was down at the New York Times Center. I thought it was exciting because I got to work with so many colleagues from all over. I love all the information that Capacity provides about the field. I get my information in an email — something I read quickly — and having time to do research and to learn is limited. So, attending Capacity was an experience. Then, when we did it online after that — I think this was my third time — there was so much valuable information there, right after COVID. There were some good workshops. We were given a lot of demographic information — which, of course, we're always interested in, both in marketing and in development — in terms of how to reach people, and how to communicate with people. A lot of times we do something one way, and it works, and we continue. Capacity allows you to see, *Oh, here's another way. Oh, this has changed. Maybe we need to think about this differently this time.* So, it's valuable information. It's challenging sometimes because you don't always get to implement what you have learned, but you do have the information to begin to think about something — maybe for the following year — of what you want to do.



Sharon Duncan

Thinking about what I listened to this year, there was a session on mission. My colleagues know mission is always in the front of my mind; it helps us to remember why we do what we do. Great examples were given, as well as analytical information. I will say this — I prefer to be in-person. Nothing else can hold your attention. However, the online option was good. There was a panel with Monica Holt from the Kennedy Center and Troy Smith from San Francisco Opera. He came to his new role as marketing director at San Francisco Opera with new ideas around audience or donor engagement, I think. His ideas likely seemed radical, since he was coming from a technical industry, however, they did try his suggestion. One approach they used didn't really fly with their older audience — it worked with the younger audience. While it wasn't a success, they learned something new about their younger demographic; they understood the idea or what was because they're more technically sound, but what was good was the willingness of his staff to try it, and what we're learning now too, is just that — if it doesn't work, you know it doesn't work — try it again, or something else altogether. Our new senior director of philanthropy is always stressing that. Often, we repeat the same thing; this is what we've always done, so let's do it again. So, I appreciate Capacity for the array of topics and panelists.

Seth Bauer I couldn't agree more. I've only done it twice. Last year was my first year. There are similar patterns to previous years, but this year's material is completely up to date. I've never been "live" with it, but we get so busy — especially at the end of our calendar year, when we're doing major appeals and things like that. We were down a staff member, so things just got pushed to the side as Sharon and I were doing our best to keep things moving. It was great to get this reminder and say, "No, let's block out the time," and "Schedule yourself to invest in yourself, because when I'm really busy, trying to make everything happen, it's hard to build out the time to take a step back and ask, "Is this the best solution, or should we be doing something differently?" If we're only in New York performing two weeks of the year, how do we provide people with benefits for their membership or for their donation if they're not around us very much? But one of these presentations was very clear that since the pandemic, people care more about mission than they care about just the pragmatic benefits or discounts. They want to belong to our organization, and they also want to invest in their neighborhood. There was a lot of talk about localizing. People are giving less to the Red Cross and the United Way and more to their local food bank, or their local church, or their local community organization. I'm the Manager of Individual Giving. We have a strong, forceful, and meaty mission that we can continue to reinforce to people, instead of just what we can't do because we're always out on tour.



Seth Bauer

Ellen I think you're right about spending two weeks in New York and then being on tour a lot. You've had a challenge in that way, I think, for the fundraising part of it—especially among New Yorkers, who can be more generous than other people.

Sharon Yes. We're going through that right now. We're trying to figure out a strategy for national fundraising, since the Company tours around the country. That's something we are looking to implement in 2025. I'm glad you mentioned the Floria Lasky Symposium, because there is so much overlap. The task is deciding to try something new and determine what can we effectively implement. It's getting the acquired information past Keyana, myself, and now Seth, to the rest of the staff. Jennifer Zaslow would always say, "Well you guys are the influencers within your organizations." It's bringing new ideas and ways of working together, with a different mindset, to enhance the work of the entire organization. One of my favorite sessions of all is the radical candor. Just being able to have honest conversations with colleagues is so necessary. Jennifer's last workshop with us—and they are continuing—was around building high performance teams.



Floria Lasky

Ellen Is there anything you want to say about the Lasky gatherings—which, of course, preceded all the Boot Camps? At one point we decided that we really couldn't grow in a way that we needed to, and we needed to have the relationship with Capacity. I'm very close with Erik Gensler and at that point he was running it, and I really felt that that was the right thing for us to do because it allowed us to expand out and get so many people who could really be responsive to everyone's needs. I thought that was great. I just wondered whether you had any thoughts about Lasky, which preceded everything? Keyana, you were there from the very beginning.

Keyana I love Lasky. I love Jennifer [Zaslow]. For me, being an arts professional, the Capacity experience and the Lasky experience have helped me become more comfortable, more secure, and more encouraged to do the work. And having a small staff often could feel stressful. So, I would say that the radical candor session—that hit deep, because I've felt that we don't say the things that we need to say. We had a conversation about difficult conversations and things like that, and we got to role play. The thing I've learned, probably the most, is that I'm not alone, in some of the ways that I feel *I don't know this, or I don't understand this*. With the Capacity Interactive Boot Camps and Lasky, you're not alone.

Sharon And we've built relationships and have a group of colleagues we can connect with and ask for information and shared opinions on a particular issue or situation and get constructive feedback and solutions.

Ellen Talk a little bit about the safe space that we created in Lasky, because that's what really struck me all along, from the very beginning, even though we introduced new people from time to time. We really had a space where everyone knew they could come in and say things and it wasn't going to be passed along to anyone, within your organization or without your organization.

Sharon It's true. Jennifer did an activity with us—this is when we were still meeting at the Koch Theater—and I forget what the question was, but you had to write down something very intimate, and so many people wrote, "I'm in a job I don't know what I'm doing; "I don't know how to ask for help." The objective was to let us know, "You're not alone." Because you can think you must know everything. I often feel that in my role. I think I'm supposed to know every aspect of fundraising, and it's not true. It can be daunting sometimes. The Lasky sessions allow you to discuss issues in a safe space; develop new skills and ways to approach your work and colleagues; and grow as leaders.

Ellen It's up to you, whether you want to bring things back, or whether you want to include the person. Some people feel like the group is really formed. They don't want to introduce anyone who's not been part of it. They don't feel safe, and I think that's an important thing for everyone to think about. I would like to turn to the

Capacity Interactive Boot Camp that's coming this year. You know, the Robbins Foundation has not had a huge amount of money because we always gave away more than we had, and we always felt good about it, but now it's kind of caught up with us. During the pandemic we lost so much income from the companies that we license ballets to. Is it good to do the virtual, or do you prefer to be there? Because they're doing both now, and it's getting more expensive, but we've put aside some money because we know how important it is to have people there.

Sharon We'll do that. Thank you, Ellen, for thinking of Dance Theatre in that way.

Seth We're really grateful.

Keyana Thank you. I'm here for the in-person. I appreciate that there's a virtual option, should you not be able to go, but I agree with what Sharon said in the beginning. Just getting away from the office and being present in that environment is great. To be with your colleagues. I like the in-person experience.

Seth One of my many takeaways was that since the pandemic, the audiences that have come back have come back, and the others—they're not waiting to come back. You've lost them, and it's time to go after new audiences. And find new ways—like Sharon was talking about a moment ago about Troy. Remember, Sharon, they were doing a Steve Jobs opera that they thought was going to fail terribly—because they didn't think that their opera people—so they bought lists, and they went after young tech people? They incentivized new people to come, and they built a new audience with even more money. Basically, one of the things was to go after your casual audience members at this point because your loyal audience members are already there and the ones who haven't returned aren't coming back. It's time to go after new audiences.

Ellen I think that's true. There was an article in the *New York Times* not long ago about just that, about how everyone has to change the way they market their companies.

Seth Right.

Sharon I want to say something about watching it on video. Having been to the New York Times building, where the event is held, I felt connected watching online, however, it is another experience in person.

Keyana I wanted to say one thing about the Boot Camp that I enjoy is that they do a stellar marketing reel where they show all the videos, and that's really lovely. You get to learn from everyone. And there was a year when we did our video "High Above," and it was really well-received by people. And it was such a good feeling to be there, that it was up there and that they show those and share it with everyone. Then, people in the audience really appreciate it. That was a beautiful moment for me in my Boot Camp experience, pre pandemic. And I just really love the way they make everyone feel. You know, it's not so rigid. It's really a warm place. I love Erik.

Sharon Erik is amazing.

Ellen He really is. He really did a great thing by relinquishing the leadership of Capacity to Priya [Iyer Doshai], who is very communicative. I think she has a lot of very good qualities that are different than Eric's, but also complements him very much.

Seth She led a wonderful workshop too.

Ellen I think she's really good. When she was doing the Boot Camp, she was really busy and having things pulling her in many different directions, but I really found her very focused.

So, I salute all of you. I think you're doing a wonderful job. I always have. And it's been my privilege to work with you and to know you over the years, and I'm hoping we'll still stay in touch, which I'm sure we will.

Sharon Absolutely. ■



Linda Murray, Curator of the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, and the Dance Research Fellows: Lloyd Knight, Virginie Mécène, Alexa West, Kim Jones, Alexandra Kamerling, and Michael Byrne.

2023–24 Dance Research Fellows Exploring the legacy of Martha Graham

The 2023-24 Dance Research Fellows at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Jerome Robbins Dance Division focused on Martha Graham, as her dance company celebrated its 100th anniversary. The Fellows presented their work at the Dance Division's concluding symposium in January 2024.

Ranging from dancers and choreographers to multidisciplinary artists and researchers, the 2023 Dance Research Fellow cohort represented a wide array of interests sparked by Martha Graham and her work. In 2023, Michael Byrne, Kim Jones, Alexandra Kamerling, Lloyd Knight, Virginie Mécène, and Alexa West embarked on a six-month Fellowship at the Library for the Performing Arts. Their projects shed a light on Martha Graham's extensive career and legacy. "One hundred years after she founded her revolutionary dance company, we still owe so much to Martha Graham's legacy," said Linda Murray, Curator of the Jerome Robbins Dance Division at The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. "These artists, working at the forefront of their fields, continue to further our understanding of what Graham's work means for us today." William H. Wright II (Vice Chair, Committee for the Jerome Robbins Dance Division) added, "Martha Graham was a giant of modern dance and remains deeply influential within the field today through her technique, which is taught in colleges and schools across the country. However, her collaborations with other artists, her political and thematic interests and her working methodologies also still have much to teach us..."

The Jerome Robbins Dance Division's Dance Research Fellowship was created in 2014 to support scholars and practitioners engaged in graduate-level, post-doctoral, and independent research using the division's unmatched holdings. In addition to supporting research utilizing the library's resources and archives, the library granted each Fellow a \$10,000 stipend. The 2023–24 round of the Dance Research Fellows was made possible through the generosity of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation.

The symposium consisted of an all-day series of presentations by these Fellows at the Library for the Performing Arts:

Michael Byrne works at Cornell University's technology campus in New York City, Cornell Tech, researching the collisions between dance, history, and immersive applications. He is a Research Associate of the Digital Life Initiative and co-leads the Milstein Summer Program in Technology and Humanity. Byrne completed his undergraduate design degree in South Africa, before continuing his performance studies at the Royal Academy of Music, King's College London, RADA, and the University of Cambridge. For over a decade he appeared within the narrative works of The Royal Ballet, and in several touring productions for the Mariinsky and Bolshoi Ballet companies.

Lament for the Land: Monumentality, Identity, and Innovation in Martha Graham's *American Document*

One year before the beginning of World War II, Martha Graham created *American Document* in response to rising Fascism in 1930s Europe. Current events offer an uncanny resonance, embedding Graham's historic work with a recursive sense of futurity and prescience. Michael Byrne, Creative Lead for Tech, Arts & Culture at Cornell Tech, used his Fellowship to ask, how can we vivify Graham's ongoing spirit of innovation through the intersection of technology, performance, and archival practice? Leveraging *American Document* as an anchoring case study, Byrne drew upon his background in dance, volumetric motion-capture, and other digital technologies to bring to life the creative mission set forth by Graham for future audiences.

Kim Jones—choreographer, dancer, and native New Yorker—is an associate professor of dance at UNC Charlotte, a régisseur for the Martha Graham



Dance Research Fellow Michael Byrne speaks about his project, *Unboxing Martha*, inspired by Martha Graham's *American Document*.



Dancer So Young An and Korean drummer Vong Park perform a work inspired by Choi Seung-Hee, choreographed by Dance Research Fellow Kim Jones.



Alexandra Kamerling speaks about her project looking at Martha Graham's dance inspired by Emily Dickinson, entitled *Letter to the World*.

Resource Center, and founder and artistic director of Movement Migration. She danced with the Martha Graham Dance Company. Jones also re-imagined Martha Graham's *Imperial Gesture* (1935) for the Graham Company and reconstructed Paul Taylor's *Tracer* (1964) as research with permission by Mr. Taylor. In July 2022, Jones was invited to Chicago for the National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute: Making Modernism: Literature, Dance, and Visual Culture in Chicago, 1893–1955 at the Newberry Library.

Fragmented Memories of Korea's First Female Modern Dancer Choi Seung Hee: A Re-Imagining of her "Lost" Work During the Japanese Occupation

As a former member of the Martha Graham Dance Company, UNC Charlotte Associate Dance Professor Kim Jones centered her research and choreography on the "lost" elements of modern dance history. These elements included both the work of Choi Seung-Hee (1911-69), a Korean artist not seen after the division of Korea following the Korean War, as well as Martha Graham's lost 1935 dance, *Imperial Gesture*, known only in photos and reviews, costumes, and music. These two artists were mysteriously intertwined: during a visit to the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, Jones found a program that listed Choi Seung-Hee (Sai Shoki) and Graham on the same program in New York City. Jones used artistic and scholarly methods, as well as her personal background, to reimagine, reinvigorate, stage, and disseminate works of the 20th century, and she researched more about these "lost" elements of dance to reinvigorate their history.

Alexandra Kamerling is a Brooklyn-based writer. She received her BA in English from Mills College and her MFA in Poetry from Brooklyn College. She previously trained in dance at the Alonzo King LINES Training Program in San Francisco and held choreographic residencies through the ODC Pilot Program and SAFEhouse Arts. She is currently an adjunct lecturer in the Brooklyn College English Department.

A Formal Feeling: Poetic Scores in Martha Graham's Letter to the World

In 1940, Martha Graham choreographed a dance about Emily Dickinson entitled *Letter to the World*. Poet Alexandra Kamerling studied ballet and contemporary dance from an early age, and for her the relationship between the two art forms has always offered a lens to process ideas about temporality, perception, and relationships. Learning about Graham's dance dedicated to Dickinson sparked an immediate interest, and Kamerling wondered what affinity the choreographer felt towards the poet, and did Graham see something inherently choreographic in her poems? Kamerling explored this by focusing on Graham's work around Dickinson's intellectual and emotional life, presenting her research as a hybrid critical and poetic text.

Lloyd Knight has a BFA from the New World School of the Arts. Knight joined the Martha Graham Dance Company in 2005 and was promoted to Principal in 2014. He has had ballets choreographed on him by Nacho Duato, Andonis Foniadakis, Larry Keigwin, Doug Varone, Lar Lubovitch, Kyle Abraham, Liz Gerring, Michelle Dorrance, Anne Bogart, Pontus Linberg, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, Pam Tanowitz, Hofesh Shechter and Mats Ek. *Dance Magazine* named Knight as one of the "Top 25 Dancers to Watch" in 2010.

Martha's Influence... "The Effect of the Necessity"... Hers & Mine

Born in England and raised in Miami, Lloyd Knight is a Principal Dancer for Martha Graham Dance Company, and has been dancing with the company since 2005.

Through his Fellowship at the Library for the Performing Arts, Knight explored his youth, his experience as a young principal dancer, and what drew him initially to Graham from an early age. The research resulted in the production of a new piece by Knight laying bare what it takes physically and psychologically to pursue this type of career.

Virginie Mécène is a former Principal Dancer with the Martha Graham Dance Company (1994–2006). Director of Graham 2 since 2007 and Director of Program at the Martha Graham School, her direction has focused on training the next generations of dancers for the Martha Graham Dance Company and other companies around the world, and the next generations of Graham teachers through her pedagogic instructions. She was the Director of the Martha Graham School from 2007 to 2015, maintaining and developing the School curriculum. Mécène has re-staged, reconstructed, and directed numerous works of Martha Graham at universities and dance companies, as well as taught the Graham Technique™ at multiple national and international conferences. In 2017, she reimagined the concept and choreographed Graham's lost solo, *Ekstasis*, for the Martha Graham Dance Company. Mécène's choreographic work includes several acclaimed commissions at venues such as New York City Center and The Joyce Theater in New York City, and many others. She received a LP degree in Artistic and Cultural Management from the University of Bourgogne, France.

Reimagining and Rechoreographing Lost Solos of Martha Graham: Revolt (1927) and Immigrant (1928)

While Martha Graham created 181 performances, several early works not performed for decades are considered lost. Among them, some have no traces other than their titles, and others appear only in books, mentioned in interviews, shown in pictures, or even captured in fragmented footage. Choreographer, coach, pedagogue, program director, regisseur, and dancer at the Martha Graham Center for Contemporary Dance, Virginie Mécène used the Martha Graham Archive to research and assemble fragmented parts of such dances, using interviews and writings. She reimagined, embodied, and actualized several of Graham's lost works, notably two solos from the late 1920s, *Revolt* and *Immigrant*, relevant to today's social and political climate.

Alexa West is a dance artist based in Queens, New York. West studied in the professional training program at the Martha Graham School before receiving her BFA from the Cooper Union. Her work has been presented in spaces around New York City and Houston, Texas. She is a co-director of PAGEANT in Brooklyn, NY.

Dramatic Objects: Set and Prop Design of Martha Graham

Objects and sculpture feature prominently in many of Martha Graham's performances — as in *Appalachian Spring*, where a minimalist frame by Isamu Noguchi acts as a divider of the space. These set pieces function as more than just props: they inform the movements performed and help communicate the strong American body language. Alexa West, who moved to New York at age 19 to train professionally at the Martha Graham School, developed a collaborative relationship with objects as a dancer, and eventually trained in the sculptural visual arts as well. West used the Martha Graham archive to create a comprehensive overview of the sculptural set design of Graham's oeuvre, in performances like *Maple Leaf Rag* and *Acrobats of God*. Her research at the Library for the Performing Arts concluded with the production of a set piece, a prop, and a choreographed dance that activated the objects. ■



Lloyd Knight performs in his project inspired by Martha Graham, *The Drama*.



Leslie Andrea Williams performs *Revolt*, a lost Martha Graham solo, reimagined by Dance Research Fellow Virginie Mécène.



A performer dances in Alexa West's work in progress, *Plastiques*, inspired by the set and prop design in Martha Graham's performances.



Dancers Wilma Curley and Jay Norman and choreographer Jerome Robbins rehearsing Jerome Robbins' *Afternoon of a Faun* for Ballets: U.S.A., 1958. Photo by Martha Swope.

Ushering New Audiences into the Ballet by Lauryn Johnson

In September of 2014, I was newly 20 and living in NYC for the first time. I was attending a dance training program at Broadway Dance Center and figuring out what path I wanted to pursue with my dancing. As an extracurricular activity, the training program arranged for the students to attend a tour of the David H. Koch Theater and a working rehearsal of Jerome Robbins' *The Concert* (or, *The Perils of Everybody*).

Despite having trained extensively as a dancer since the age of three, I had not received much instruction about the history of the art form in which I was immersed. So, at 20 years old, I was just learning about the New York City Ballet for the first time. The theater—nicknamed the “Jewel Box” for its red velvet interior and diadem-studded balconies—immediately captured my imagination. Every detail was so carefully thought out and executed, that I couldn't imagine the world that was about to be opened to me when I stepped inside the theater to watch the action on stage.

What I remember most about my first viewing of *The Concert*—my first exposure to NYCB—was watching what is known as the “Mistake Waltz,” and how surprised I was that I laughed out loud so many times. I was at “The Ballet.” I thought this was supposed to be a serious affair. My exposure to ballet while growing up had been the thrice-weekly technique class I was obligated to take to provide a foundation for the other styles I was more passionate about. I truly had no idea ballet could be so funny, entertaining, and relatable.

I have since learned that Jerome Robbins was acutely aware of the need for American ballets in the middle of the 20th century. He looked around for stories that were rooted in the American experience, and he incorporated cultural mannerisms and folk/social dances into his choreography. The result was a style of ballet that felt familiar to audiences that were largely unexposed to the tropes of classical ballet.

Almost 70 years after *The Concert* premiered, it still captures unsuspecting audiences with its wit and universal humor. For me, it set in motion what has now been a decade of fervent research on the history of New York City Ballet and its founding choreographers—George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins.

Shortly after my introduction to the world of NYCB, I began my research by reading the memoirs of celebrated dancers, such as Jacques d'Amboise, Suzanne Farrell, and Allegra Kent. This reading eventually ballooned into amassing a personal library of over 1,000 books on dance and theater. Learning what made these choreographers tick, from the people who were in the studio with them, has been a source of endless fascination for me. After reading so many accounts of the “Golden Age” of NYCB, when Balanchine and Robbins were active, I became more curious to see visual material from that period. I slowly learned how to navigate and access the treasure trove of photographic riches housed in the archives of The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

When I discovered all of the wonderful photos stored there, I realized most of these photos hadn't been seen for decades, and some had likely never been seen at all. Boxes and folders brimmed with prints of ballets, ranging from the most iconic to the nearly forgotten. It made me sad to realize that all of this beauty—the work of dancers, choreographers, costume designers, and photographers—was sitting in the dark, being kept safe, but not enjoyed or learned from.

It became my mission to find a way to amplify the voices of the past so that current and future generations of dancers and dance supporters could continue to be inspired by the great dancers of the past. I wanted the great artistic accomplishments of dancers to live beyond their lifetime. This led me to found my history preservation initiative, Immortal Icons of Dance, a multi-faceted project that includes a blog, a podcast, and a lecture-demonstration series.

At the invitation of Whitney Glandon, I now teach a monthly lecture at a senior living center in lower Manhattan. Each month the residents enjoy learning about a different ballet, some of which have included *Afternoon of a Faun*, *Fancy Free*, and *Dances at a Gathering*. My presentations use archival footage, rare photos, and demonstrations by various NYCB dancers and musicians, to dissect and discover the meaning and importance of these works. The heart of my lectures are the written first-hand accounts of the original dancers, choreographers, and dance critics of the time, which I excerpt and read to accompany the photos and footage I curate. I view myself as a conduit for these voices; I provide the connective tissue so that all the separate accounts form a narrative in real time. One of my favorite archival “finds” was a collection of photos of Jerome Robbins in the studio rehearsing Wilma Curley and Jay Norman in *Afternoon of a Faun* in 1958 for his company Ballets: U.S.A.—the cigarette smoke curling around his face as he demonstrated the steps.

Recently, I delivered a lecture on *The Concert*. The insight that NYCB Repertory Director Jean-Pierre Frohlich generously shared with me as I prepared the presentation proved invaluable, and the audience of residents enthusiastically received the demonstrations by NYCB dancers Andrew Veyette and Ashley Hod. It is fitting that ten years after I was drawn into the ballet world via *The Concert*, I stood before an audience of curious ballet lovers, passing on what I have learned.

Jerome Robbins' ballets continue to act as an usher, gesturing with an open-palm, guiding audiences into the world of ballet, and making even the uninitiated ballet-goer feel comfortable and eager to see more. What *The Concert* did for me, I try now to do for others—make ballet accessible, exciting, and welcoming. ■

Lauryn Johnson is a dancer, writer, and educator who has written for the George Balanchine Foundation and the Vail Dance Festival. She is also an usher at the New York City Ballet. To see more of the ballet history content she has curated, visit www.immortaliconsofdance.com.



Lauryn Johnson lecturing on Jerome Robbins' *The Concert*, 2024. Photo by Whitney Glandon.



Dancers Chris Grant and Unity Phelan demonstrating Jerome Robbins' *Afternoon of a Faun*, 2024. Photo by Whitney Glandon.



“It was a master class every time we got together...”

A conversation between
Alex Felicetti and Ellen Sorrin

Ellen Sorrin I want to talk about your role as Producer, General Manager, and “Person-Who-Organized-Everything” for a number of Robbins projects. I want to start out with the Centennial Celebration which was done for Robbins in 2018. Tell me what you did, and how it got organized. That was your first project for Robbins, I remember.

Alex Felicetti It was. I came to work with Robbins as a consultant after my time at City Center, at New York City Ballet, at the Balanchine Trust, and at the Choreographic Institute. The track that I had been on was sort of Event Organization, Company Management, Contracts and Budgets. Moving people from Point A to Point B. Keeping an overall eye on all the nuts and bolts and all the moving parts of everything that I have ever worked on. So, I was able to channel that experience into that Centennial Celebration. It kicked off with the event at the Kaplan Penthouse. It was a lot of behind the scenes coordinating, and because the Robbins Foundation wanted to have a performance element, it was not just a cocktail party and rubbing elbows. It was also Tiler Peck, and Mikey Winslow, and dancers who had danced Robbins’ repertory joining us that evening. We had so many elements — live music, a film, appetizers, and a bar. We wanted to make it feel intimate and welcoming, so that everybody could talk to each other, hear each other, mingle, walk around, but then also sit comfortably. We also wanted to make sure that everybody could see the live performance, so we worked with the folks at the Kaplan Penthouse, with a lot of planning. We needed a floor. We used the help of Perry Silvey, of New York City Ballet at that time, to help us with that, and we made sure that the performance could really happen safely. That’s always the first thing for me, to make sure the dancers are safe, so we spent some time on that — getting the flooring they needed, the rehearsal time they needed, making sure the music was going to work. That was really the centerpiece for me. Then we also had elements like people who stood up to speak. Allen [Greenberg] did. There were a number of folks who were present who wanted to comment on what was launching — this year-long celebration that was happening not only in New York City but everywhere else — so, we had a nice cocktail reception. It felt very festive, and it really kicked off the Centennial as a great intro to what people could look for in the following year. There were a lot of logistical elements that I planned, to make it all come together, and I think everybody had a really great time.

Ellen I really think it was a great event, and you did a wonderful job. I really was so glad that you were available. After that, came Lasky. The Robbins Foundation made a commitment to have a Floria Lasky Symposium. It was something where I was going to be involved with the content, and I came to you because I knew that you were just the best at everything you did. Tell me what was involved with that — when you got involved, and what you did.

Alex I was happy to get to work as closely as I did on Lasky, including the larger Symposium and the award, and also the sessions we masterminded and planned throughout the year for the non-for-profit professionals and development and marketing departments of many constituents throughout the city, including

New York City Ballet, BAM, Ailey, Atlantic Theater Company, DTH. What was interesting about Lasky was that it really was a think tank. It was a master class every time we got together. The Symposium was a day of learning, for me. When I was coming in, you were trying to give it a structure and make it a destination for people, like when an organization plans their five or six board meetings in a fiscal year. We took that approach with Lasky. How often do you get the director of marketing from this organization in the same room as that other director of marketing and their development people? It really became an incredible think tank. There were ideas discussed in those sessions and that room that really helped people, not only professionally, but personally as well.

We had the committee that helped us with programming and guests. It was made up of Gina Gibney and Erik Gensler and folks who were on-the-pulse of current happenings. And through our Advisory Committee, we got to know Jennifer Zaslow, who had a career in Development at New York City Opera, and who is currently an executive and leadership coach. Getting connected to Jennifer was the pivotal moment for us, because she could moderate and plan sessions for strategic programming. She was really a wonderful facilitator of content, and for discussions and feedback, and the open dialogue that eventually played out in every room. I remember the lesson she taught about “failing forward,” and how it’s okay to fail. Those sessions were amazing, and the Symposium was sort of a culmination of all of those topics. We had guest speakers and panels made up of the folks in the room, and also outside executive directors and authors. The sessions laddered up to the Symposium, which was such a wonderful day — getting started in the morning, planning how everybody would sit together to facilitate conversations and breakout sessions — to being able to listen to a panel that was facilitated and moderated by a guest, to lunch and coffee breaks. I always felt like everybody wanted to be there, which was so refreshing. We were so learning-based and that’s one of the reasons why Lasky is so successful — because the people in the room are also very learning-based as they continue in their roles in their organizations. These are the future executive directors in this room. These are the people who are going to be championing arts organizations for decades to come. To me it was about helping them build their foundation in order to go forward.

Ellen I think that’s really important. And don’t forget, we followed the Symposium with the Lasky Award. People who got the Lasky Award were people who we greatly admired and respected in the field. They always gave a speech, and they always invited people they wanted to be there. It was really a special time.

Alex The Symposium invited a group of not-for-profit professionals, and then you would interview the award recipient toward the end of the Symposium Day, so our attendees could really hear from that person about how they came to be a leader within their organization. You always spoke in a way that brought us into that guest, who would then be honored with the award. We were truly honored to hear them speak, and to see them get the Floria Lasky Award. And everybody had some connection with Floria — some memory to share. We’re all in the room, everybody knows each other, and here’s how everybody is championing not only the award recipient, but each other. The honorees knew in advance that they were receiving the award. They had time to plan, and to reflect on themselves, for themselves, too. This is such an honor. *Why am I getting this award? What did I do?* But it was a nice way to acknowledge the mark that they have left — Joe Mellillo and Karen Brooks Hopkins, Gina Gibney —

Ellen Paul Epstein, Cora Cahan, Jody Arnhold.

Alex Exactly. The list! They’re just such pioneers in the New York City quilt of arts. It was just such a beautiful time for everybody in the room.

Ellen And we would go out to dinner with them afterwards — you and I, and Allen, and Chris — the three Robbins trustees, and other people that they wanted to have come — and we all went to different places all the time. It was really fun, and we got a chance to relax and just enjoy them.

And then we decided that when you found your new career — which is as a real estate agent, which I always thought you were born to do — we had gotten to the point with Lasky where we needed to make a huge jump. We needed to either become a different kind of organization, or we needed to find an institutional partner who would be able to continue that, and I think we both felt that Jennifer Zaslow was that person. So, she has now taken over Lasky for the last year or so, and she’s now having sessions with people, and it’s really been going well. I’ve kept a distance, as have you, because I think we know that it’s important to let people do their thing.

One thing I do want to say about Lasky was that it really became a safe space. People could share things that they normally would never be able to do, and I think that was a huge benefit. They could say whatever they needed to say, and they knew it would stay in that room.

Then the Robbins Foundation decided they wanted to do something that would really honor Jerry's involvement in projects. So, we decided that we would have a project that would take people into a three-week residency that would allow them to develop an idea, with a composer, a choreographer, maybe a director, and they all brought stage managers and everyone they needed for it. And we called it Project Springboard. I went to Mara Isaacs, who was at that time the producer at the McCarter Theater in Princeton, and I asked her if she would like to be involved, and she said she would. When she became a Broadway producer, it became clear to her that there was a conflict of interest for her, and so she stepped away. And then the pandemic came, which was pretty crazy. In the meantime, we had projects that we began with, and you came into watch that project the first year. And then you were involved in the second year.

Alex Project Springboard was maybe one of my favorite projects that I've ever gotten to work on, because of the intention of it—to fill a need in the field. It's interesting you said "safe space" for the Lasky sessions. Springboard also provided a safe space. There was no culmination of any kind of preview. The press was never invited into the room to come and see what had been workshopped over the last three weeks. I first came in at the end of 2017, which had the first two projects selected, and I saw the culmination of the three weeks by Camille A. Brown at the Baryshnikov Arts Center. I just remember watching that final presentation to the folks who were in the room, thinking, *Oh, wow! This is so important.* Where else would Camille, in this case, be able to try new ideas, and hear music, and work on everything together, without having to worry about space, time, money, et cetera? That was something that the Robbins initiative really provided.

For the years that I was the general manager for Project Springboard, I appreciated the process by which we selected the two projects that would each receive a three-week residency. We used the New York City Ballet rehearsal studios. We would receive the applications in the first round, and what was wonderful to see was how word got out about Project Springboard, and how year after year, we always had more applicants. That was really wonderful. Not only because Springboard was catching on, but it showed how many creators needed what Springboard was offering. After our first round of applications, we would narrow it down to ten, and then sometimes ask for additional materials, and then spend time reading, and listening, and taking into consideration the goals of every project. And they were all in varying stages. Once we had selected our projects, we had a special agreement with Actors' Equity Association because it was important to Springboard to make sure that we did everything with everybody working together as a team, and that we were going to all work together to make this happen. We also had a special agreement with SDC—Stage Directors and Choreographers Society.

We would begin the process of making all of that happen, and the projects had the opportunity to have twelve performers, for a total of three weeks. It was all very cohesive, and everybody was involved. It forced our creatives to think about what they needed in the room. So, while Springboard was not a technical theater residency—it wasn't about, "Let's work on this scenery"—they did have to think about, "Do we need props for this number?" or "We'd really like to have skirts." I remember in the project that was named *Bhangin' It* at the time, which is now *Bhangra Nation*, they had a number that took place in the kitchen at a restaurant, and they needed special tables, and they had to be on casters. That was one example of, "We recognize this isn't a scenic or technical residency, but those props, those moving tables will inform the movement of this particular production number, and that is why we're here—creating developing dance musicals." So, for everybody who came through Springboard—including *Bhangra Nation*, including *Illinois*, by Justin Peck, now on Broadway, including *The Night Falls* by Troy Schumacher—the time, the space, and the freedom, was invaluable to them, at whatever phase of the projects they were in.

Ellen Then the pandemic came, and we didn't do anything in 2020 or 2021. In fact, we had chosen projects for 2020 that (we had to say) were not proceeding because we couldn't, because they would happen in the summer. But there are some projects that have continued to be developed and I wonder if you could talk about the projects we had, and what happened with them.

Alex Let's start with Troy Schumacher. He came in with *The Night Falls*, in 2018, the same year as *Bhangin' It*. *The Night Falls* was [choreographer/director] Troy Schumacher, [composer/lyricist] Ellis Ludwig-Leone, and [book writer/lyricist] Karen Russell. During the pandemic, we actually did make it work to allow for Troy and Ellis, who live in New York, and Karen, who is based in Seattle, to have kind of a virtual residency. We, the Robbins Foundation and Springboard, paid them for their time, to work, because that's what was needed in that moment. We realized that we didn't want everybody's projects to just come to a screeching halt because of the pandemic. *The Night Falls* was such a unique project because nobody could really put into words what it was. Was it an operetta? Was it a

dance musical? I think that the time that they spent at Springboard, and then in their virtual residency, really helped them get their ideas out and go through different versions of their project that, ultimately, we saw at PEAK Performances at Montclair State University. It was beautiful. They worked on this show for a long time, and I know that a lot had changed. They had dancers and they had singers, and the singers were the singing voices of each dancer. That was something that was really worked on—"How are we going to make that work?" Then, they had performances at Montclair, where Springboard really helped them along.

Ellen They worked on the music. They have continued to do it because Troy knows that this thing that he has created is really a hybrid. It's not an opera, and yet it's not (a) dance, and it's not just a piece of theater. It's a combination. He knows that he has to find producers, and we have to help him find producers that are unusual in that way, that understand the differences among all those art forms. I think the same thing is true for Justin Peck now with what he's doing, and *Bhangin' It* is much more straightforward because I think both Mike [Lew] and Rehana [Lew Mizra], who are involved with it as the creatives, along with Sam Willmott, the composer, and Rujuta Vaidya, the choreographer, are very theater oriented, so they come to it more traditionally. And then we have Kambi [Gathesha], who had developed a different kind of project. Kambi came here from Kenya, to go to Juilliard. What was interesting about his work, for me, the first iteration of it had all black people who were the cast, and a black stage manager. Then, when he developed it further, we were going through the Black Lives Matter change, and the script began to reflect that. And I found that it was angrier and more adamant about rights, and I think it just had to be that. Kambi's project, *A Nation Grooves*, went on to Hi-ARTS, and then went up to MASS MoCA. We also helped him with some of the funding. The important thing to us was that it didn't just stop once we finished the residency. It was important to us that the projects had a life afterwards. With a number of projects, it has happened, and I hope that they will continue.

Alex Something that Springboard offered, too, was the video element of it that we put together after the process. It was made up of interviews with the creatives, so they really had an opportunity to talk about their process, the material, their "why" for their project, how the creative team worked together, what the impetus was, and why Springboard was important to them.

Then in 2019 we had Kambi and then we had Charlie Sutton's project that was based on the Jefferey McDaniel poem, "The Quiet World." The story came after. That was the opportunity that we were able to provide for them.

Ellen He brought in one of the people who was in *Jerome Robbins' Broadway* to kind of be his guru.

Alex "The Quiet World," as a poem, is about what you're allowed to say, or what you can speak, in the silences, and how each character is only allowed a certain number of words to say every day. So, it's sort of ironic that the book needed work. We would have three weeks for Project Springboard and then on a Friday, there would be kind of a showing of the work-in-progress, and I remember at the end of *The Quiet World*, I was just in tears. Really sobbing. So, the projects really varied, and where they are in time and space now, has varied. That was the point. The point was never, "Do this show and then go to Broadway!" It was, "What kind of project do you have in mind?" and "Where might it land best?"

Ellen The other thing was that when we made our agreements with the creative person, who was usually the choreographer, we made sure that we had credits that would follow us if the project ended up being in a different venue. That happened with Justin Peck's project, *Illinois*. He came to us in 2021, asking could we fund a workshop for him for a project he had, based on Sufjan Stevens' album called "Illinois." So, we looked at it and we said, "Okay, we'll do that." It was done in July 2022. We commissioned him to develop it and to give him his first showing. We had some other interested people—Bard was interested because they were going to do it after we did it—and it's now on Broadway.

While Springboard was happening with Justin, we were talking to another organization about taking Springboard to a different institutional partner, and we chose New York Stage and Film because they have a workshop situation, and they also have an after-workshop situation. They're very tuned into us. Thomas Pierson, who was running the organization at the time, and Liz Carlson, who's their Interim Artistic Director, were very enthusiastic about it. That project now lives there, and we have given them our records, and provided funding for them for the next few years. The Robbins Foundation and The Gilman Foundation each put in a certain amount of money every year. The Gilman Foundation already funds New York Stage and Film, so they had to work out how they were going to do that. And the Frederick Loewe Foundation—Emily Altman runs that—is also supporting it. And the Mertz Gilmore Foundation is supporting it. It's really been a great project, and now it's living with New York Stage and Film. And we keep a

very “hands off” distance from them because we want them to develop the way they need to develop. I think Springboard has influenced some people to begin to look at their projects in different kind of ways. We had a committee of people, who Mara organized, and we brought them together to do the final vetting of the projects. We took everything they had to say into account.

Alex I think that’s great, because everybody approaches the projects from different points of view. Our committee included choreographers, composers, and everybody was represented.

Ellen I think Springboard will continue to be successful, and you’ll see its name on the programs of projects like *The Night Falls* and *Bhangra Nation* and *A Nation Grooves*. You’ll see Springboard’s name, but it will be New York Stage and Film’s name on projects that come now.

You also worked on another interesting project. Jerry Robbins did a ballet back in the early 1970s called *Watermill*, when Edward Villella starred in it. It was reimaged in 2018 at The Fisher Theater at BAM by choreographer Luca Veggetti, whom we knew from New York City Ballet. He did the Choreographic Institute.

Alex Yes. It wasn’t presented by “So-and-so Company at BAM Fisher.” It was kind of a pick-up project. The dancers were going to be from SUNY Purchase, and Luca signed on as Director. Then Joaquín De Luz came in as the lead dancer in the Edward Villella role.

Ellen He was a Principal at New York City Ballet.

Alex Right. It was, again, moving people from point A to point B. I guess my resume should just say, “Alex moves people from point A to point B.” So, we coordinated with the dancers at SUNY Purchase, and got the band back together—the original *Watermill* musicians, except for one. And then, we needed to create our own team of lighting and stage management. I had spent 10 years at Fall for Dance, so I called Lori Wekselblatt, whom you knew from ABT and who I knew from Fall for Dance. And, small world, Lori was my husband’s stage management professor. My husband is an alum of SUNY Purchase. So, Lori came on to the project as a stage manager, with her team, and Clifton Taylor, the lighting designer whom you knew from the Gilbert Hemsley Lighting Programs, and whom I knew from Fall for Dance. So, it was really the A-plus team coming together to put on this gorgeous, stunning ballet. When something like that comes together, it really doesn’t feel like work. It was a lot of work, but it was so enjoyable. Mounting it again, everybody involved felt it was important and felt it was very cool to be part of it. It was the kind of thing where—at the end—everybody felt, *We should keep doing this. It’s really sad it’s over.*

Ellen You’ve talked about how important each project was to you, and how much you loved each one, for different reasons, and some for the same reasons. Are there any other things that you remember that you would like to share?

Alex For me, my takeaway from having had the beautiful opportunities that we just talked about was how everything informed not just me as a professional, but me as a person. I think that every experience was very human, as I touched on with Lasky. It was professional development. It was absolutely master class after master class after master class, and it really helped me shape my person. Truly. From Springboard, seeing creations. From seed to flower. Who else had that opportunity? *Watermill*. Being a part of what was historic that was now something I was able to experience. Where else would that have happened? Having the opportunities at the Jerome Robbins Foundation, and being involved with the Trust as well, and given my background with you, at the ballet, and at the Balanchine Trust, and at the Choreographic Institute, and then with my time at the City Center working on the dance programming at Fall for Dance there—it just made sense. It made sense for me to jump into these roles because I was interested in all of it, and it was just such a beautiful marriage of everything.

Ellen And you’re now on your new career, which is working out really well. You’re a wife and a mother, and you’ve just done really well for yourself, and I’m so proud of you and your accomplishments, and how you’ve picked up so many good values from doing things. I think it’s really helped you in your current career.

Alex Thank you, and thanks for the opportunity. I was very lucky to have those experiences. ■

Alex Felicetti started working for New York City Ballet in various capacities including with The George Balanchine Trust and the New York Choreographic Institute, before becoming the Manager of Dance Programs at New York City Center. During her 10 years at City Center, she managed all aspects of the annual Fall for Dance Festival and the dance programming presented there. As a recent freelancer in the general management and producing space, Alex has worked with The Jerome Robbins Foundation, Stage Directors and Choreographers Foundation, Miami City Ballet, School of American Ballet, and is the General Manager for Project Springboard: Developing Dance Musicals, and represents various dancers, choreographers, and projects.



Amari Frazier and Dabria Aguilar in Troy Schumacher’s *The Night Falls* at Montclair State University, 2023. Photo by Maria Baranova.



Bhangra Nation at Birmingham Rep, 2024. Photo by Craig Sugden.



The cast of *Illinois* at the Chicago Shakespeare Theater during its pre-Broadway run, 2024. Photo by Liz Lauren.

Illinois on Broadway, 2024. Photo by Matthew Murphy.







Zaynah Ahmed and the T.I.G.R.E.S. in *Bhangra Nation* at Birmingham Rep, 2024. Photo by Craig Sugden.

Post-Project Springboard *Bhangra Nation* Continues To Grow by Gregory Victor

Bhangra Nation premiered at the La Jolla Playhouse in California under the name of *Bangin' It* in 2022. Earlier this year, the show—in an all-new production—received glowing reviews and overwhelming audience approval at the Birmingham Rep in Birmingham, England. Critic Arifa Akbar wrote in *The Guardian*: “The music by Sam Willmott, and dance, choreographed by Rujuta Vaidya, is always vital, the dholaks (Indian drums) as infectious as a thumping bass... A thunderously upbeat finale has so much energy that the show wins with its charm and journey towards joy.”

The show's generous developmental homes have included La Jolla Playhouse, the Jerome Robbins Foundation's Project Springboard: Developing Dance Musicals, Rhinebeck Writers Retreat's Triple R Program for two readings and a residency and Rhinebeck's summertime Writers Retreat, as well as the Johnny Mercer Colony at Goodspeed Musicals, Running Deer Musical Theatre Lab and The Orchard Project.

The show is set in the world of collegiate bhangra contests. When students with exciting new ideas meet resistance from those with a more traditional outlook, the competition becomes about much more than just the dancing.

Sam Willmott, composer of *Bhangra Nation*, took the time to answer a few questions about the show and its artistic journey:

What is Bhangra?

Bhangra is a harvest festival folk dance that originated in Punjab (present-day northwest India / northeast Pakistan). In the past forty-ish years, it has found a

major foothold in colleges and universities across the world where competitive teams battle for prestigious titles in epic dance smackdowns. Traditional Bhangra music features instruments like the two-headed dhol drum and the one-string toombi, accompanying iconic shoulder-popping, high-energy, exuberant choreography. Collegiate routines often remix and hybridize this traditional music and dance with other styles to dazzling effect.

Does it stand for anything beyond the dance and music tradition?

Bhangra has come to mean a great deal particularly for diasporic South Asian communities across the world, for whom collegiate teams, classes and dance parties serve as nexuses for cultural and cross-cultural sharing, community building, bonding, joy, fun, love...and, obviously, excellent cardio.

How would you describe *Bhangra Nation*?

Bhangra Nation is a dancetastic musical comedy that tells the story of Mary and Preeti, two college students on the East Lansing University T.I.G.R.E.S. Bhangra team, whose conflicting visions for their upcoming routine set them on a thrilling collision course towards the National competition.

How did you first get involved with writing the music for the show?

I met playwrights Rehana Lew Mirza and Mike Lew one night at 11pm when we were randomly paired together for the 24-Hour Musicals (for clarification: Rehana and Mike are, and were already, married to one another). That evening, we were tasked with delivering a draft of a new 15-minute-long show by 5 am, and, consequently, had so much fun that we decided to keep the party going—for 10+ years. We like to refer to our relationship as a one-night stand that turned into a marriage. After that fateful night, we started talking about bigger projects to work on together, and Rehana mentioned that she'd written a screenplay called *Bhangin' It*, about the tumultuous world of intercollegiate competitive bhangra. I'd been dying to work on a dance-driven musical, and Rehana's idea just glittered from the go. The more I learned about Bhangra dance, Bhangra music, Bhangra team politics, and Bhangra team *drama*, the more excited I became. Rehana and Mike hadn't written a musical before, and I hadn't written songs about South Asian-American identity politics before, but we all threw caution to the wind, and here we are!



Jena Pandya, Zaynah Ahmed, and the full company in *Bhangra Nation* at Birmingham Rep, 2024. Photo by Craig Sugden.

Who is in on the creative team (and in what capacity)?

I write the music and the lyrics and collaborate on vocal and dance arrangements. Beyond myself, Rehana, and Mike, we truly have the team of all teams; producers Mara Isaacs, Tom Kirdahy, and Peggy Koenig lead a brilliant group of creatives including Stafford Arima (director), Rujuta Vaidya (choreographer), Becki Howell (musical staging), Parambeer Samrai (Bhangra specialist), Michael Taylor (set), Linda Cho (costumes), David Bengali (projections), Nick Richings (lighting), and Adam Fisher (sound). It's my *particular* privilege to work alongside my dear friends and colleagues on Team Music, including Kuljit Bhamra (additional arrangements and orchestrations), Rich Morris (music supervision), Matthew Malone (orchestrations) and Josh Sood (music direction), all legends in their own right.

Can you share anything about the dhol drum, for anyone not familiar with it?

Sure! For most of us, the dhol really defines the typical Bhangra sound. It has two goatskin (usually) heads, one on either end, and is slung over the shoulder and played by a *dholi* with one wooden stick and one bamboo stick (again, usually). You're likely to see a dhol/dholi make an appearance at an Indian wedding, particularly during the *baraat* (entrance of the groom). It's scientifically impossible not to get up and dance when someone wails on the dhol.

The show spent part of its development as part of Project Springboard: Developing Dance Musicals. Can you share your thoughts about that experience?

Okay, so true story — when we got the official email inviting us to participate in Project Springboard, I had a sudden and intense realization. I had no idea or plan for what we would have done if we *hadn't* been accepted. *Bhangra Nation's* whole life force — its whole *raison d'être* — is dance-driven storytelling. My own artistic sensibility was defined by dance musicals of yesteryear (*Singin' in the Rain*, *West Side Story*, *A Chorus Line*, *Sweet Charity*, the dream ballets of *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel* and *The King and I*...I mean, come on!). We, the *Bhangra Nation* team, wanted to honor that legacy in our own way, utilizing Bhangra, Kathak, vintage Bollywood, contemporary Bollywood, hip hop, and Punjabi folk styles to propel our story forward and set the emotional timbre of our show.

But where do emerging artists find a space where they can experiment with

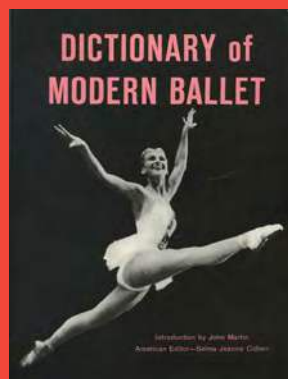
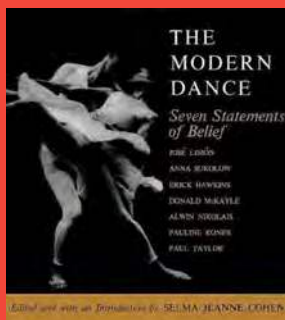
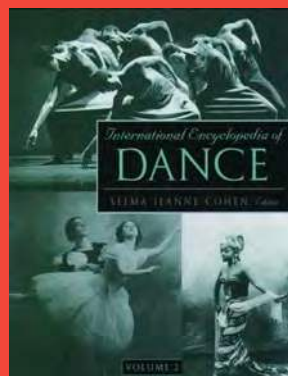
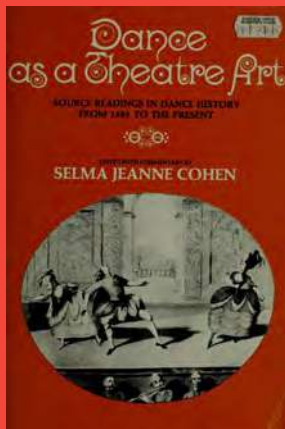
different forms and discover their pitfalls and potential — and do so at scale? There are shockingly few opportunities in the professional theater specifically designed to develop dance-driven material, particularly when the shows are as big (and expensive) as ours. While I respect the enormous financial challenges of producing workshops of this magnitude, the reality is that, without them, creatives must find other, dance-less ways to tell story and solve artistic problems, and choreography consequently becomes less of a vital storytelling mechanism and more a last-minute superfluous add-on. By centering the inherent potential of dance, Project Springboard gave our team a chance to realize the dance to its fullest expression, and let it guide critical creative decision-making. We spent three weeks in the gorgeous New York City Ballet studios testing the limits of possibility with music, movement, story and multidisciplinary, multicultural collaboration. We created an entire classical Indian pas-de-deux dream ballet from scratch, and developed an opening number, a Bollywood showstopper, and an extended scene/song/dance sequence that combined everything from folk Bhangra to brash dance-off to — spoiler alert — a massive, balletic, Bhangrific spice fight.

The incredible folks at the Jerome Robbins Foundation lovingly supported our whole team every step of the way, and our final presentation became the launchpad for our eventual first production at the La Jolla Playhouse. I truly couldn't be more grateful for the opportunity to have participated in Project Springboard and don't know where we'd be without it. *Bhangra Nation* really exists in its truest form because of it, and I, most assuredly, am a better artist thanks to it.

What's next for the show?

This year, we had our UK premiere at the Birmingham Rep, and just last week we were awarded the Eastern Eye ACTA Award for Best Production. As for what's next, I can't say yet, but fingers majorly crossed there will more Bhangra in our future. ■

Sam Willmott is a composer/lyricist whose projects include the Richard Rodgers Award-winning *Bhangra Nation*, as well as *Wake Up, Daisy!* and *Yo, Vikings!* (both with Marcus Stevens), the Emmy-nominated HBO documentary *Song of Parkland*, and the mini-musical *Scarlet Takes a Tumble*. He is the recipient of the Kleban Prize, the Fred Ebb Award, a Jonathan Larson Grant, and the ASCAP Foundation's Harold Adamson and Cole Porter Awards. Sam is a staff writer for the Korean English-language program, English Egg, as well as a Resident Artist at Harvard University. For more, visit SamWillmott.com.



SELMA JEANNE COHEN (1920–2005) transformed the field of dance by giving critics and historians language to discuss the nuances of performance and choreography. Cohen studied ballet at the University of Chicago before earning a Ph.D. in English literature there in 1946. In 1970, she created a program that trained journalists as dance critics. Cohen also began writing extensively about dance theory and founded *Dance Perspectives*, before editing the *International Encyclopedia of Dance*. She served on the boards of the American Society for Theater Research and the American Society for Aesthetics, founded the Society of Dance History Scholars, and received the first Dance Magazine Award ever given to a dance historian.

Reprinted with the permission of George Dorris. "Selma Jeanne Cohen." *Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*. 27 February 2009. Jewish Women's Archive. <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/cohen-selma-jeanne>

In 2019, the Jerome Robbins Dance Division at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts celebrated its 75th anniversary by focusing on topics selected by the curators who have overseen the collection during its history. Elizabeth Zimmer, a Dance Curator Fellow, focused on the Selma Jeanne Cohen Collection, presenting remarks about the pioneering dance historian, writer, and educator. What follows is the first installment (of two) of Elizabeth Zimmer's remarks presented at the Symposium which served as the culmination of the Fellowship.

A Catalyst and Her Cat Selma Jeanne Cohen and American Dance Scholarship by Elizabeth Zimmer

Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh. — Ecclesiastes 12:12

Selma Jeanne Cohen was born in Chicago. For half a century, she pioneered serious dance scholarship in America, leaving a trail of monuments. Her books, her stewardship of the *International Encyclopedia of Dance*, and the 66 issues of her magazine, *Dance Perspectives*, are legendary.

As the recipient of a Curator's Fellowship at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, I spent half of 2019 reading her papers in the Dance Division. I got used to the weirdness of whipsawing back and forth across five decades, following her struggles between art and commerce, tracking the pleading, placating, and backstabbing among collaborators on her projects. She was simultaneously scholar, critic, teacher, entrepreneur, mother hen, spade-worker for college dance history programs, adjudicator, thesis advisor, fixer, and goad. She lived in Greenwich Village from the late '50s until her death in 2005.

Selma Jeanne saved everything. She knew very early that she wanted to be a historian, a perception that shaped her filing habits. Luckily, she had the resources, including real estate and a succession of secretaries, to keep track of all the paper. She made multiple copies of many documents and filed them in different places. Trained as a researcher at the University of Chicago, she won a fellowship, in 1961, to work in the NYPL Dance Collection, under curator Genevieve Oswald. She knew what she was doing, and who she was doing it for; periodically she dropped documents off at the Library.

Her papers include handwritten letters she received from the 1940s onward, and carbon copies of her own letters, at first typed on onionskin paper, and later photocopied on recycled documents. There was no internet back then, and answering machines didn't show up until the 1970s; her files contain postcards and air letters and telegrams and fliers and programs and menus and ticket stubs and memos from people who house-sat her apartment and thank-you notes for a multitude of gifts. She complained about the phone service and the mail; New York City endured postal disruptions and subway strikes and fires in telephone switching stations. Her community was international and multigenerational; people from all over, from high school students to artists and scholars, asked for advice, sent manuscripts, sought jobs. She was patient with them. She invited many of them over for cocktails and holiday dinners.

I offer here a rough chronology of Selma Jeanne's life, tricky to build since the contents of the archives are mostly in alphabetical order. Sometimes the alphabetizing is based on the letterheads on people's stationery, rather than on their names. I decided, going in, to read everything. I also talked to people who knew her well. I knew her slightly; she was 25 years my senior, but actions she took in the '60s shaped my career in the '70s and after. We had similar instincts and similar communities; we were both passionate amateur dancers, students of literature, critical writers, and teachers of writing, but after the '60s she decided to concentrate her energies in dance history and scholarship, while I stayed with arts journalism.

School Days

Selma Jeanne was the only child of Frank A. Cohen and Minna Skud Cohen, who moved to Chicago from Muncie, Indiana early in the 20th century.

Frank and his four siblings were the children of Moses and Sarah Cohen, who were immigrants from Poland and apparently the first Eastern European Jews in Muncie. They got on well and prospered. Frank Cohen followed his father

into the scrap metal business; he also prospered. Selma Jeanne attended the private University of Chicago Lab School, graduating in 1937, when she was only 16. In this she followed her father's youngest brother, Benjamin Victor Cohen. Her uncle Ben went to law school and became a noted figure in the Roosevelt Administration, an architect of the New Deal. He was her advisor and financial bulwark until his death in 1983. Both of them had broad cheeks and prominent chins; both were seriously nearsighted and very, very smart.

Selma Jeanne told critic Mindy Aloff, in an interview at a Philadelphia conference of the Dance Critics Association published, in an edited form, in *Dance Chronicle* in 2000, "When I got out of the University's high school, each of the students was called into the Dean's office and asked, 'What do you want to be?' I said, 'I want to be a dance historian.' 'You want to be a *what?*' was the reply. 'There is no such thing.'" But Selma Jeanne was already on her path. She'd been taking ballet with Chicago teacher Edna McRae, who noticed that the petite young woman had no talent and channeled her toward the studio's collection of dance books. Selma Jeanne borrowed them and read them all, and began to buy her own copies.

After high school she went to Stephens College, in Columbia, Missouri, then a two-year college that attracted the daughters of wealthy Chicago families. She earned an Associate's degree in 1939. On her transcript, her religious preference reads "Christian Science," apparently a strategy that let Jews in Chicago fit more easily into the community surrounding them. She did well at Stephens, ranking in the 93rd percentile and earning honors in English, European History, Music Appreciation and American Literature. Then she returned to her parents' apartment and the University of Chicago, where she told Aloff, "I really wanted to be involved in dance, but...there weren't any classes about dance in the humanities...a few courses in dance technique, but not about dance history or ideas about dance." As a grad student and after, she served as an instructor in Humanities at the University, and edited the *Carillon*, a literary magazine.

She studied English literature, writing a dissertation on the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. She queried published authors on the process of writing historical fiction. In 1946, she moved to Los Angeles and taught English at U.C.L.A. until 1948. She also worked in the Hollywood studio of choreographer Eugene Loring, serving as a librarian and teacher and whetting her interest in dance notation.

She began contributing to *Dance Magazine* around 1950, writing such articles as "Ballet, the Universal Language, and How It Grew." Publisher Henry Holt turned down her proposal for a book on this subject. She contributed to Louis Horst's *Dance Observer* beginning in 1953; later she wrote there, "We cannot develop researchers by wishing them into being. But, by introducing young people already interested in dance to their full and existing heritage, we can inspire the incentive for research. This, in itself, can do much to raise the status of dance as an art."

New York

Her move to New York, in 1953, was underwritten by a \$500 gift from her uncle Ben, identified by *Washington Post* columnist Joe Alsop as "the New Deal's finest legal draftsman." Selma Jeanne immersed herself in a field that most adults, especially male adults, had trouble taking seriously, but she had access to wise counsel from Uncle Ben, a revered figure in progressive Washington.

She taught literature at Hunter College and went to work at New York's High School of Performing Arts, where her colleagues included Robert Joffrey and Lucas Hoving; among her students were Judith Chazin Bennahum, Bruce Marks, and Cora Cahan. In 1953 she took over the dance history class from Lillian Moore, a ballet dancer with a high school education who was one of the first American dance historians.

They pioneered the strategy of teaching historical dance forms to students, who then performed them at annual concerts. She taught at Performing Arts until 1956. Ann Hutchinson, then a prime mover at the Dance Notation Bureau, hired Selma Jeanne to edit a book, her first publishing job in New York. She wrote for *Dance Magazine* about extraordinarily diverse subjects, including a two-parter in 1956 about the 17th-century British member of parliament and diarist Samuel Pepys and his adventures in dancing. (Pepys was celebrated in 2017 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music by choreographer Annie-B Parsons in a piece called *17c*.)

Selma Jeanne assisted critic John Martin at the *New York Times* from 1955 until 1958. Martin served the *Times* for 35 years, from 1927 until 1962, advancing the reputations of major American modern dancers. At the *Times* Selma Jeanne wrote dance reviews, covered society events, and prepared advance obituaries. She was assigned to go to churches and summarize the sermons, and became one of the first female critics on the paper. She also wrote about dance for many encyclopedias, and proposed to a publisher a book of dance biographies.



Selma Jean Cohen, with her cat, Giselle. Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Zimmer.

In 1959 she helped found *Dance Perspectives*, which she later described as "critical and historical monographs...the only periodical concerned with scholarly studies in the field of dance." Inspired by predecessors like Lincoln Kirstein's *Dance Index*, her journal lasted until 1976, producing issues on American Ballet Theatre's first twenty years; choreographers Frederick Ashton, Antony Tudor, and Lester Horton; and many other subjects. In the very first issue of *Dance Perspectives*, with Al Pischl as her co-founder and co-editor, she published Lincoln Kirstein's essay called "What Ballet is About," dedicated to W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman. The magazine, its title page declared, was a place where "writers of specialized knowledge and perceptive opinions can publish essays of considerable length." For \$5 subscribers got four issues, 60 to 80 pages each. The rate increased slowly over the years. If you are not familiar with *Dance Perspectives*, request it in the third floor reading room of the Library of Performing Arts; some issues can actually be checked out on the second floor.

In 1960 the New York Public Library published a slim volume, reprinted from the Library's *Bulletin*, titled *Famed for Dance: Essays on the Theory and Practice of Theatrical Dancing in England, 1660-1740*, composed of essays written by Ifan Kyrie Fletcher, Selma Jeanne, and Roger Lonsdale. In this book, Selma Jeanne shared her first significant dance research, turning up, according to former New York Times dance critic Alastair Macaulay, new information "on the British ballerina Hester Santlow, muse to John Weaver and much more. Truly original research in what was then terra incognita."

Next, she spent a year working for the performing arts library, then located at Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street, assembling a bibliography of Italian ballet librettos. At that time the dance collection was headed by Genevieve Oswald, whose specialty was music; Selma Jeanne and Lillian Moore became invaluable advisors on dance matters. The three women became known as "the trinity," or the three graces, or, as Selma Jeanne herself reported, the three musketeers.

In 1961 she wrote to a friend, "I've been working on a big bibliography for *Dance Magazine*. We're trying to get dancers interested in reading. Let's hope it works."

Her mother, who graduated from the University of Chicago in 1919, the year before she married Frank Cohen, died in March of 1962, generating a cascade of sympathy notes. The archives reveal nothing about her father, but I found many handwritten letters from Uncle Ben, 25 years her senior and apparently her soulmate. Her cousin Bernard Freund, a lawyer from Muncie, Indiana, wrote to her, "Let Ben and me be 'family' for you in the years to come." Her Aunt Bess wrote from Los Angeles, "I know you are very busy and interested in your work. You are used to living a life of your own and that is a good thing for you now. You will not be lonely."

Teaching in Connecticut and beyond

In 1963 Selma Jeanne began teaching at the Connecticut College summer school of dance in New London, Connecticut, also the site of the United States Coast Guard Academy. This association lasted nearly a decade. When she arrived in New London in 1964, she wrote to Mary Clarke, editor of London's *Dancing Times*, that "the students are all very nice and interested and ignorant, so I feel needed." That summer her colleague Doris Hering, a longtime fixture at *Dance Magazine*, wrote to Selma Jeanne, warning her to "Keep away from the submariners!" Her reply: "No time for submariners. I'm taking class with Yuriko. I don't know if this means I'm terribly brave or terribly foolish."

The archive chronicles the progress of her various book projects, from concept to contract to finished volumes. Some proposals came to nothing. Mainstream publishers didn't think there was an audience for dance books. Some of her ideas were picked up, but bounced around as editors lost their jobs and resurfaced elsewhere. She found a home at Wesleyan University Press, where her first major publication, *The Modern Dance: Seven Statements of Belief*, became a surprise best-seller after it appeared in 1966.

Originally a series for *Dance Magazine*, *Seven Statements* took years to come together. Choreographers she hoped to include, like Merce Cunningham and Helen Tamiris, dropped out, and new ones were added. The final roster featured José Limón, Anna Sokolow, Erick Hawkins, Donald McKayle, Alwin Nikolais, Pauline Koner, and Paul Taylor. They each earned \$100 for contributing essays, and another \$100 years later after the book sold 5,000 copies.

Selma Jeanne repurposed articles and issues of *Dance Perspectives* into books, served on panels and juries, and accepted temporary teaching gigs. A long piece she wrote in late 1960, "Avant-Garde Choreography," for the journal *Criticism* at Detroit's Wayne State University, garnered responses, both grateful and critical, from artists accustomed to being ignored.

Deeply infatuated with the Royal Danish Ballet, Selma Jeanne worked for years to get August Bournonville's *My Theatre Life* published in America, translated by a young student, Patricia McAndrew. To McAndrew she served as "fairy godmother," cheerleader, agent, guidance counselor, catalyst, and host for a publication party when, after nearly a decade, the fat red volume appeared in 1979, published by Wesleyan.

The fate of the arts in the United States began to change dramatically in the mid '60s, with the founding of the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities. Selma Jeanne served on the endowment's first dance panel, which let her learn and teach at a national level, befriend artists she admired, and understand the workings of government funding.

In the 1960s she worked with the National Regional Ballet Association, traveling the country to adjudicate dance festivals involving professional and semi-professional performers and young students, dispensing sage advice on technique, repertory, and other aspects of developing companies. Meanwhile she continued editing stellar issues of *Dance Perspectives*.

In 1965 she bought out her "inactive colleagues" at *Dance Perspectives*. That summer she'd planned a trip to Europe on an ocean liner, but John Martin, who'd been hired to teach a course in dance criticism at Connecticut, was suddenly invited to go on tour with the New York City Ballet, and jumped at the chance. Selma Jeanne replaced him, launching a program that lasted close to 50 years, as the American Dance Festival, in association with the Arts Endowment, continued to underwrite a gathering of critics to train with leaders in the field. Her files for those summers include directories of all the students and faculty at ADF, and a magazine of criticism written by her class.

In addition to teaching writing, she was asked to review festival concerts for the *New London Day*, a situation she decided was unethical, as she was an employee of the festival.

Lillian Moore became the director of the Joffrey Ballet's apprentice program in 1966, and wrote to Selma Jeanne, "I do hope you will give the course on the writing of criticism, even though there are no jobs for your brilliant graduates." But Selma Jeanne had a hunch that the incipient dance boom, fueled by funding from the arts endowment, would change that situation.

In 1966 she began teaching at the University of California at Riverside, where a one-month lectureship launched a relationship that continued until 1989 and culminated in the establishment of a Ph.D. program in dance history, the first in the country.

In November of 1967 Lillian Moore died of cancer, devastating Selma Jeanne, who called her "the first friend I had in New York. I miss her terribly, and we needed her so."

In the early '70s Selma Jeanne turned an issue of *Dance Perspectives*, featuring an autobiography of Doris Humphrey, into a book, completing the life story the choreographer left hanging when she died of cancer in 1958. The

Rockefeller Foundation funded the project, allowing Selma Jeanne to give up teaching and freelance writing for a stretch, and take up an invitation to the MacDowell Colony to finish the manuscript. When Simon & Schuster turned it down, *Doris Humphrey: An Artist First* became another best seller for Wesleyan.

One consequence of Selma Jeanne's classes at the annual Critic's Conference was that, when her books came out, she had a network of educated writers on newspapers across the country, ready to review them. Her files are stuffed with those reviews.

Federal funds for workshops

The University of Chicago gave her a professional achievement award in 1974. That year she began a project she'd planned for years, a dance history seminar sponsored by the University of Chicago Extension. In her funding proposal she wrote, "Because of the generally held but completely mistaken assumption that dance has no accessible history, no college or university in the United States has yet devised a curriculum for dance scholarship."

The program was hosted on the Hyde Park campus by Elvi Moore, a former ADF student of Selma Jeanne's who was then the sole member of the University's dance faculty, based, as were so many others, in the Physical Education Department. Funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the seminar ran for three summers, focusing in the first year on the Romantic ballet, in the second on Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*, and in the final year, 1976, on theatrical dancing in America before 1900, coinciding with the country's bicentennial celebrations. The third-year group included Nancy Reynolds, a dance book editor who later played a major role in the production of the *Encyclopedia*, and who wrote the marvelous dance history *No Fixed Points*. Another student was Bill Bissell, an undergraduate at Fresno State who went on to become a program officer at Philadelphia's Pew Center for Arts & Heritage.

Selma Jeanne not only taught these workshops, in conjunction with visiting faculty, but raised money—and donated her own—to provide scholarships. In the second year, she helped organize an exhibit about the other arts involved in Diaghilev's productions, at a University of Chicago gallery. The final report for the Humanities Endowment declared that the project placed "the history of dance against the backdrop of the culture in which it exists." Bissell told me the seminar was "about ballet and modern dance being connected to the world."

In 1974, Linda Winer, a member of one of Selma Jeanne's early critics' workshops, wrote an article for the *Chicago Tribune* that began, "It's one of life's ridiculous truths that you cannot major in dance history in this country." Copies of her story, which chronicled her visit to the seminar, appear in many folders in many boxes of Selma Jeanne's archive. Winer, long the only female first-string theater critic in New York, resigned from *Newsday* in 2017, commenting that "criticism doesn't get clicks."

The remarkable thing about Selma Jeanne's career as a dance scholar is that for only one year, 1976 to 1977, did she hold a full-time academic job, as Distinguished Visiting Professor at the Five College Dance Department in Massachusetts. One of her Smith students, Lesley Farlow, was the first woman in her family to go to college. She said of Selma Jeanne, "She did a mini conference on virtuosity in the fall of '77; I was her assistant, making phone calls. She was starting to think about the encyclopedia. I was interested in the questions she asked...about dance history, about virtuosity."

Farlow recently retired after a long career at Trinity College in Hartford. "I loved her book *Dance as a Theatre Art*," she told me, "Loved reading the words of the artists themselves, because they were articulate. I've used that book so students get a sense of what the artists were thinking about. Selma Jeanne was kind of eccentric: the words were squeezed out of her mouth, slow and deliberate; it encouraged me to be a bit more deliberate in what I was saying and thinking. She was always very patient. She considered us peers. She wanted me to feel that I had the tools and resources to participate in the field...[but] there was always a distance. She was the elder stateswoman." ■

Elizabeth Zimmer, a native New Yorker, has been writing about the arts, for print and electronic media, since 1971, when she began reviewing theater, film, books, and dance for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. After stints in Halifax, Vancouver, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, in 1992 she accepted the position of dance editor at New York's *Village Voice*, to which she has also contributed reviews and feature stories. She has also covered dance for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and written for *Dance Magazine*, *Ballet Review*, the *AARP Magazine*, and a variety of other publications. She edits manuscripts for *Persimmon Tree*, an online magazine of the arts, and for many individuals. She holds a BA in literature from Bennington College and a master's degree from Stony Brook University, and has taught writing workshops around the country, most recently for the MFA program in dance at Hollins University in Roanoke, VA. In 2019 she received a fellowship from the Jerome Robbins Dance Division of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts to research the life and work of Selma Jeanne Cohen.

Photo Call: The Theater Photos of Joan Marcus and Carol Rosegg is on view in the Vincent Astor Gallery at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts through September 28, 2024.

The library's Billy Rose Theatre Division has made the archives of Joan Marcus and Carol Rosegg publicly accessible. Acquired in 2018, the collected works are one of the library's largest digital acquisitions of photography. Both collections were processed by Heather Halliday and Susan Kline concurrently in 2021.

Since 1980, Joan Marcus and Carol Rosegg have documented theatrical productions in New York and across the country, in addition to portraits of performers and theatre artists. The collections of the two colleagues are highly complementary and celebrate the New York theatrical scene for over four decades.

Photo Call is the first major exhibition of the two photographers. The exhibition is curated by Doug Reside in collaboration with both photographers. ■

“I think that *On the Town*, which was the first show I ever did probably had more dancing in it than *West Side Story* did. But the use of the dance was different, and the use of all the theater arts was more... I'll start this way — I felt that the poetry that was in Shakespeare's play — its approximations had to be made through the arts of the theater, whether they be dance, lighting, scenery, lyrics, music, etc.... We tried to weave all the three arts together, so you didn't know where one ended and the other began.”

— Jerome Robbins, in an interview by Craig Zadan for his book *Sondheim & Co.* (New York: Macmillan, 1974)



Jay Armstrong Johnson, Tony Yazbeck, and Clyde Alves in the 2014 Broadway revival of *On the Town* (choreography by Joshua Bergasse, original 1944 production of *On the Town* choreographed by Jerome Robbins). Photo by Joan Marcus.



Cast members of the 2010 tour of *West Side Story* perform “Cool” (choreography by Jerome Robbins, reproduced by Joey McKneely). Photo by Carol Rosegg.



Roman Mejia in Jerome Robbins' *Dances at a Gathering* at New York City Ballet, 2019. Photo by Erin Baiano, courtesy NYCB.

A moment with Roman Mejia

by Gregory Victor

Roman Mejia was born in Fort Worth, Texas and began studying ballet at age 3 with his mother (former principal dancer at Chicago City Ballet and Fort Worth Dallas Ballet, Maria Terezia Balogh) and his father (former New York City Ballet dancer, Paul Mejia). He attended summer courses at the School of American Ballet in 2014 and 2015 before entering full-time for the 2015 winter term. In August 2017, he became an apprentice at New York City Ballet, and then joined the Company as a member of the corps de ballet in November 2017. He was promoted to soloist in 2021, and then to principal dancer in 2023. Since joining New York City Ballet, Mr. Mejia has danced roles in several of Jerome Robbins' ballets including *Brandenburg*, *Dances at a Gathering*, *Fancy Free*, *The Four Seasons (Fall)*, *Interplay*, *Other Dances*, and *Piano Pieces*.

How are things going with your dancing these days?

I'm dancing a lot, and I'm dancing all the things I'd like to dance. I still have more ballets on my bucket list that I'd like to hit. I still want to do *Prodigal Son*, and *Apollo*—the classics. Also, there are full-length ballets I'd love to do—*Giselle*, *Swan Lake*. And of course, any of the MacMillan ballets—the full-length *Romeo and Juliet*, *Manon*. All of those ballets.

You were in Fort Worth, Texas, until what age?

Fifteen. My father was a producer with a Russian company in Arlington, at the time, called Metropolitan Classical Ballet, and the Director had been a principal dancer at the Bolshoi Ballet—Alexander Vetrov. A lot of the dancers were Russians and that was kind of the atmosphere I grew up in. I was raised on *La Bayadère*, and *Spartacus*.

So, you were initially trained in the Vaganova technique?

Yes, for a very long time. I got my Russian roots in that school, until I was nine years old. Then, I decided that dance wasn't for me—because there aren't a lot of guys who do it in Fort Worth, Texas—so I did other things for a while.

Such as?

I studied piano. And I played sports. I played soccer at school, and tae kwon do. I did martial arts for a few years. Then, around the age of twelve, my parents wanted me to go to a Fine Arts school in Texas and I had to audition with either music, acting, singing, or dance. So, I auditioned with dance and theater, and I got in. Then, during *Nutcracker* season, a studio nearby needed boys for *The Nutcracker*, and that's where I fell back in love with ballet.

I came across a Fort Worth Star-Telegram article about that production. You are as a nine-year-old, said, "It's really fun, and there's a lot of acting in it. I like to act." Have you ever taken acting classes?

Not really, but there's a lot of acting in what I do. It's something I've always enjoyed, and I think it's also something that pulls me toward those full-length story ballets. I love playing a character. My first real experience with that in a ballet was when I got to play Mercutio in Peter Martins' *Romeo + Juliet*. Mercutio is such a meaty character, and I was really excited to dive into something like that, you know, the whole drama of it, and playing the character was really fun. Jerome Robbins' ballets, and Balanchine's ballets, don't really need a lot of acting because the steps really speak for themselves. Especially the sailor in *Fancy Free*. All those steps are very much in the character of that sailor, and it feels very natural. I don't feel like I have to act in order to do it.

Since your parents were both accomplished dancers, there had to be constant advice coming from them. What lessons that they taught you have proven useful?

They taught that the work that you put in is always important. Their classes when I was growing up were hard. As soon as my dad figured out that I could do a double tour, I was doing double tours in class. Even if the technique wasn't quite there, I was going up and turning in the air twice. The technique came later. I worked on that when I came to SAB. Also, I was always in the theater while I was growing up. I was always around that atmosphere.

Is it true that you attended SAB without the explicit goal of eventually being in New York City Ballet?

I was familiar with City Ballet. I had friends who had been to the summer course who suggested that I come with them, and I thought, *Alright, I'll go to the summer course*. It's quite funny, because I told my father that I wanted to go to the SAB summer course, and he asked, "How'd you hear about SAB?" I didn't really know about his whole background. I knew he was a ballet dancer, and that he taught, but I didn't know the extent of his history with City Ballet. But then he sat me down and told me about everything.

He must be in the house when you eventually perform your first *Prodigal Son*.

Oh, he will be. What's great is that we've also shared a couple roles now, too, which has been really fun.

Such as?

Symphony in C, third movement.

Do you dance the exact same choreography, or have there been adjustments over the years?

The same choreography. And we've shared *Rubies* as well. We talk a lot about these things, which is really fun.

When you're learning a ballet, what's the best process for you?

Of course, I start with the steps, with the Repertory Director. A lot of these ballets, I kind of already know because I'm a "bunhead" and I've watched so many videos throughout the years. I do a lot of research.

Talk to me about being onstage.

Even as a kid I've always loved to be onstage. That doesn't mean that I don't get nervous. I get nervous, but I feel really comfortable once I'm out there. Once I'm out there, I feel good, no matter what happens. And if I make a mistake, I always try to make something out of it. I love the air. It's just a freedom for me. I escape into it. There's nothing like it.

Just for fun, I'd like to ask you a few of the questions that were asked of a young Jerome Robbins when he joined Ballet Theatre in 1940. The Ballet Theatre Publicity Department asked the dancers to fill out a questionnaire that would be useful in promoting the Company as they toured. Sure. Go ahead.

Did you have a predilection for your present career when you were very young? Yes.

What is your favorite dish? Steak.

Do you smoke? No.

Do you collect any odd things? Sweatsuits from countries I visit.

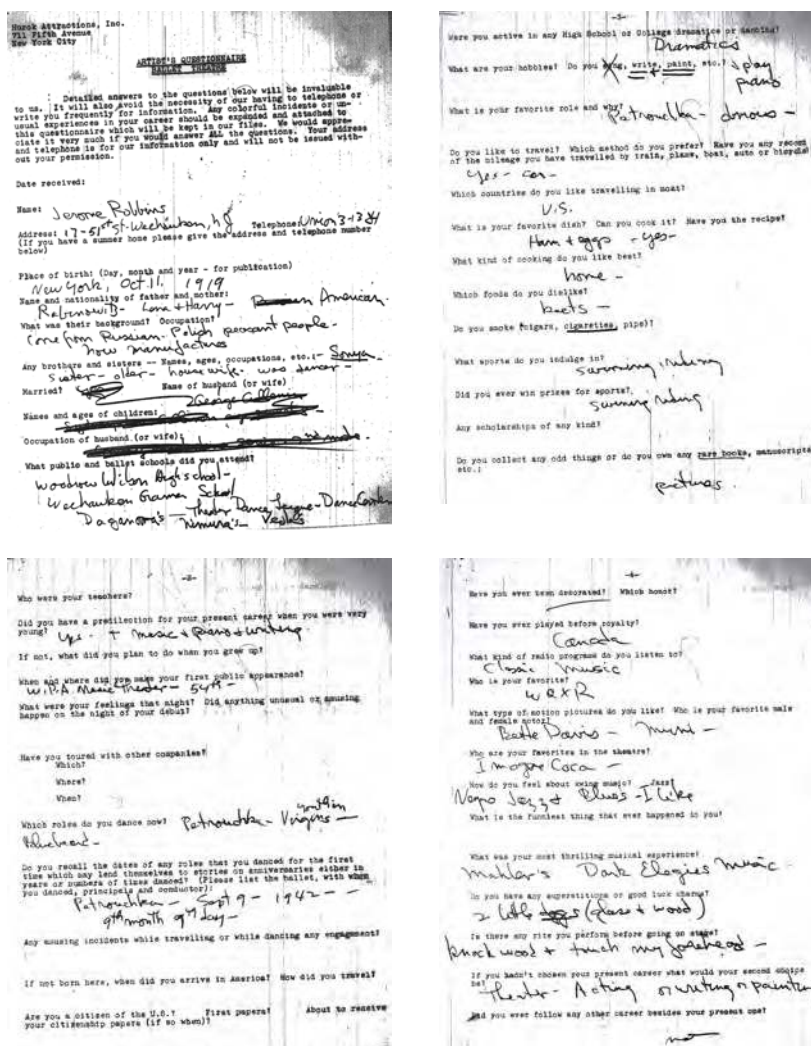
What type of motion pictures do you like? Action.

Who are your favorite male and female actors?

Joaquin Phoenix and Margot Robbie.

Do you have any rite you perform before going on stage?

Knocking wood and slapping my thighs. ■



Ballet Theatre's "Artist's Questionnaire," with responses from the newly hired Jerome Robbins in 1940.



Maria Kowroski and Robert La Fosse on staging *Fancy Free* at New Jersey Ballet

Last fall, New Jersey Ballet presented "A Night on the Town," a successful program of four ballets: *Rubies* (by George Balanchine), *This Bitter Earth* (by Christopher Wheeldon), *Reencounter* (by Gustavo Ramirez Sansano), and *Fancy Free* (by Jerome Robbins). Below are excerpts from a conversation with Maria Kowroski (Artistic Director of New Jersey Ballet) and Robert La Fosse (who staged the ballet for the Robbins Rights Trust).

Programming the evening

Maria I tried to find a way to bring people into the theater. I tried to put a program together that, maybe if there was a new audience member, they might like one thing in it that they would come back to see. Everyone always loves a Broadway-type show, so I thought *Fancy Free* would be an amazing ballet to bring to the community. I've watched it for years. I never danced in it, but I watched it from the sidelines for years and was always a huge fan of it, so I thought it would be a wonderful program. I do a lot of the programming based on the dancers in the company — who I think would be able to dance the roles. For instance, for *Rubies*, there is a girl who had come in the year before, and I thought, *Oh my God, she'd be great as the tall solo girl in 'Rubies,'* and with some of the men I could totally

see them doing these characters in *Fancy Free*. And I had seen *Reencounter* at a Dance Against Cancer benefit, and I loved it. I loved the "Symphony in C" Bizet music. I couldn't imagine anything else to that music, but then when I saw it, I thought it looked so different, and that it would be a really wonderful ballet to bring to the dancers. At the time I did have the dancers I thought could do it. Of course, everything always changes. As you plan a program, sometimes the dancers aren't there the next year. So, I planned it the year before, and some things shifted as the year went on, but I think, all in all, the audience was happy with the performance.

Robert Thinking about the program — Bernstein is very much connected to Robbins, and Stravinsky is very much connected to Balanchine, and I think that was very educational for the audience to get to know that those composers were synonymous with those two choreographers. They're also master works. You're getting two really important pieces of art.

Staging *Fancy Free*

Robert With *Fancy Free*, you have very specific characters. It's like casting *A Streetcar Named Desire*. You have to have these personalities who will project what I believe Jerry was trying to say. These characters were written on certain

people, so to watch the dancers of New Jersey Ballet find the characters was really interesting. That's always the truth with *Fancy Free*. The first time you do it, you're basically putting the steps and all of the information together within a certain amount of time. Then, when you walk away from it and come back to it a year later, you have a different perspective. You ease into it a little bit more. There are a lot of lines in this ballet — just as an actor has lines — and cues, and reactions. It's a fascinating ballet to watch people navigate. Some people catch on to it quickly and some people take a little bit more time. I've learned how to have patience with the process and helping them through that. With the staging at New Jersey Ballet, we had a great group. They enjoyed learning it.

Maria It was fascinating watching you stage it, too. Obviously, from having worked with Jerry for so many years, there was so much that you had to offer. I just loved your approach, because you weren't forcing anything. You emphasized that it had to be natural, and that the dancers had to feel it in a genuine place, like an actor. By the end, they were really tuning in to that. When we do it again, it will be interesting to see the same cast approach it after a few months of not doing it.

Robert It will be a lot easier, because they won't be scared of the first performance. Now that they've done it, they can have a little perspective and know where they can breathe. The thing about staging Jerry's work is that you want very much to think about what he was trying to say. The easy way is to just show them what I did. Instead, I try to get them to discover something that comes from inside themselves. Jerry was a master at doing every character that he ever invented. He could show what he wanted, easily, and I was good at mimicking him. But I think it's more interesting to allow the dancer to discover who that character is. Maybe they'll find something that we've never seen before. Not every dancer does their best performance the first performance. Or the second. Sometimes it takes a couple of seasons, as you well know, Maria. You grow into a role, or it fits you like a glove, and you own it.

Staging *Fancy Free* as originally intended (amid concerns about the perceived power dynamic between the sexes in the ballet)

Maria We spoke about it. Robbie, you mentioned the challenge several times — that we had to make it look like this, and not like this — and were very clear about the way it looked.

Robert The action in the ballet is that the sailor takes her purse away from her, jokingly, and he puts it on himself, and he pretends to be her, mimicking her walking down the street. Then, the sailors keep the purse away from her. They're

playing with her. The operative word is playing. What can happen when you take something from someone, it can look like you are stealing something. It's important that it not read that way. I think the most important part is her reaction. It's important for that girl to understand that she's not afraid, she's not a meek character, she's strong, and she can stand up to three sailors. What I think is the secret, so that the audience doesn't feel as though she's being assaulted, is that she has the correct response. Her gestures, and the way she does them, tell us she's not in danger. What can happen, over a period, is that that character can be played as angry. That's the trap. That's not at all what Jerry had in mind. We have to know that Jerry did not have in mind that these guys were assaulting her. In fact, she leaves, and those two boys go after her, and she comes back, and we know that she's okay. At the very end, when he holds her wrist, and she does a sort of untwisting of it — it shows that she has more power. I think what this woman has, that other women in ballets don't usually have, is a kind of power over the man. It's our job to address it, and to make sure that it's clear. It's so important that these acting bits get portrayed correctly. Otherwise, it can be misconstrued as something other than what Jerry intended. ■

Maria Kowroski was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Ms. Kowroski entered the School of American Ballet in 1992. She became an apprentice with New York City Ballet in 1994 and was invited to join the Company as a member of the corps de ballet in 1995. In 1997, Ms. Kowroski was promoted to the rank of soloist, and in 1999, she was promoted to principal dancer. Ms. Kowroski has danced many principal roles in the Balanchine repertory and has had the pleasure of being created on by several choreographers including Jerome Robbins, Christopher Wheeldon, Mauro Bigonzetti, Justin Peck, Peter Martins, Boris Eifman, and Helgi Tomasson. She has also had the great privilege of working with the great choreographers Alexei Ratmansky and William Forsythe. In 1994 Ms. Kowroski was the recipient of the Princess Grace Award, and in 2011 she received the Jerome Robbins Award. Ms. Kowroski joined New Jersey Ballet Company as the Acting Artistic Director in November 2021 and became Artistic Director in September 2022. Most recently Ms. Kowroski won an Emmy as Creative Director for New Jersey Ballet's marketing video in 2022.

Robert La Fosse joined American Ballet Theatre in 1977 and performed as a principal dancer for six years. In 1986, he was invited by Jerome Robbins to join the New York City Ballet as a principal dancer. Throughout his career he has danced leading roles in many of the full-length classical ballets, including the U.S. premiere of Sir Kenneth MacMillan's *Romeo and Juliet*. He has performed in works created by many choreographers including George Balanchine, Jerome Robbins, Anthony Tudor, Merce Cunningham, Sir Kenneth MacMillan, Sir Frederick Ashton, Twyla Tharp, and Paul Taylor. He has also starred in the Broadway productions of Bob Fosse's *Dancin'* and *Jerome Robbins' Broadway*, for which he received a Tony Award nomination for Best Actor. His television appearances include: "American Ballet Theatre in San Francisco," Twyla Tharp's *Push Comes to Shove*, and the "Live from Lincoln Center" telecast of "Ray Charles in Concert with the New York City Ballet." He appeared as Dr. Stahlbaum in the film of George Balanchine's *The Nutcracker*. Mr. La Fosse is also a choreographer who has created over 100 works for ballet, Broadway, opera, film and television. The New York City Ballet has performed 10 of his ballets. In 1987 he wrote his autobiography entitled *Nothing to Hide*. He continues to teach, choreograph, direct, and stage the works of Jerome Robbins throughout the world.



Artistic Director Maria Kowroski, stager Robert La Fosse, and Repertory Coach Zoe Zien at a rehearsal for Jerome Robbins' *Fancy Free* at New Jersey Ballet, 2023.



Dancer Joshuan Vazquez and stager Robert La Fosse rehearse Jerome Robbins' *Fancy Free* at New Jersey Ballet, 2023.

Chita Rivera photographs by Jerome Robbins

with excerpts from *Chita: A Memoir*, provided by co-author Patrick Pacheco

Each day, we were like racing thoroughbreds at the gate, hyped up and raring to break out. Never more so than when we started working on "Dance at the Gym." What Jerry emphasized above all else was clarity. No fuss, no clutter, no distraction. He dealt in the essence of dance, conveying emotion to an audience through incredibly complex and detailed steps. "Let me see you!" he often shouted. And by that, he meant, "Show me who you are as a person, as a character." Style, yes, but more importantly, *substance*. And even more, *awareness*.



During dance rehearsals, Jerry, a perfectionist, worked us relentlessly. He took his background in classical ballet, fused it with hip and frenetic street energy and created drama. I suspected that he and Peter Gennaro, his co-choreographer, had haunted the dance halls of Spanish Harlem before they started choreographing *West Side Story*. Jerry was never just about the steps. It was always about *feeling*. The mambo became an erotic pas de deux; the cha-cha, lively and playful.

Dancers are so used to doing exactly what we're told to do. But it was the mid-1950s, and the Lee Strasberg approach, known as "the Method," was just flexing its muscles as an acting style. In fact, I'd heard that Montgomery Clift, who'd studied at Strasberg's Actors Studio, was the one who'd suggested to Arthur Laurents that he write a musical about New York gangs... I didn't know much about the Method. It hadn't penetrated into musicals as much as it had in plays. But Jerry expected us to know everything about our individual characters—where they lived, their families, their entire life story.



I could read Jerry's moods pretty well. From the beginning, I was always able to pick up on the temperature in a room. So, when I saw Jerry starting to do a slow-boil, I looked over to see who he was looking at—Mickey Calin, who played Riff, making time with the girls. As Jerry passed me on his way to chew out Mickey—something he did often—I impulsively whispered, "Jerry, don't." To my amazement, he stopped. He stared at me, not quite sure what he had heard. Finally, he said, "Chita, you're a witch!" We both laughed.

While Jerry choreographed the Jets, Peter was in charge of the Sharks. They made a great team, although they were like night and day. Jerry was very analytical in his approach to dance. Peter was all instinct. Jerry was dark and serious, always dressed in black, and you didn't dare fool around when you were with him. Peter was light, Southern, sweet, funny, and kind. Peter had grown up in New Orleans, where he not only picked up on the Black rhythms of the streets but also learned dance from the Black kitchen staff in his Italian family's restaurant.



When I was six months along, I invited my gynecologist to attend *West Side Story*. He nearly had a heart attack. "Chita, you gotta get the heck out of there. Now!" I gave my notice. That night, I literally "became" pregnant. My stomach swelled. I felt life stirring inside me. The baby in my womb stretched out her little arms and legs and relaxed. It was as if Lisa, my daughter-to-be, had heard the Stage Manager in the Sky say to her, in a voice not unlike James Earl Jones, "Places, please."

Patrick Pacheco is an Emmy Award-winning arts writer and commentator whose work has appeared in many publications. He is the host and producer of "Theater: All the Moving Parts" on CUNY-TV (all shows available on YouTube) and is the writer of the 2009 award-winning Disney documentary, "Waking Sleeping Beauty." Pacheco co-wrote with Erik Jackson the new stage musical, *Christmas in Connecticut*, which premiered at the Goodspeed Opera House, and is the writer-editor of *American Theatre Wing: An Oral History*. He recently had the honor of collaborating with Chita Rivera on *Chita: A Memoir*, published by HarperOne.

Chita and Jerry by Brian Meehan

I know that Chita Rivera was one of the artists with whom Jerry worked who was among his most prized collaborators, for that is what she was, as much as Lenny Bernstein or Steve Sondheim or Arthur Laurents were, in the creation of *West Side Story*. Jerry and Chita created Anita together. They brought Anita to life together in the rehearsal studio and on the theater stage. He always wanted his dancers, be it in ballet or theater or film, to be just as committed to a role with their characters as much as with their bodies, and that Chita Rivera was, all the way. When she was on stage, according to Jerry, Chita was Anita and Anita was Chita: fierce, sensual, passionate, as well as a technician of perfection. And as no one lives the same day twice, she never gave the same performance twice.

When Jerry truly admired—loved—a dancer and an actor whom he would see over and again in the same role, he would say, "Let's see what she's going to do tonight."

I was with Jerry when we ran into Chita in a theater lobby in the early '80s. They greeted each other with the joy, laughter, and warm embrace of two colleagues who had shared in the creation of theater history. Afterwards, I told him what a thrill it had been to meet her (I had seen her in the original production of *Chicago*), and he pronounced the superlatives that are most often employed to describe her as a performer: "brilliant," "electrifying," "unforgettable." But then he said something truly singular and memorable to me: "I gave her her wedding party." That struck me as no small gesture of friendship, but as the expression of the deep and abiding love of family. ■



Maria Kowroski in a rehearsal of George Balanchine's *Serenade* at New York City Ballet, 2006.
Photo by Kyle Froman.

In 2018, the New York City Ballet Gala celebrated the Jerome Robbins Centennial, toasting what would have been Robbins' 100th year. In a speech preceding the evening's opening ballet, Principal Dancer Maria Kowroski, who has since become the Artistic Director of New Jersey Ballet, shared the following remarks:

Good evening. I am delighted to welcome you to New York City Ballet's Spring Gala, and the opening night of our Centennial Celebration for Jerome Robbins.

Jerome Robbins was born in New York on October 11, 1918. He was a legendary director and choreographer who changed the face of Broadway, won an Oscar for his work on the silver screen, and yet, here in this theater, to the dancers, he was simply Jerry.

In an incredible 40-year career with us, Jerry created nearly 60 ballets, and in one of his final works, *Brandenburg*, he found a part in the corps de ballet for little old me. Or little young me, as I was known at the time.

In the final years of his life, I had the huge honor of being in the studio with Jerry on a number of his ballets, including principal roles in two of his great masterpieces, *Dances at a Gathering* and *Glass Pieces*, and today, I am the last current company member to have worked with him directly.

When I think back to those times, the word that springs to mind is "easy." "Easy, easy, easy..." he would say. Which of course, is a lie, because it wasn't. But this was Jerry's way of telling us not to force anything, and just be. Just dance. He wanted you to be genuine on stage, bring yourself to the role, and create a performance that was authentic. Sometimes this meant weeks of rehearsals, or waiting seasons to perform a role, because putting the work in ahead of time enabled you to be free. He liked his dancers to create atmosphere and bring a slice of humanity to their work. To pull the audience right into the world they were creating on stage.

Select Upcoming Performances of Jerome Robbins Works

"Mistake Waltz" (excerpt from *THE CONCERT*)

Royal Ballet School, Linbury Theatre, Royal Opera House, London
June 19, 20, 2024

IN THE NIGHT / AFTERNOON OF A FAUN / EN SOL (IN G MAJOR)

Teatro di San Carlo, Naples, Italy
July 19, 21, 23, 25, 26, 28, 2024

GLASS PIECES

New York City Ballet, David H. Koch Theatre, New York City
September 17, 18, 20, 21(m), 26, 2024

THE FOUR SEASONS

New York City Ballet, David H. Koch Theatre, New York City
September 19, 21(e), 22, 2024

DANCES AT A GATHERING / THE CONCERT

La Scala Ballet, Teatro alla Scala, Milan, Italy
November 8, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17(m), 20, 2024

Please note: Cancellations or postponements are always possible.

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