



Robbins, Jerome (1918-1998)

by Bud Coleman

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A portrait of Jerome Robbins in *Three Virgins and a Devil* (1941) by Carl Van Vechten. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Bisexual choreographer and director Jerome Robbins was both a great choreographer of classical ballet and a Broadway innovator, but he was fearful that he might be outed, and his reputation was tarnished when--during the height of McCarthyism--he "named names" during a meeting of the House Un-American Activities Committee.

According to critic Clive Barnes, Jerome Robbins "was an extremely demanding man, not always popular with his dancers, although always respected. He was a perfectionist who sometimes, very quietly, reached perfection."

From 1944 to 1997, Robbins choreographed 66 ballets and choreographed (and often also directed) fifteen Broadway musicals. During his extraordinarily prolific career he not only excelled in two different fields, but he also worked with chameleon-like versatility, never seeming to repeat himself.

Born Jerome Rabinowitz to Harry and Lena Rabinowitz on October 11, 1918 in New York City, he and his family soon moved to Weehawken, New Jersey. His father's corset business allowed young Robbins to attend New York University for one year, where he majored in chemistry, before a slump in business forced him to withdraw.

Robbins had already started accompanying his sister to dance classes, which led to his professional debut in a Yiddish Art Theater production in 1937.

For five summers Robbins choreographed and performed at the famous Poconos resort Lake Tamiment, in between dancing in four Broadway musicals, one choreographed by George Balanchine.

Robbins was hired as a choreographer for the second season of Ballet Theatre (1940-1941). His meteoric career took off with his first ballet, *Fancy Free* (1944), to an original score by Leonard Bernstein.

The ballet was an instant hit; and the composer and choreographer, both twenty-five years old, joined forces with lyricists Betty Comden and Adolph Green to create a musical out of Robbins' comic ballet of three sailors on leave in New York City: *On the Town*. The success of *On the Town* made Robbins the boy genius of two worlds: musical theater and concert dance.

In the 1950s, Robbins began to direct as well as choreograph, creating such masterpieces as *The King and I* (1951), *Bells Are Ringing* (1956), *Gypsy* (1959), *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964), and, most notably, *West Side Story* (1957).

Robbins' darkest hour occurred at the height of McCarthyism. In 1953 he named eight colleagues as members of the Communist Party during a House Un-American Activities Committee hearing.

Robbins never explained or defended his motives for naming names. He may have testified to avoid being

blacklisted on Broadway or out of fear of being outed as a homosexual. Many colleagues and others considered his behavior a betrayal and never forgave him for it.

Unlike other directors of musicals, Robbins demanded that his actors dance as well as sing. His high expectations of the cast of *West Side Story*, for example, created the triple-threat performer: the actor/singer/dancer. This landmark production in the history of musical theater was also the beginning of a new genre: musical tragedy.

While librettist Arthur Laurents felt that the shared Jewishness of the collaborators was the greatest influence on the creation of *West Side Story*, surely the show was also influenced by the fact that seven members of the creative team were gay: Robbins, Laurents, composer Leonard Bernstein, lyricist Stephen Sondheim, set designer Oliver Smith, lighting designer Jean Rosenthal, and costume designer Irene Sharaff, in addition to the first actor to play Tony, Larry Kert.

One result of the homosexuality of most of the creative team is that, despite the heterosexual plot line, *West Side Story* is nevertheless intensely homoerotic. The male characters are eroticized as much as the female characters, if not more so; and Riff seems to love Tony as much as Tony loves Maria.

At the invitation of Balanchine, Robbins joined New York City Ballet as a dancer, choreographer, and Associate Director from 1949 through 1959. He returned to New York City Ballet as Ballet Master in 1969.

For the next twenty years, the former king of Broadway choreographed numerous masterpieces of ballet, including *Dances at a Gathering* (1969), *The Goldberg Variations* (1971), *Glass Pieces* (1983), *Ives, Songs* (1988), and *2 & 3 Part Inventions* (1994). There is little doubt that his ballets would have been more highly regarded, then and now, had they not been created in Balanchine's shadow.

Robbins' classicism was not as dedicated to a strictly codified idiom as Balanchine's; rather, it was infused with theatricality and emotional expressiveness. Many of Robbins' ballets have a naturalness, a democratic air, because they translate (and transform) European (especially Russian) ballet conventions into a more familiar vernacular. Robbins' ballets are not about Americana, yet they are very American.

Shortly before the death of Balanchine in 1983, Robbins and Peter Martins were named co-directors of New York City Ballet, a post Robbins held until 1990.

Robbins took a leave from New York City Ballet in 1988 to stage *Jerome Robbins' Broadway* (1989), an anthology of dances and scenes from eleven of his Broadway shows. It won the Tony Award for Best Musical and ran 624 performances.

Robbins the perfectionist was often his own worst enemy. He was savagely demanding of his performers and unrelenting in his demands on himself. High expectations ruled his personal life as well, as Robbins pursued both men and women, but formed no permanent relationship.

Robbins' ballet *Facsimile* (1946) reflects his bisexuality, as two men and one woman vie for one another's affections.

Ballet dancer Nora Kaye told reporters that she and Robbins were to be wed in 1951; at the same time, Broadway dancer Buzz Miller and Robbins were in the midst of their five-year live-in relationship (1950-1955). Robbins' other romantic affairs included those with actor Montgomery Clift, writer Christine Conrad, photographer Jesse Gerstein, and filmmaker Warren Sonbert.

On 29 July 1998, Robbins died of a stroke at the age of 79. His numerous awards include one Emmy (*Peter Pan*), two Oscars (*West Side Story*), four Tony Awards, the Kennedy Center Honors (1981), and a National Medal of the Arts (1988).

The greatest classical choreographer born in this country and a Broadway innovator, Robbins took millions of people to a new place, as he once said, a world "where things are not named."

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