

3 | In Anticipation of *West Side Story*

The Confluence of Styles, Genres, and Influences in the Early Choreography of Jerome Robbins

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I have tried to give you an accurate picture of myself – my selves. The evil, the good, the bad, the smiling, sneering, artistic, malicious, destructive, benevolent, rapacious, egotistical, sacrificing and selfish are all my selves . . . all me.

– Jerry Rabinowitz, English 12, 1935¹

Jerome Robbins's career prior to *West Side Story* was a balancing act between the vastly different worlds of concert ballet and Broadway musicals. Robbins's often Janus-faced artistic identity was created not out of random opportunities but because his way of working stemmed from a narrative investigation of movement that was forged in a unique time when ballet was modernizing and musical theatre was discovering the dramatic potential of dance. This chapter describes how Robbins (1918–1998) came to be a 'narrative artist' and how he did not emphatically choose between concert dance and Broadway but navigated between the two through the whole of his career. Owing to his innovative choreographic strategies and creative interpretations of the world around him, Robbins brought modes of communication from one artistic world to the other, generating an overtly mimetic and dramatic style in concert ballet and an athletic and punchy ballet style in musical theatre. In fact, this doubleness in Robbins's life extended throughout his career beyond *West Side Story* and helped to modernize (in his time) dance in both genres that has left a lasting impression. Notably, Robbins continually strove to exorcise his personal demons through concert dance and musical theatre, causing both joy and angst for the dancers and his collaborative partners. In the turbulent process, or perhaps in spite of it, he created some of the most lasting pieces of choreography in the repertoire of dance in the United States. This discussion traces Robbins's formative training years, early career, and then focuses on several foundational shows that set in motion his choreographic career along with lesser known creations that helped shape his mode of expression building up to *West Side Story*. Robbins's style, choreographic strategies, and ingenuities in *West Side Story* have

a foundation in the material circumstances of his early career, helped along by key mentorships and collaborations with fellow artists both in ballet and musical theatre. I establish from the beginning how Robbins started out as many aspiring dancers do: cobbling together a variety of training schemes, odd jobs, and hustling for paid gigs. Along the way, I consider the tensions that continued to mount for Robbins between his personal life and his professional career and colour his way of working. Limitations of space prohibit a thorough investigation of Robbins's many successes, projects, and artistic relationships in the decade building up to *West Side Story*; however, I draw out a collection of primary threads that weave together to create the dance-driven storytelling that comes to full fruition in *West Side Story*.

There are many reasons, ranging from proximity to Manhattan to early artistic contacts and mentorships, why Jerome Robbins was able to experience and be involved in the New York performance scene from an early age. Jerome Robbins was born Jerome Wilson Rabinowitz on 11 October 1918 in New York City. He came from a lower-middle-class family that ran a corset company and lived in Weehawken, New Jersey. Growing up, Robbins had the advantage of piano lessons, a school with arts programs, and the opportunity to attend the cinema on weekends. In addition, his older sister Sonia pursued dance training and would invite him to watch her classes and be part of at-home rehearsals. Geographically, Robbins had the advantage of being a quick ferry ride away from a plethora of performance offerings in Manhattan, from Broadway musicals and plays, to a hotbed of avant-garde experimental artists practicing their craft, often outside for all to see. For amusement in his teen years, Robbins and his friends would seek out the strangest, most provocative work they could find in the city. Robbins constantly leaned on Sonia for support, encouragement, and help brainstorming future goals from a young age. Though Sonia wanted her own life and moved into the city to train as a dancer, Robbins, fiercely opportunistic from a young age, would constantly contact her for help and general advice.

While his family would have preferred Robbins enter the family business or pursue a more respectable and secure profession such as engineering or chemistry, his failing of several courses in his first year at New York University called for a reset of possible career trajectories. Robbins, who had a close relationship with his mother and a difficult relationship with his father, convinced his parents to let him try his hand at the various artistic endeavors he was interested in for one year. If his pursuits did not pan out, he agreed to return to the family business.² And so, after high school, at

Sonia's suggestion he auditioned for and was accepted into Senya Gluck Sandor's experimental modern dance company, where she was a member. Robbins was soon training and performing side by side with upcoming modern dance luminaries such as José Limón. Sandor was a unique mentor for Robbins as he was an unusual 'hybrid choreographer – ballet-trained, dedicated to modern dance, but also a veteran of Broadway, burlesque and vaudeville.³ In order to excel at his theatrical approach, Sandor encouraged Robbins to study ballet and take acting lessons on the side. Sandor provided a substantial amount of modern dance training and a variety of performance and social opportunities. Perhaps the most substantial job in Robbins's two-year engagement with the group was being part of the Yiddish Art Theatre's production of *The Brothers Ashkanazi*. Importantly, this show, choreographed by Sandor, had nine performances a week and was Robbins's first steady employment as a dancer. In this time Jerome Rabinowitz changed his name to one that was less Jewish sounding. The irony that this happened when he was learning more about his Jewish roots through working with a Yiddish company is not lost. In fact, the overt awareness of his Jewishness was something Robbins pulled away from in his early career.⁴

In this formative time two personal developments or basic character traits become clear – one practical, one artistic – that would go on to colour his early career. Firstly, Robbins was a resilient and relentless journeyman of the arts. He would seek out any creative employment opportunities he could find from puppetry to small tasks and backstage work that he would eagerly take on from anyone who was connected to the performing arts. He was extraordinarily determined and yet rarely got into projects the first time, second time, or at all. Recognizing that Robbins had to apply himself, press teachers for opportunities, and use considerable elbow grease to get even the chance to audition or try out ideas, brings a sense of ordinariness to someone who has often been exalted in dance and musical theatre history. His trials and tribulations also help explain the anxiety, self-doubt, and desperation he experienced early on; physicalized qualities that manifest at times in his movement style, such as seen in 'Cool' in *West Side Story*. Robbins's early archival papers include many letters to artistic directors, company managers, and fellow artists asking for opportunities to audition or pitch ideas.⁵ Markedly, some of his early breaks in the dance world came from the need for male dancers in the profession.⁶ For example, after only four ballet classes he was thrust into a partnering role with an independent professional ballerina who desperately needed a partner.⁷

Secondly, early on in his work with Sandor's company, and building on his experience in a variety of plays and operettas in high school, he began to be fascinated by the dramatic potential of the body. His interest in how to communicate through body language was consistently being deepened with every small project or nascent concept he was thinking and writing about. Deborah Jowitt, in *Jerome Robbins: His Life, His Theatre, His Dance*, explains that Sandor 'pushed dancers to think about their character's backgrounds and perform truthfully in the Stanislavskian sense.'⁸ Sandor insisted the dancers understood 'the importance of theatrical credibility,' and Robbins absorbed this advice as he continued to pursue the development of narrative and character through his own movement.⁹ The concept of believable characters stood in contrast to the pantomimic tendencies and stereotypical characters often found in ballet productions. Robbins's curiosity for realism would come to full actualization in *West Side Story*, where he consistently demanded truth and self-analysis from his performers.¹⁰ In considering the fundamentals of performance, what began as general observations, informal performance ideas, and general curiosities about the ability of the moving body to carry plot, turned into a very particular 'intuitive knowledge.' This unique creative impulse strengthened when Robbins had the opportunity to spend four summers outside of New York at Camp Tamiment in his early twenties.

Camp Tamiment

Camp Tamiment was a Catskills-like resort in Pennsylvania, nestled amongst the Poconos Mountains, where people would come to relax, play, and get away from the stresses of the city. On the grounds of the resort was the relatively large Tamiment Playhouse, which seated approximately 1,200 people – roughly the size of a Broadway theatre. Max Leibman had been established as the director since 1933 and was tasked with the massive job of putting on a new musical or revue every week for ten weeks. Performers and entertainers of all sorts would come out to work at Tamiment. While the pay was minimal, it was a professional performance job and provided room and board. Robbins was thrilled to be hired as a performer in 1936 and not return to work at the corset factory. In *Jerome Robbins: A Life in Dance*, Wendy Lesser explains it was at Camp Tamiment where Robbins came to be a 'narrative artist.'¹¹ Several factors combine to give Robbins the space to develop this mode of creative expression.

To start, the advantage of employment at the summer resort was that established professionals would join in or headline the revues for the summer season. In this capacity, Robbins, who spent his first few summer contracts in the ensemble, was able to watch, emulate, work alongside, and eventually collaborate with some key people in the field including Leibman, Danny Kaye, Carol Channing, and Imogen Coca among others. He would study their style and timing and learn from their acting choices in rehearsal and unique physicalizations in performance. In his free time, he would play around with various bits of choreography for small groups and experiment with his own ideas inspired by the musical comedies he performed in. Lesser explains the key importance of Robbins's Tamiment experience: 'beyond the dance and performance experience, he was learning something about the essence of theatricality, and it was the comedians who really taught him this.'¹² In the development of musical theatre of the time, the form was becoming increasingly solidified as to its various conventions. As the genre became more prolific in the United States, established methods of constructing successful musical shows were taking shape. Various conventions, such as the pairing of characters, structuring narrative arcs, and inserting comic foils along the way became part of the essential toolbox of writers, composers, and directors of musical theatre. The process and experience of being a cast member in a new show every week, while intense, exposed the nuts and bolts of the form, and offered up a road map to Robbins's telling of a story in the musical theatre genre. He developed an innate sense of the performative gesture and how it worked to satisfy both the needs of plots and audience expectations. Considering the string of musical theatre offerings loaded with comedic bits and shenanigans that had circulated in Robbins's formative years over the past decade, including *Girl Crazy* (1930), *Anything Goes* (1933), *On Your Toes* (1936), *Me and My Girl* (1937), *The Boys from Syracuse* (1938), etc., there was a physical impulse and dramaturgical texture that became associated with Broadway musicals. Robbins was picking up on the many nuances of the form and how his own sense of movement could work in the genre.

In this musical theatre 'boot camp,' Robbins was included in the creation of a few short pieces that were sometimes included in the shows. He was always primed to learn a new skill, figure out lifts or partnering techniques, and help move rehearsals forward.¹³ In this capacity, he became someone choreographers and directors wanted to work with – a creative problem solver (a role he would take on many times down the road on floundering shows to help out colleagues, mostly uncredited).¹⁴ From his initial role as an ensemble member, towards the end of his four summers, he was often

involved in the more formal choreography for the productions.¹⁵ For someone who was extremely self-conscious and critical of himself from an early age, Tamiment offered a safe space to explore and experiment artistically and socially. In performance, Robbins had a physical exuberance and charm that was clever and appealing to watch and brought him the needed confidence to return to the city and audition for Broadway musicals and dance companies.¹⁶

A Taste of Broadway

When Robbins returned to the city, he proceeded to network with Broadway dancers, performers, choreographers, and directors he may have worked with at Tamiment. He went to every Broadway musical audition call for ensemble members and surprisingly (to him) had little luck. He was never quite able to shake his feelings of inadequacy, focusing often on his shortcomings and the growing paranoia that he would never get another opportunity. Eventually, he got into the chorus of *Great Lady* (1938), a Broadway musical with music by Frederick Loewe. This was followed by being in the ensemble of *Stars in Your Eyes* (1939) and *Keep off the Grass* (1940). His journals cry out with the frustrations and the hard work of being in the chorus and tell of the general woe of being in the background.¹⁷ Despite his frustrations, the most key part of his chorus experiences is that George Balanchine, the rising star of the dance world, was the choreographer of *Great Lady* and *Keep off the Grass*. Robbins immediately identified the artistry in Balanchine, and closely followed his career trajectory and process and received some mentorship in return. Though Robbins's style would never be as minimal and classically derived as Balanchine's, the idea that he could dance and do choreography in both genres appealed to his creative impulse and obsessive desire to succeed on many levels. He turned his attention toward the ballet world in order to fulfill his desire to work and train amongst the best dancers.

Ballet Theatre

When Robbins heard Lucia Chase, a wealthy art lover, was set to invest in a new performance company called Ballet Theatre (which would go on to become the renowned American Ballet Theatre) Robbins was attuned to the opportunity this might present for him. True to form, he wrote letters

seeking auditions with Ballet Theatre, tried to connect with some of the dancers in the company, and used his new status as an ensemble member in a Broadway show to give him a sense of legitimacy. During out of town try-outs for *Keep off the Grass*, when he heard the nascent Ballet Theatre were holding auditions he eagerly contacted the company managers. He wrote at the time, 'I am greatly interested in joining the company – but unfortunately I will be out of town at the time for two weeks . . . I would gladly leave the show to join and rehearse for the fall season.'¹⁸ This statement demonstrates his desire to be in the company given how quickly he would give up his Broadway gig. Eventually, after many attempts at contact and auditions, he got a job as a temporary summer intern in the company. Through a combination of fortunate breaks of being in the right place at the right time and doing the work required of him, Robbins was eventually offered a position in the company in the lower ranks. This was a very opportune moment for Robbins as he was able to take advantage of all the training and daily company classes traditionally offered in a ballet company and hone his skills. This increase in his technical aptitude was helped in large part by the opportunity he had to travel with the company to Mexico City for a four-month summer residency.

Still in his early twenties, Robbins felt for the first time in his anxiety-filled life that he had found a surrogate family in the company of ballet dancers in the new American company.¹⁹ Robbins was happy, curious, and generally elated to be in Mexico City. He was at his most creative in this environment, thinking up poetry, scripts for plays, and ideas for choreography. While he was very closed off emotionally in some ways, he had an effusive and vivid internal dialogue about what he wanted to achieve as an artist. ('I will live to dance, eat to dance, sleep to dance.')20 In this formative time Robbins was beginning to get a greater understanding of the classical form (much like Tamiment had taught him about musical comedy). This appreciation built on his early impressions from seeing *Les Ballets Russes*. These new companies, though operating on shoestring budgets, were modernizing the form with each premiere. They turned the page on the classic 'white ballets' filled with women in long layers of tulle and crinolines and began to experiment with form and style. Anxious to make the Ballet Theatre as formidable artistically as *Les Ballets Russes* that had toured in the USA as early as 1916, the company toured across America to many cities of all sizes. Of note, in his time as a dancer, Robbins had first-hand experiences of all the dramas, unfair treatment, body exhaustion, and shenanigans of touring.²¹ Given this experience, one might suppose his treatment of his own dancers later on in his career would have been more

understanding; however, it seemed the intensity fueled him to work harder and be even more self-critical, obscuring an established empathy for others. These ways of being in the world do in part go back to his childhood where his mother was brutally honest to him about every poem or story he would write.²² In this capacity, he developed a very blatant sense of honesty which, like his mother's, was quite cruel. He writes in his diary, 'Sometimes I dream I am so mean I have to go to bed.'²³

At Ballet Theatre, Robbins continued to hone his craft in the ensemble. He had already shown he had the grit to endure the brutally honest experience of casting within a large company. For example, when he failed to get cast as the understudy or even the second understudy for the title role in the ballet *Petrouchka* (which would become his favourite role) he writes, 'I went to [Fokine] and asked him if please could I just study it – he didn't have to spend any time with me, just let me come to rehearsals to watch and learn the role.'²⁴ In fact, this temerity paid off and he eventually stepped into the role, and would receive tremendous recognition for his interpretation of the part over the coming years. Refusing to take no for an answer was indeed his *modus operandi*. Thankfully amongst all this self-commanding and obsession, he continually took solace in exploring his surroundings on tour.

Taking in the moods and ambience of different towns across America was a great curiosity and delight for Robbins, and opened his mind to a broader feel for the United States. He would often tour around the various towns the company stopped in, whether it was Boston, Seattle, Atlanta, or New Orleans, among others. He was taking in what all these towns had to offer including jazz music and cultural offerings. Agnes de Mille, Martha Graham, and Katherine Dunham were among others who had ventured outside of New York or Hollywood, and were exploring what it meant to be American and how that could be interpreted on stage through movement.²⁵ Robbins describes the shift happening in the United States surrounding the status and acceptance of ballet, 'a democratic people's mark on the ballet is directly evidenced in its subject matter, its dancers, and the kind of audiences that attend it.'²⁶ The touring of Les Ballets Russes followed by Ballet Theatre, along with various other dance companies throughout America, had helped democratize the form, and with lower ticket prices allowed for greater accessibility. The cross-over of artists between the previously recognized 'lowbrow' musical theatres with the 'highbrow' classical ballet helped to level out hierarchies in performance and fostered more curiosity in the form from a wider range of people. The growing interest in ballet was

reflected in musical theatre, and had been for a while, when you consider musicals such as *On Your Toes* (1936) or *I Married an Angel* (1938), both choreographed by George Balanchine. The inclusion of ballet in musicals was to become a substantial turn for the genre that would take firm hold for the next several decades. Robbins was to be part of this shift and, as developed on tour, already had his nascent ideas for a short ballet about three sailors visiting New York City.

Fancy Free and On the Town

Robbins was so eager to impress and officially start his career as a choreographer at Ballet Theatre with this potential new piece about sailors' shore leave that he continued to write letters and make pleas for the opportunity to put the ballet together formally with support from the company, rather than in his spare time. Once he finally gets a chance to rehearse his ballet, he writes in a letter to the company manager, promising, 'I'll dig in like crazy and the poor kids who work for me will not have felt a lash like mine.'²⁷ This statement exposes a culture of the artistic figure-head as disciplinarian. That Robbins felt, in order to pitch his idea, that he would also promise to work the dancers extremely hard is troublesome and is demonstrative of his growing desperation to carve out an artistic identity for himself. His eagerness to please and prove himself comes at a cost to his connection to dancers on an equal level (as one himself). At this point, there is already the development of an intensity of labor that comes to colour his process for the rest of his career.

Returning to the composition itself, Robbins explains much of his inspiration came from Paul Cadmus's 1934 painting *The Fleet's In!*; though he found it too crude.²⁸ Indeed, the painting of the scene of sailors' debauchery on shore leave caused quite a scandal when it came out. Robbins's *Fancy Free* seemed to make much effort to keep a youthful exuberance and curiosity to the characters and stays away from the raunchier ideas set forth in Cadmus's work. In fact, there is much more of a feeling of fellowship between the sailors. Lesser describes the camaraderie between the sailors as 'palpable,' and indeed it is this playfulness that is at the heart of the piece.²⁹ This quality is important to note for several reasons. Firstly, classical ballet at the time was experimenting with structure and form and these very forthright narrative or story telling qualities were not the norm in the new ballets. Secondly, the reservedness about the sexuality, he in fact embraces a year later in *Facsimile*.

The basic premise of *Fancy Free* is fairly simple: three sailors are on shore leave, they enjoy a fanciful night on the town pursuing women and good times. The men quickly come in contact with two women and the three men dance with them in a collection of duets. However, one man always is left out, or is found dancing alone. As a way of solving their dilemma the men hold a competition where each does a dance and the women choose the victor. Structurally, the unique strategy built into the piece is the odd number of performers. This unevenness is quite unusual in ballet, known for its many identical rows of swans, sylphs, etc., not to mention the conventional *pas de deux*, *quatre*, or *six*.³⁰ With the stage never seeming balanced, Robbins creates a jagged edginess to the moment that seems to be heading for a resolution, but never does. This effect creates a sense of anticipation or urgency and propels the piece forward, a strategy that carries through in *West Side Story*, in the opening prologue and elsewhere. Conversely, given Robbins's unshakable sense of disconnect with his peers and his own strict self-judgment, there is a tinge of sadness cast upon the one always being left out. Adding to the complexity in *Fancy Free*, the ballet is filled with canons, meaning, one dancer performs a move, which is then repeated by the next dancer and so on creating a sort of waterfall effect of the step occurring numerous times. Robbins did not invent this effect; however, his use of canons in *Fancy Free* adds a unique dimension as each sailor has an individual character as shown by how the move is interpreted with slight differences by each dancer. Markedly, as the canon is performed with an uneven number of dancers, and in combination with Bernstein's provocative score, the piece has a pulsing expectancy or promise that increases as the piece moves forward. Lesser explains the effect, 'This refusal to fall into neatly aligned symmetries and predictable matchups make the dance everlastingly interesting.'³¹ Robbins's style has many moments of classical vocabulary juxtaposed with off-kilter shoulder, hips thrusts, and Latin stylings. There is no attempt to disguise the ballet elements, they appear as punctuation throughout. For example, in one of the early duets, *chassées* and *pas de bourrées* lead into a lift in *attitude* position, when only moments earlier the dancers had been doing a sharp snake hips-like section.³² This obvious use of ballet moves alongside jazzy or invented steps becomes a signature of Robbins's style. Ballet audiences were unaccustomed to combinations of lyrical or romantic movement juxtaposed with more upbeat popular styles. The insertion of sharp, hot moves onto the concert ballet stage, not to mention the wearing of character shoes (heels) by the women launches *Fancy Free* into a league of its own. This insertion of more racy moves, seen in hip rolls, shoulder shimmies,

and a more grounded sense of movement helped to modernize and sensualize the ethereal and lifted body posture of classical ballet. Overall, *Fancy Free*'s gestural and narrative style builds from moments of sheer virtuosity, tender silences, thrilling bravado, and a general salute to the comraderies of the three sailors, each with a distinct personality.

Fancy Free stood out amongst the ballet company's other offerings at the time and on 18 April 1944, the twenty-nine minute ballet was a near instant success. In its time *Fancy Free* offered a snapshot of New York City outside the doors of the theatre, or a postcard of the city for audiences on the company's extensive tours, and audiences and critics alike were very receptive. Reconsidered today, however, *Fancy Free* has its limitations, specifically surrounding the male–female stereotypes as well as the harassing actions of the men disguised as playful shenanigans. Lea Marshall, writing for *Dance Magazine* in 2019, suggests it may be time to retire *Fancy Free* from the repertoire. She explains, 'The ballet hasn't aged well, especially in the wake of #metoo. It's a study in rape culture.'³³ The pursuit of the women by the men, which involves hip thrusts aplenty, and a variety of grabs of body parts, though not championed in 1945, would likely be disapproved of in today's social climate and the suggestion of the repetition of the cycle at the end of the piece, despite the women being fed up with the men's antics, is also problematic.³⁴ The historical distance may offer an out for Robbins, and, considering he was choreographing for the *zeitgeist* of his time, the blame cannot rest entirely with him for the overt womanizing in the piece. Marshall, however, does not forgive this, noting, 'Robbins knew women don't relish this kind of behaviour from men. But he still made a comedy out of it.'³⁵

Just over six months after the premiere of *Fancy Free*, essentially an intimate concert ballet piece, Robbins's concept became the inspiration for a Broadway musical. In a moment of unique collaboration, Betty Comden, Adolph Green, Leonard Bernstein, and Robbins teamed up to create *On the Town*, which premiered at the close of 1944. Robbins was deeply immersed in the whirlwind of creating a piece that would come to have many achievements on Broadway at the time, one of the most integral being the desegregation of the cast and crew and incorporation of a more diverse team on and off stage. This is particularly poignant in the hiring of Japanese dancer Sono Osato.³⁶

The necessary changes in the transformation of the short ballet into a full-length musical, however, were illuminating to Robbins in regard to

his aesthetics as a ‘narrative artist.’ When the piece was developed to an evening-length musical and directed by the renowned George Abbott, the most decisive element of the movement that was lost in the choreography was its ‘free-floating timeless charm.’³⁷ The whimsical off-centeredness was squared up and most substantially, due to the conventions in the genre of musical theatre at the time (and often continuing today), there was a decided resolution to the piece in the final grouping of happy couples. The distinct conclusion to the musical drew away the ambiguity in the piece for Robbins. Moreover, Robbins was confronted with the decisive workings of a director and experienced a loss of the control he had cultivated in bringing *Fancy Free* to its feet. Abbott, a formidable talent with over a dozen Broadway shows under his belt, had a ‘disciplined, forthright, pragmatic approach to directing’ which did not mesh with Robbins’s own singular way of working and brought much conflict in the run up to the opening.³⁸ Additionally, from a narrative point of view, and though he had been in several Broadway musicals himself, the introduction of singing seemed to shore up the grey areas of the characters’ personalities and make them more black and white. For Robbins, the increasingly stereotypical characters removed any room for more individualized interpretations. As Lesser describes, ‘the verbal obviousness crushes what was delicate and unspoken in dance.’³⁹

The discordant experience for Robbins of joining of song and dance may have been instrumental in developing how he was to make a lasting impact in musical theatre. Robbins would continue to seek out moments where he could recapture the voiceless ballet quality, as is seen in the ‘Prologue’ of *West Side Story* or the ‘Chavaleh Sequence’ in *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964). Though the sounds and sensibilities of Broadway, including jazz and vernacular dance, was so influential to him, one of the basic tenets of ballet – story-telling through mimetic narrative – remained one of his key tools.

A Decade of Work

Fundamentally, with the success of *On the Town*, Robbins was able to share his time and artistic development between Broadway and ballet. Jowitz sums up the arrangement: ‘the former subsidized the latter.’⁴⁰ *Fancy Free* received a prominent place in the Ballet Theatre repertoire, along with commissions for others, and his Broadway projects over the next ten years were in a constant flow. The diverse creative opportunities and challenges in both genres appealed to Robbins and having some financial security

from his Broadway endeavors allowed him to do both. Robbins continued to develop his skills at bringing narratives to life through movement in a string of memorable musicals including: *Billion Dollar Baby* (1946), *High Button Shoes* (1947), *Look, Ma, I'm Dancing!* (1948), *Miss Liberty* (1949), *Call Me Madam* (1950), *The King and I* (1951), and *Peter Pan* (1954), where he assumed the role of director, after successfully co-directing *Look, Ma* with Abbott. As Robbins gained more experience on Broadway he began to work methodologically with the goal to have 'dances that made logical sense, supported dramatic intent, and provided a stylistic continuum from the Libretto.'⁴¹ These goals sustained a string of mostly successful musicals and allowed for a productive and lucrative career for Robbins. Uniquely, it was his work in the ballet world, happening in tandem with his Broadway hits, that allowed him the freedom to experiment with deviations from the standard fare. In his ballet work he explored more ambiguous topics and aesthetic challenges of the form that would eventually fuse with the more popular styles he was using in musical theatre – a coming together that fully materializes in *West Side Story*.

The second ballet Robbins did for Ballet Theatre with Bernstein, before moving over to the newly formed New York City Ballet with Balanchine at the helm in 1949, was *Facsimile*. A brief glance at this three-person ballet gives some insight into Robbins and his process. While Robbins wanted a 'human aspect to emerge' in all his ballets he still was able to be much more abstract than in musicals.⁴² Robbins used three dancers in the piece, one of them being himself. *Facsimile* has been called 'the first ballet about contemporary neuroses' by *New York Times* dance critic Anna Kisselgoff.⁴³ The ballet takes a much more urgent approach to a love triangle that is toyed with in moments in *Fancy Free*. Jowitt describes how Robbins was 'primarily intent on bringing out the superficiality of these people's lives and desires, the idleness that leads them into potentially harmful games.'⁴⁴ In an about face from his previous works, sexuality and eroticism are the modes of communication, laden with a sense of despondency and cruelty. *Facsimile* ends with the female dancer crying out 'Stop!' leaving an uneasy aura haunting the space (foreshadowing Maria's final cry at the end of *West Side Story*). John Martin describes the unlikeable characters in his review of the premiere, 'Without inner resources of any sort, they play around dangerously in the realm of psychological thrills. The argument of the piece is simply that Mr. Robbins doesn't approve of them.'⁴⁵ The erratic emotional realm created by the dancers, listed in the program as 'three insecure people,' does not come out again in Robbins's work until much later when he returns full time to the ballet world: in 1965 with American

Ballet Theatre, and in 1969 the New York City Ballet. I mention *Facsimile* because after its premiere, Robbins moves away from the exploration of neuroses or dysfunction, and does *Pas de Trois* (1947) and *Summer Day* (1947) before moving over to New York City Ballet. Even so, I suggest this physicalized leeriness, or depleted cynicism, and overt eroticism pulses within the visceral choreography in *West Side Story*, a quality not generally found in his more popular works and which can perhaps be traced to this moment of exploring the more corrupt or selfish aspects of humanity, some of which he may have seen in himself.⁴⁶

Though Robbins retired from dancing in 1952, he continued creating work with the New York City Ballet. He made numerous very unusual ballets, including *Age of Anxiety* (1949) based on the poem by W. H. Auden and Bernstein's 1948 symphony of the same name, where the dancers wear fencing masks, and which explores reflections of the self and 'emotional emptiness,' and *The Guests* (1959) about inner and outer circles of society; both ballets can be seen to inhabit some of his own anxieties. In 1950, he created *The Cage*, about man-eating female insects, which is hailed as an experimental breakthrough in its non-human narrative, though generally discomfiting in its complexities around sexual rites and initiations.⁴⁷ His interpretation of *Afternoon of a Faun* in 1953 is well-received, and praised for its dream-like quality and musicality. He does not return to the raw and troublesome world of *Facsimile* in ballet until later in his career, but a unique manifestation of physicalized anxieties and passions permeates his work in *West Side Story*.⁴⁸

An Idea Long in the Making

West Side Story, originally titled *East Side Story*, had been an idea brewing between collaborators from as early as 1949. Robbins had pitched the idea of an updated *Romeo and Juliet* to his friends Arthur Laurents and Bernstein. Robbins was thinking through the different warring factions that could be pitted next to each other, perhaps Jewish and Catholic? Though the project was put aside, due to other commitments and the collaborators never coming to an agreement about the groups involved, the idea was never abandoned. As the story goes, newspaper headlines about juvenile delinquents sparring on US streets caught Robbins's attention. Jowitt describes, 'Robbins agreed ... that ethnicity rather than religion should be the crux, and gangs, rather than families, the antagonists. The Jewish kids became Puerto Rican and the Italian gang a mix of European

stock.⁴⁹ When the group was able to get going on the project, work began on the musical.⁵⁰

Robbins worked the dancers extraordinarily hard. He demanded constant soul-searching and full commitment to the physical and psychological demands of the show. Dancers tell tales of the harsh conditions of rehearsals, some bragging, others complaining. Robbins pit one group of dancers against the other so tensions were felt both on and off stage. His ability to physicalize the agitation, stress, anxiety, and adrenaline of the Jets and the Sharks, alongside the tenderness and passion of Tony and Maria, was unprecedented. As Chapter 14 in this volume will explore, Robbins championed the ensemble as physical story-tellers and created actable, intuitive, and raw movement, boldly juxtaposing ballet, jazz, and popular dances of the moment – a confluence of genres, but also of the complicated experiences disciplining his mind and body – to achieve all he desperately wanted in life.

Robbins's way of working stemmed from a narrative investigation of movement forged in a unique time when ballet was modernizing and musical theatre was discovering the dramatic potential of dance. As the years went by, the choreographer said he was more interested in a world 'where things are not named,' and his exploration of ballet's classical idioms became more abstract and profound.⁵¹ His sister Sonia, Senya Gluck Sandor, Max Leibman, George Balanchine, Mikel Fokine, Leonard Bernstein, Betty Comden, Adolph Green, George Abbott, Arthur Laurents and others were mentors and collaborators who were part of Robbins's journey to what some say is his grandest accomplishment – *West Side Story*. Robbins engaged with people where he could; however, his anxiety and self-doubt pushed him to be more of an authoritarian over the work and he was decidedly not the easiest man to work with. What never changed, however, was his consistent awareness of the body in motion and the dramatic potential of dance. He astutely remarks at age twenty-seven:

And as the ballet and the theatre draw closer to each other, an exciting prospect opens in which not only musicals, but theatre pieces with vital ideals, will combine drama, dance and music, to the benefit of all three.⁵²

Foretelling his work in *West Side Story* and eerily prophesying the creative intersections beyond his lifetime and into the twenty-first century, Robbins's legacy lives on in the collaborations and complexities across musical theatre, ballet, and theatre today.

Notes

1. Jerome Robbins, 'My Selves: An Attempt to Express My Character as I See It by Jerry Rabinowitz, English 12' in Amanda Vaill's *Jerome Robbins, by Himself: Selections from His Letters, Journals, Drawings, Photographs, and an Unfinished Memoir* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 20.
2. Wendy Lesser, *Jerome Robbins: A Life in Dance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 7.
3. Amanda Vaill, 'A Biography in Brief,' Jeromerobbins.org, 2001. <http://jeromerobbins.org/a-biography-in-brief/>.
4. Robbins does not engage with his Jewishness in significant detail prior to *West Side Story*. He was keen to be assimilated amongst others, as was common for first generation youth at the time. Deborah Jowitt describes his fear of anti-Semitism, 'He had been brought up to believe to be a Jew meant to be in constant danger.' Jowitt, *Jerome Robbins: His Life, His Theater, His Dance* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 20. He returns to explore his Jewishness later in his career. For further information see Jowitt's Chapter 16, 'The Sixties – Fiddler on the Roof.'
5. See Amanda Vaill's *Jerome Robbins, by Himself* for the most recent collection of and information on Robbins's archival materials.
6. Robbins had the advantage of being white, which at the time was very much the casting norm on Broadway. Only as recently as 1933, five years before Robbins began working on New York stages, had a Black dancer (Buddy Bradley) performed on stage with white dancers, and that was in London, the fashion not yet acceptable on Broadway. For more on Bradley, as a choreographer and dancer, and the challenges of being a Black artist in the 1930s and 40s, see Chapter 21 in Marshall and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 160–69.
7. Vaill, *Jerome Robbins by Himself*, 31–33.
8. Jowitt, 18.
9. *Ibid.*, 18.
10. See Dustyn Martincich's chapter in this collection (Chapter 14) for more on Robbins's creative process in *West Side Story*.
11. Lesser, 9.
12. *Ibid.*, 9.
13. Excerpts from his diary outline his declaration of dance as his religion, see Vaill's *Jerome Robbins, by Himself*, 31.
14. *Wonderful Town* (1953) is one such show where Robbins helped out choreographer Donald Saddler with the more physical and athletic moments of the show.
15. Vaill, *Jerome Robbins, by Himself*, 22.
16. Lesser.

17. Vaill, *Jerome Robbins, by Himself*.
18. Excerpts from a letter titled 'To Company Management, Ballet Theatre' in Vaill's *Jerome Robbins, by Himself*, 44.
19. It is during his time with Sandor's company that Robbins reports in his diaries of his first homosexual experience. He does not openly discuss his sexuality and experiences and considerable anxiety builds up around the issue which would continue throughout his career. See Jowitt, 24.
20. Journal entry titled 'Journal 1939, October 28 4 A.M.,' Vaill, *Jerome Robbins, by Himself*, 41.
21. Vaill, *Jerome Robbins, by Himself*.
22. Lesser, 6.
23. Vaill, *Jerome Robbins, by Himself*, 9.
24. Diary excerpt 'Training, July 17, 1976' in Vaill, *Jerome Robbins, by Himself*, 60.
25. Dunham ventured outside of the United States entirely, bringing Caribbean and African influences to her work and training methods. For more on Dunham's contribution to dance in the United States and globally see Joanna Dee Das, *Katherine Dunham: Dance and the African Diaspora* (Oxford University Press, 2017).
26. Jerome Robbins, 'The Ballet Puts on Dungarees: A Choreographer Describes How Ballet Has Emerged from the Hothouse and Become America's People's Entertainment,' *The New York Times*, 14 October 1945: SM9.
27. Vaill, *Jerome Robbins, by Himself*, 71.
28. Lesser, 17.
29. Lesser, 21.
30. Two, four, six.
31. Lesser, 21.
32. From the ballet repertoire: a *chassée* is a traveling step where the body glides forward or to the side with knees bent and feet turned out. *Pas de bourrée* is a series of small steps generally used to link together steps. A lift in *attitude* is an overhead lift where the dancer lifted has one leg straight and one leg extended behind them in a bent position.
33. Lea Marshall, Op-Ed: 'Is It Time to Retire *Fancy Free*?' *Dance Magazine*, 19 April 2019, www.dancemagazine.com/fancy-free-ballet-2634991525.html. Accessed 30 July 2020.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. For more on the diversifying of cast and crew in *On the Town* see Carol Oja's *Bernstein Meets Broadway: Collaborative Art in the Time of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
37. Lesser, 25.
38. Barbara Wallace Grossman, 'Musical Theatre Directors' in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*. Edited by Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Wolf (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 283.

39. Lesser, 26.
40. Jowitt, 120.
41. Liza Gennaro, 'Evolution of Dance in the Golden Age of the American "Book Musical"' in *The Oxford Handbook of The American Musical*. Edited by Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Wolf (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 52.
42. 'Jerome Robbins at New York City Ballet,' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rigl9ejpuV4> Peter Martins. Accessed 24 August 2020.
43. Anna Kisselgoff, 'Jerome Robbins, 79 is Dead: A Giant of Ballet and Broadway,' *The New York Times*, 30 July 1998, A1.
44. Jowitt, 124.
45. John Martin, 'Facsimile Ballet has its Premiere Here,' *The New York Times*, 25 October 1946: 36.
46. Robbins was a member of the Communist party in his early career, as were numerous artists at the time. Many of his colleagues were blacklisted and suffered the loss of opportunities and, thus, finances, while Robbins continued working and spent much time out of sight in Europe. When he was no longer unable to avoid testifying in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), he named many of his colleagues, a choice he thought was right at the time but came to plague him his entire life. He later claimed his choices involved not wanting his homosexuality made public; however, there is continued debate around his motives. As Greg Lawrence reports, in the words of Robbins's colleague James Mitchell, 'He was living in some kind of dream world. Who didn't know?' Lawrence, *Dance with Demons: The Life of Jerome Robbins* (New York: Putnam and Sons, 2001), Preface.
47. Lesser, 32. For more on *Age of Anxiety*, see Lesser, 28–38, and for *The Cage*, 56–68.
48. Additional ballets include: *Ballade* (1952), *Fanfare* (1953), and *The Concert* (1956). For a thorough chronology of all of Robbins's ballets and musicals see Vaill, *Jerome Robbins, by Himself*, 391–407.
49. Jowitt, 267.
50. For a thorough telling of the building and early days of *West Side Story*, see Elizabeth Wells's chapter, 'From *Gangway!* to Broadway: Genesis of the Musical' in Wells, *West Side Story: Cultural Perspectives on an American Musical* (Plymouth, UK: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2011), 27–53.
51. www.nytimes.com/1998/07/30/theater/jerome-robbins-79-is-dead-giant-of-ballet-and-broadway.html
52. Jerome Robbins, 'The Ballet Puts on Dungarees,' 1945.