

Jerome Robbins

Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered History in America, 2004

Born: October 11, 1918 in New York, New York, United States

Died: July 29, 1998 in New York, New York, United States

Nationality: American

ROBBINS, Jerome (b. 11 October 1918; d. 29 July 1998), dancer, choreographer, director.

Born Jerome Rabinowitz in New York City to Russian-Jewish immigrants who had fled the pogroms, Robbins was still small when his family moved to Weehawken, New Jersey, where his father opened a delicatessen and later became a corset manufacturer. Robbins and his only sibling, older sister Sonia, studied music and dance at the Gluck Sandor studios. He attended New York University for a single year, then began intensive study in ballet and modern dance.

He joined the American Ballet Theater in 1940 and debuted as a soloist in *Petrouchka* in 1942. On 18 April 1944, Robbins premiered his breakthrough choreographic success, the character ballet *Fancy Free*, set to a commissioned score by Leonard Bernstein. The patriotic work featured three sailors on a day of shore leave in New York City who pursue two women in a high-spirited format of comic vignettes and challenge dances. An immediate success, the work was expanded into the hit Broadway musical *On the Town*, which opened 28 December 1944.

Robbins's choreographic style combined popular social dance movements with classical ballet to under-score the dramatic impulse of dance for its characters. From then on, he maintained fertile and highly successful parallel careers as a director and choreographer of ballets and Broadway musicals.

Robbins's exceptional Broadway work encompassed several of the most important musicals of the twentieth century. He staged inventive dances for *Billion Dollar Baby* (1945), *High Button Shoes* (1947), *Look, Ma, I'm Dancin'* (1948), *Call Me Madam* (1950), and *The King and I* (1951), among others, then moved to directing and choreographing musicals on a level of unprecedented stagecraft and narrative flow. His productions of *Peter Pan* (1954), *Bells Are Ringing* (1956), *West Side Story* (1957), *Gypsy* (1959), and *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964) achieved an extravagant integration of dance, music, and character development.

West Side Story, written with gay and bisexual collaborators Bernstein (composer), Stephen Sondheim (lyricist), and Arthur Laurents (librettist), retold the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet as an encounter between rival New York City street gangs. Its jazz-inflected yet operatic score and balletic dance sequences described an ineffable angst among feuding Italian and Puerto Rican teenagers. *Fiddler on the Roof*, inspired by Sholom Aleichem stories, explored Jewish cultural heritage through the story of Tevye, a poor Russian dairyman, and his attempts to preserve tradition among his family of five daughters. Robbins revisited his Broadway successes with the staging of *Jerome Robbins' Broadway* (1989), a retrospective of his greatest dance numbers.

Robbins's choreographic success in ballet included works that mingled social dance styles with classical form, as in *Interplay* (1945), and extended theatrical possibilities of the idiom, as in the unexpected vocalized scream of the ballerina in *Facsimile* (1946), a work about a love triangle between two men and a woman. In 1948, Robbins joined the newly created New York City Ballet at George Balanchine's invitation and attracted critical acclaim dancing the title character in Balanchine's *Prodigal Son*. In the next decade he created a series of important ballets that explored gesture, character, and repressed desire framed in a patent theatricality, including *Age of Anxiety* (1950), based on a W. H. Auden poem with music by Bernstein; *The*

Cage (1951), about a tribe of man-eating female insects; *Moves* (1955), an abstract group work without music; *Afternoon of a Faun* (1953), an oblique erotic encounter by dancers in a rehearsal studio; and *The Concert* (1956), a campy spoof of a classical music concert.

In 1958, Robbins formed a short-lived pick-up company, Ballets: USA, for which he created several works, including *New York Export: Opus Jazz* (1958) and *Events* (1961). He returned to the New York City Ballet, where he remained until 1990, when he gave his official farewell at the Festival of Jerome Robbins's Ballets. Among his more than fifty ballets for that company are many significant offerings, including *Dances at a Gathering* (1969), *The Goldberg Variations* (1971), *Watermill* (1972), *Dybbuk Variations* (1974), and *Glass Pieces* (1983).

Firmly closeted and deeply ambivalent about his sexuality, Robbins had brief affairs with many men and women, including the actor Montgomery Clift, the dancer Buzz Miller, the dancer Christine Conrad, the filmmaker Warren Sonbert, and the artist Jesse Gerstein. A self-proclaimed perfectionist, he earned the enmity of nearly all of his collaborators for his virulent emotional manipulations in the rehearsal hall.

In 1953, Robbins testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee, naming names of various Communist Party members, apparently in order to avoid public disclosure of his homosexuality. In general, his work tended to treat sexual identity as a catalyst for violence, as in *The Cage* and *Events* (the latter depicting the rape of a man), although *Watermill* (1972) offered, to some audiences, a visual meditation on a solo male dancer's physical beauty. Robbins died after a stroke in July 1998.

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Further Readings

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