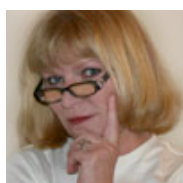




Jerome Robbins

Something to Dance About



Melissa Berry

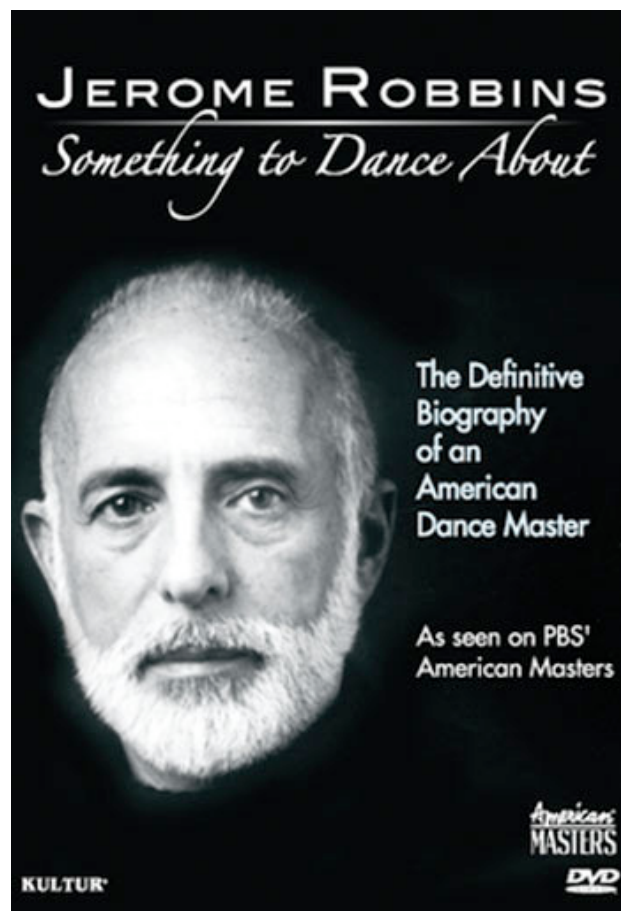
Contributing Writer

After repeatedly watching the first and only full-length eponymous documentary, *Jerome Robbins: Something to Dance About*, I just knew I could dance — just listen to the music and start moving. I was drunk was terpsichorean

fever. I wanted to go the barre and order a pair of toe (pointe) shoes -- “straight up”; that was my fantasy while watching Jerome Robbins’s reality. I can’t dance, except to dance in my heart and head with stunned admiration of those lucky enough to actually have been touched in some way by Jerome Robbins for more than a nanosecond — not only dance but then some, as this documentary proves. Jerome Robbins’s own infinite creative genius has affected our world for decades and lives on with the results touching someone, somewhere, somehow every day.

Jerome Robbins: Something to Dance About

explores his life and work, revealing the dichotomies between the two. The first time I watched it through, it was wonderful, but then every successive time, it got darker and more layered. He was a difficult taskmaster, reviled by some colleagues. Although he was a man routinely described as a genius, he struggled throughout his life with profound insecurity about his talent. Nobody says “genius” is easy. Stephen Sondheim equated Robbins’s genius with “endless invention which sometimes restrained him from his own talent.”



In the beginning of the documentary, in a jittery fragment of old film, a young man dances on a New York rooftop, whirling and jumping as he grins for the camera, bursting with confidence and possibility. He is Jerome Robbins, and this documentary goes with him on his journey that was to lead to an unprecedented career in ballet and musical theater, but that day he was just a kid who loved to dance. “Art was like a tunnel to me,” Robbins wrote of his youth. “At the end of the tunnel, I could see light.”

Written by Amanda Vaill and directed by Judy Kinberg, *Something to Dance About* intersperses its dance excerpts with a wealth of interviews with those who knew Robbins — writers, dancers, artistic colleagues, friends. We also are privy to his artistic works of endless illustrated journals expressing his involvement with life. They are so tender and romantic in the tradition of the Romantic Poets, that we’re reminded of William Blake and his “Songs of Innocence” with his accompanying illustrations. Robbins continued creating his illustrated journals into adulthood as though he were so full of inspiration and creativity that he needed endlessly diverse ways to express it, as we see in his broad spectrum of contributions to dance. With his private life often referred to as “tortured,” movement, it seems, was the only place this troubled man found ease...and it became his gift to the world. His approach and ability to create dance involved all forms. Classical training changed his life, but he was not a heroic classical dancer -- he was so much more. There was a taste of Agnes DeMille flavored with a hint of Isadora Duncan. He was not just a choreographer but a wonderful stager, according to Stephen Sondheim in recounting the staging for the song “There Once Was a Woman” in *Pajama Game*. It’s a song that requires a lot of movement but had two leads who really weren’t much of dancers. Robbins was able to stage it in such a way that even they seemed to be able to dance.



Recently, in honor of Mr. Robbins’s 90th birthday, The Jerome Robbins Celebration began on April 29th of this year with an extraordinary one-time-only Spring Gala performance featuring *Circus Polka*, *The Four Seasons*, and *West Side Story Suite*. Many of the original cast members were present to recreate their original rolls.

I was fortunate enough to meet with choreographer/dancer Grover Dale who was a dancer in the original Broadway cast of *West Side Story*. After *West Side Story*, Mr. Dale continued working with Jerome Robbins on a number of projects. In 1958, he assisted him with Ballets U.S.A.; in 1967–68 at the American Theatre Lab; and in 1989 co-directed the award winning *Jerome Robbins Broadway*.



Chatting with Mr. Dale and listening to his stories of the ups and downs, ins and outs, and the intensity of work and dedication demanded of the cast leading to the opening night of this iconic show was mind-boggling. As Mr. Dale referred to it: The Robbins Experience.

Melissa Berry: The obvious question: Your first Broadway show as a dancer was *West Side Story* with Jerome Robbins. This was a man whose work was so timely that it became timeless, as proved by this current “re-envisioning” of this current production. Tell me about it...and don't leave anything out!

Grover Dale: In 1984, I watched Jerry being interviewed on an early morning TV show. He talked about his motives for doing *West Side Story*. He wanted the show to say something about the “futility of intolerance.” Wow. Everything about his contribution to the show came together at once. It's 25 years later, and I'm finally realizing what he gave us. For starters, he replaced an opening song, “Rocket To The Moon,” with a prologue that delivered an “inciting incident” within 45 seconds of the curtain going up. Without words, he showed us the unity that mattered most to a gang of street kids. When the first intruder arrived, he showed us how easily minor irritations can get out of hand and grow into violence and tragic consequences for an entire neighborhood, community, city, or nation. Alas, little of this is orchestrated in the current Broadway revival. For the first time in Broadway history, 30 unknown dancers were cast to illuminate a dramatic story that would test the acting abilities of seasoned actors. Robbins made that happen.

MB: There you were — this inexperienced young dancer from a small town — suddenly in this high-octane environment. How long was it before you realized what you were truly enmeshed in and the intensity of what was expected of you?

GD: As a skinny tap dancer still wet behind the ears, I showed up at the first rehearsal with knee pads, jazz sandals, and all nine of Snowboy's lines memorized. Thinking my ducks were in a row, I soon learned otherwise. When Jerome Robbins started demanding details about the background of our characters, I sensed the arrival of a painful experience. Turning to Tony Mordente, I quietly admitted I didn't know what Big Daddy was talking about. “Never admit that!” Tony snapped back, “He'll destroy you. Watch how I handle this...” My education about holding onto a job was about to begin. In less than a minute, Tony's wild description of how his character, “Arab,” justifies stealing money from his father to buy cigarettes for his buddies, had Robbins nodding to his assistants with approval.

Looking back, it's fair to say that *West Side Story* was “life-altering,” not only for me but for most of the original cast. Few of us understood that we were going to work every day with geniuses — four of them. Thirty-two dancers rehearsing with Robbins, Bernstein, Sondheim, and Laurents. How often does that happen?

MB: “He’ll destroy you”? Seeking approval? These have a sense of foreshadowing with a tone of what could be some pretty ominous if not bleak events.

GD: Every dancer in the cast competed for Robbins’s approval. A few did it well. Most fell flat on their faces. Little did we know how rarely he gave it... even to himself. Thanks to Mickey Callin’s blunder (he played “Riff”), I got my second lesson. Never boast about being a tap dancer within ear shot of Big Daddy. Mickey learned the hard way. A few days later, as we rehearsed version four of the “Cool” dance, sounds of another actor auditioning for Mickey’s role wafted up from the studio below. In silence, Mickey swallowed a bitter pill. His performance levels spiked with a new sense of urgency. The replacement never happened.

MB: Fear seems to be the method of choice to get the desired results from the cast. Were there times where you felt maybe you’d escape this?

GD: I knew it was only a matter of time until I’d hear someone in the studio below auditioning for my part. It wasn’t until the show played the National Theatre in Washington, DC that the fear waned. The exact moment happened when Larry Kert showed me a copy of the first *West Side Story* ad in the *Sunday New York Times*. For some unknown reason, my name was there along with featured players Mickey Callin, Tony Mordente, Eddie Roll, Lee Becker, and David Winters. Whew! Am I safe? If they were going to fire me, they sure as hell wouldn’t have added my name! Years later, I learned that Robbins had suggested it.

MB: What about the “falling off the stage” legend? I’ve heard so many versions of it — where it was, how it really happened; the mythology of this incident begs clarification, and you were there!

GD: It was during the Philadelphia tryout that the incident of Jerry falling backwards off the stage occurred during a note session. The explanation heard most often implies that no one alerted him about the danger he was in — that the cast’s silence was intentional. Not true. Robbins’s notes were delivered with such intensity that you couldn’t look away from him. In the heat of his tirade, we stood there frozen. No one saw how close he was to the edge of the stage until he dropped out of sight. We rushed to the edge of the stage. Like all survivors, he scrambled back up onto his feet and demanded we get back to our places. He had more notes.



MB: Well, I'm glad the air is finally cleared about that, because otherwise, the cast sounds just too vindictive. There must have been some way to his heart.

GD: In 1967, I shot footage of Jerry improvising with children and dogs on the beach at Bridgehampton. Watching him soften at the sight of a playful dog or a child was far different than watching him at rehearsals pointing out the weaknesses of others.

As a man with nuances, no other creative figure of the latter twentieth century was as contradictory as Jerome Robbins, and few were as controversial. Always interested in community, he was invested in "getting truth through performance" – posing tradition against myth and superstition, as seen in *West Side Story* and *Fiddler on the Roof*. He was a master of the Broadway musical, transforming its possibilities with such works as *Gypsy*, *The King and I*, and *On the Town*. He was also one of the greatest ballet choreographers this country has ever produced, as we're shown in this documentary through snippets of his great ballets, made during his many years at New York City Ballet with George Balanchine, with special focus on his lyrical masterpiece, "Dances at a Gathering."

Jerome Robbins: Something to Dance About sums up perfectly what Mr. Robbins once said to Irving Berlin:

"Give me something to dance about, and I'll dance it."

