

# The ballets

## Jerome Robbins' ballets are living proof of an uncompromising, unforgettable choreographic voice. By Dr Michelle Potter.

The story of Jerome Robbins in Australia goes back at least to 1958 when New York City Ballet made its historic first visit to Australia. Three ballets choreographed by Robbins were part of that season: *Afternoon of a Faun*, *The Cage* and *Interplay*. All were worlds apart from the European-inspired works with which Australian audiences were familiar from their own Borovansky Ballet. *Faun* had narcissistic undercurrents and a hint of eroticism. There was the distinctly predatory nature of *The Cage*. And *Interplay* had an unusually casual quality. Was this American ballet?

In the early 1960s, not long after New York City Ballet had left its indelible mark, audiences in Melbourne and Sydney flocked to see the stage musical *West Side Story*, which Robbins co-directed and choreographed. It had opened on Broadway in 1957 and now, just a few years later, was on the Australian stage. Based loosely on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, it felt familiar even if its references to gang warfare and racial tensions between the opposing gangs, the Jets and the Sharks, were a little startling. *West Side Story*'s huge success was in large part due to the uncompromising choreographic voice of Jerome Robbins. Its leaps and turns for the men in the cast led one commentator to remark that there seemed to be "T (for testosterone) in the air," while its freshness and finger-snapping jazziness left audiences buoyant. In *West Side Story*, as in so many of his other well-known works for the musical and ballet stage, Robbins showed his unerring ability to create a sense of time, place and mood through movement. And like Robbins' signature ballet *Fancy Free*, which he made in 1944 about three sailors on shore leave, it had a down-to-earth quality and an intelligence in its staging and choreography that has stood the test of time.

Since those first few years of exposure, Australians have enjoyed Robbins in many situations. *Faun* entered The Australian Ballet repertoire in 1978. Other ballets followed: *The Concert* in 1979, *In the Night* in 1985 and *Other Dances* in 2001. And most theatre goers will have seen one or other of his Broadway creations, either onstage or in a film adaptation. Some are household names: *The King and I*, *Gypsy* and *Fiddler on the Roof*. Robbins is a choreographer who is at home in many environments.

But in 2008, as the dance world remembers the tenth anniversary of Robbins' death, how can we describe the intrinsic qualities of his choreographic voice? The four works which make up the Australian Ballet's own tribute, *The Concert*, *The Cage*, *Afternoon of a Faun* and *A Suite of Dances*, highlight the diversity of styles and infinite variety of approaches to creativity that characterise Robbins' choreographic output. There is diversity in mood and in the reactions that those moods generate, for example. His 1956 work *The Concert*, in which the audience members at an all-Chopin recital engage in personal flights of fancy as they listen to this onstage concert, is ballet comedy at its best. As Robbins once put it himself in a programme note: "One of the pleasures of attending a concert is the freedom to lose oneself in listening to the music. Quite unconsciously mental images and pictures form." What emerges from these flights of fancy in *The Concert* is often rollicking, slapstick humour. And yet behind the clowning and despite our laughter we cannot fail to recognise ourselves or someone we know, and at the end we feel enlightened about ourselves and our fellow human beings.

By contrast there is a dark mood to *The Cage*. Made in 1951 and set to Stravinsky's *Concerto in D for Strings*, the work centres on a group of insect-like women who lure two males into their domain and kill them. Some have commented that *The Cage* displays a gruesome or disturbing attitude to women and it might well be Robbins' most controversial ballet. Robbins sets the scene strikingly and clearly from the very beginning. In the opening moments of the ballet, the dancers toss their heads back and stretch out their hands and when setting the ballet Robbins explained to the dancers that it was like a scream of triumph. What follows is a ballet that Robbins has described as "a phenomenon of nature" in which the choreography is inspired by a range of animal and insect movements. It is certainly vastly different in tone and style from *The Concert*. Put these two works beside the languidly beautiful *Faun* and the relaxed sophistication of *A Suite of Dances* and we run the gamut of moods and styles.

But beyond diversity, The Australian Ballet's *Jerome Robbins — a celebration* gives us an insight into Robbins' intense love for and knowledge of dance. He loved, for example, to make ballets about dance itself. Take *Afternoon of a Faun* as the prime example. It is erotic and sensuous, even voyeuristic as Robbins uses the proscenium to represent the mirror of a ballet classroom through which we, the audience, observe the dancers in their practice. The two dancers seem to sketch out a pas de deux but look constantly in the 'mirror' to see how the work is unfolding. And the work is intimate enough with just two dancers that we don't simply observe, we participate in the self-critical, and often narcissistic world of the dancer. It is as if Robbins wants us to be part of the world he loved and in which he worked all his life.

In a similar vein *A Suite of Dances* is very much about dance, the steps that make dance such an arresting art form. In it Robbins also suggests that dance and music go hand in hand. Robbins had officially retired when, in 1994, he made *A Suite of Dances* as a solo for Mikhail Baryshnikov. The work is a tiny post-retirement masterpiece. It is set to excerpts from Johann Sebastian Bach's *Suites for Solo Cello* with the cellist on stage throughout. It begins and ends with the dancer looking at the cellist as if to say this, the music, is the source of the choreographer's inspiration and an impetus for a dancer's movement. Baryshnikov has referred to its often subtle changes of movement as "those combinations that are so his, and so beautiful, the twists of the shoulder, the open, relaxed steps gradually changing into smaller, more delicate movements." Leading up to this tribute year, two major biographies of Robbins and countless articles have honoured the man who so easily crossed from ballet to Broadway. But in the end the heart of the man is in his choreography with its endless diversity and its inherently dancerly and musical qualities. The tribute year of 2008 perhaps makes it clear that the world will not forget Jerry Robbins despite the fact that, towards the end of his life, he said: "[dance is] like life, it exists as you're flitting through it and when it's over it's gone."

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