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Playbill for Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992

Extracted on Apr-18-2024 06:41:15

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Fancy Free
NYC Ballet performs the jazzy, brash ballet that
established Jerome Robbins as a classical dance force

April 18, 1994, marks the 50th anniversary of Fancy Free, the ballet that launched the choreographic career of one of this country's most extraordinary artists, Jerome Robbins. This affectionate vignette about three sailors on shore leave in New York established Robbins as a force to be reckoned with in classical dance and paved the way to Broadway, where he would galvanize the musical theatre as choreographer and director. Fancy Free will be among 13 Robbins ballets performed by New York City Ballet during its spring season, which runs from April 28 to June 26.

The world premier of Fancy Free was danced by Ballet Theatre at the Metropolitan Opera House and Featured Harold Lang, John Kriza and Robbins as the sailors, and Muriel Bentley and Janet Reed as the passersby (Shirley Eckl was the walk-on at the end of the ballet). From all accounts that first performance was one of those rare and magical evenings where everyone in attendance realized they were witnessing something special. The ballet received 25 curtain calls, and according to a review by the noted critic Edwin Denby, "was so big a hit that the young participants all looked a little dazed as they took their bows."

[[Picture]]Damian Woetzel, Robert LaFosse and Tom Gold in Jerome Robbins's Fancy Free (Photo: Paul Kolnick) [[/picture]]

Fancy Free brims with the vitality befitting a 25-year-old choreographer's first ballet, ballet that helped demystify the art form. The piece is urban and urbane, jazzy, funny, brash and ebullient. Robbins virtually ignored the classical vocabulary: Instead he fashioned an American vernacular that gleaned from Broadway, from social dancing, from the street, from everyday gestures and behavior. Robbins was not the first choreographer to depict American characters and convey an American sensibility, but no American ballet prior to Fancy Free was so contemporary, so up-to-date in its subject matter, its attitudes. Wartime audiences knew the individuals onstage: They were their sons, their daughters, their friends, their neighbors. Fifty years later the ballet retains its freshness, its immediacy. Fancy Free has thrived all these years because the characters, the choreography, the situations and the music are timeless. Leonard Bernstein's invigorating score still captures the pulse of New York City, and Oliver Smith's delightful set serves as the perfect backdrop for this high-spirited romp (especially the wonderful, cockeyed street lamp). The ballet brings an era alive without capitulating to nostalgia. The sailors

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are recognizably distinct characters who, for all their bravado, are really a bit green. That touch of innocence is the heart of the ballet, the quality that allows it to both capture a time and transcend time. When Robbins first staged Fancy Free at NYCB in 1980, the role of the first sailor was danced by Jean-Pierre Frohlich, currently an assistant ballet master with the company. Although Robbins remains actively involved in overseeing and fine-tuning his repertory, it is Frohlich who now rehearses and maintains Fancy Free as well as several other of the choreographer's works. "It's one of the most difficult pieces to teach," says Frohlich, who was a particularly thoughtful interpreter of Robbins's choreography, "because it's not just a ballet, but a play. And it's so



detailed. For instance, at one point in the first dance all three sailors walk forward, and each personality has to come through in the way they walk and strut. Also, there are always things going on in the background, when someone else is dancing in the front, things you might not even notice. It's all choreographed to a certain time in the music, and it's very precise.

"One dancer told me he'd rather do Theme and Variations [a notoriously difficult Balanchine ballet] ten times in a row than perform Fancy Free because Fancy Free is so meticulous and exact. People who weren't born in this country really find it hard to learn. It takes them much longer to understand the style and the characters."

Frolich recalls that when the company was first learning the ballet, Robbins encourage the would-be sailors to give their characters a history. "He told us to think about where they're from, who sleeps on the top bunk on the ship, what their parents are like, what their favorite beer is, whether they like redheads or dark-haired women," says Frohlich.

"That was the first time I'd ever worked like this, and it was a huge help. Even though you don't go out onstage thinking about these things, they're there somewhere in your head, and you use them. When I tell dancers who are learning the ballet to create a history, some of them think I'm kidding. They say 'I know what I'm doing.' But they really don't. I remember one dancer who was learning the third sailor, but he was playing like the first sailor: He was Mr. Tough instead of Mr. Cool. It took a while until he finally got it."

[[text insert]] In his 60-plus ballets, Robbins has repeatedly sought to impart drama and emotions through movement: Dance for the sake of dance rarely seems to have interested him [[/text insert]]

Frohlich says that the sailors' qualities reflect the personalities of the dancers who originated the roles. "Jerry told us that the characters were those people in real life," Frohlich relates. "Harold Lang had short legs and stretched all the time and was always doing splits. Johnny Kriza was very sensitive. And Jerry was that young New Yorker who thinks he can do it all."

Robbins, who danced the third-or rumba-sailor, also originated the pas de deus (with Janet Reed). At NYCB the pas de deus is sometimes performed by the third sailor, sometimes by the second. "It just depends on who Jerry feels is more suited to the pas de deus in that cast," Frohlich explains. "But it's never danced by the first sailor. He couldn't do it. He'd be jumping down her throat. He wouldn't have time for the smooth talking."

In his 60-plus ballets, Robbins has repeatedly sought to impart drama and emotions through movement: Dance for the sake of dance rarely seems to have interested him. Beginning with Fancy Free and continuing all the way through the wistful Ives, Songs (1988) - his last piece to date for NYCB - most of Robbins's ballets are in some ways an exploration of friendship and/or community. "Jerry's an observer," Frohlich reflects. "He's aware of everything around him. His ballets are about human nature, human beings. They're about relationships."

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