

The New Criterion

Dance

January 2009

Prodigal son

by [Laura Jacobs](#)

On Jerome Robbins.

When I started reviewing dance in New York City, Jerome Robbins was alive and well and making ballets for the New York City Ballet. It was 1984, the year after George Balanchine died. Peter Martins was the story then, intensely watched, each new ballet a clue to what he might do with Balanchine's kingdom, for it was Martins who had stepped into the directorship and Martins who was steering the company. There'd been a skirmish about that. Robbins pulled a Philip Larkin—he didn't want the job but he felt the least they could do was offer it to him. Robbins was given the title of "co-ballet master in chief," and his presence at NYCB continued as always: he was a deputy who was a genius and in those dark days a ballast. So he was a surety, a continuity, choreographing new pieces until his death in 1998.

I didn't pay proper attention to Robbins in those fourteen years. I was focused on learning the Balanchine repertory, which was still new to me. And although Robbins was a master—and with Balanchine's death *the* master at NYCB (Martins was a novice, still figuring out what he was going to do with Balanchine's bounty)—I took Robbins for granted, we all did, as if genius at NYCB was the norm. And for three-plus decades it *was* the norm. Indeed, Robbins burst on the scene in 1944 with a first work, *Fancy Free*, that was as perfect—as complete in voice and expressive authority—as the ballet of 1928 that stands as Balanchine's first, *Apollon Musagète*, otherwise known as *Apollo*.

It's interesting to compare them. Both contain a central trio: *Apollo* has three muses from classical mythology; *Fancy Free*, three sailors on shore leave. Both contain a contest: the three muses vie for Apollo's approval; the three sailors compete for the attentions of two young women. Both scores brim with sprung rhythms and wild syncopations, dotted notes that hatch space—*Apollo*'s courtesy of Igor Stravinsky, *Fancy Free*'s from Leonard Bernstein. *Apollo* is the more visionary work of art, idealized and ascending, the young god's newly harnessed aesthetic energies running parallel to Balanchine's own, his taking up the reins of destiny. *Fancy Free* is more accessible, hot and hormonal, shot through with a different feeling for immortality—a young man's cocksure bravado!—plus Robbins's whole twenty-six-year-old life observing people in the street, in bars, in dance class, in the Poconos, in the paintings of Paul Cadmus, it's all there already. Both ballets are eternally fresh—magnetic states in which the details crackle and stick. To those who downgrade Robbins by saying he never made a better ballet than *Fancy Free*, one can only ask, Which of Balanchine's ballets is better than *Apollo*? With genius on this level, the name-making first work is in a class by itself.

Still, Balanchine inhabited his own elevated space and Robbins knew it. There were times when he got testy about Balanchine—only to Lincoln Kirstein, of course—but his worship was absolute.

“Balanchine teaches,” Robbins wrote in a journal entry of 1974, “and how he teaches . . . he invests each particular moment of classic and basic ballet vocabulary with a how + why + a detail of such elevated elegance + perfection. If I am known as a perfectionist one should attend his classes.” For Robbins, always, Balanchine was the teacher. But did Robbins have something to teach Balanchine?

Certainly Robbins was the more gifted storyteller. Watching *Fancy Free*, you catch slang on the fly, those 1940s inflections of posture, the physical kickback of barroom jokes. It’s John O’Hara as vaudeville; Dorothy Parker with her eyes open and her mouth shut. And the way those girls smooth up their stockings and straighten their seams, it’s a peephole into wartime New York—that poignant, elbowing era. Nevertheless, Robbins was brilliant on Broadway not because his narrative talent filled the bill, but because he had the will to bend Broadway to his gifts, to make visionary shows that grew out of rhythm, movement—a straightened seam—just as his first Broadway show, *On the Town*, grew out of the ballet *Fancy Free*. Even in *The King and I*, a musical that came from a Victorian memoir with no dancing in it, Robbins made movement its motor, the only shared language between alien cultures. Kirstein has written that Balanchine was hurt when Robbins didn’t mention him in a discussion of choreographic innovators on Broadway. Unfortunately, we cannot judge how innovative Balanchine was because almost nothing of his Broadway work remains. If, however, his *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue* ballet is any indication—a 1968 re-do that is said to be better than the 1936 original—Balanchine shouldn’t have been too hurt.

And Robbins was funny, funnier than Mr. B., no small thing considering how funny Balanchine could be. It’s hard to think of a ballet that is as simultaneously broad and bon mot, free-form and precise, hilarious and yet touching as Robbins’s 1956 ballet to Chopin, *The Concert (Or, the Perils of Everybody)*. The section in which corps girls try and keep failing to synchronize is laugh-out-loud humor. It’s also a mathematical marvel, a Rubik’s cube that keeps turning out wrong, which lifts its humor higher still. The Umbrella ballet is like something from Wallace Stevens, silly and dark, charmingly quotidian and suddenly, dangerously, surreal—*Homo sapiens*, herd animal!

Surveying the NYCB repertory, there are times, too, when it can look as though Robbins provided a spur for Balanchine. For instance, Balanchine’s groundbreaking *Agon* premiered on December 1, 1957—two months after the September 26 premiere of Robbins’s groundbreaking musical *West Side Story*. Just as a mixed-race couple is at the center of *West Side Story*, a mixed-race couple, Diana Adams and Arthur Mitchell, danced the central pas de deux in *Agon*. So there’s a fascinating bit of aesthetic play here, Balanchine absorbing popular culture, virtually at its moment of conception, into a high-art modernist masterpiece. (The joke being that *West Side Story*, with Bernstein jumping off from opera and Robbins from ballet, was already high art by Broadway standards.) Neither work has dated.

And take Robert Schumann’s “*Davidsbündlertänze*,” Balanchine’s second-to-last ballet, which premiered in 1980. Its compositional values are informed by the diaphanous spatial planes and symmetries of Robbins’s 1974 *Dybbuk*, a ballet few seemed to get, though I have no doubt Balanchine got it (not surprisingly, many people didn’t get *Davidsbündlertänze* either, and still don’t). Both ballets thread narrative through nothingness, a neurogenic state between the material and the mental. Both are haunted by an invisible alternate universe. And both, I think, speak with backward glances to Antony Tudor’s *Lilac Garden* of 1936, a ballet of crushing brilliance, in which every gesture seems to pass into memory before our eyes.

It’s been ten years since the death of Robbins in 1998. This last spring at the New York City Ballet the lion’s share of performances were devoted to a Jerome Robbins Celebration. The Robbins Estate devised ten separate programs which contained a total of thirty-three Robbins ballets. One wondered how Robbins would fare in such concentration. Rarely does a choreographer other than Balanchine get a whole program to him- or herself at NYCB, because so few can sustain interest over a whole program.

This is, in fact, one of the reasons Balanchine is artistically incomparable: the amazing musical and, more importantly, tonal variety of his work. He could negotiate any poetic weather, hot or cold, romantic or classical or neoclassical or modern. He jumped from genre to genre like Hop o' My Thumb. Moreover, though he hewed to a few favored themes, as most artists do, he brought a fresh integrity to each new work, the sensation of a blank canvas, an untouched score. Where most choreographers seem to be dragging unfinished business from one piece into the next—postures and ticks, their needy or pushy sensibilities (the Kirov's recent program of four dances by William Forsythe was three too many)—Balanchine's ballets begin in immaculate space. You never have too much of him. In these Robbins programs, I expected to feel overlap, a narrowing tonality and frame of reference. I did not.

Admittedly, Robbins's spontaneity is not like Balanchine's. Balanchine moved in more worldly, also Old Worldly and otherworldly, circles, and was able to net poetic associations unhindered by latitude and longitude. This is what Robbins began reaching for in his later decades with NYCB and where he often came up empty. But it isn't as if Balanchine just tossed off ballets. In a recent conversation I had with Suzanne Farrell, we discussed the amount of time Balanchine spent studying a score, often years of study before the actual making of a ballet. She said, "I think he wanted to make sure that musically he did what he wanted. And not just [use] the piece of music as an accompaniment. Which is very different from the way choreographers work nowadays. Everything happens so quickly—I have an idea, find music, put on a ballet."

Robbins, too, studied his scores and did his research. True they were very different men: Balanchine brought up in the pure Imperial tradition, Robbins with a rag-tag, racing-from-class-to-class training; Balanchine a Georgian Christian, Robbins a Russian Jew; Balanchine heterosexual and politically conservative, Robbins homosexual and liberal. But they were alike in the one thing that mattered most: their unwavering commitment to dance and to the centrality of dance as an art form. The Celebration's knockout program right from the start—"Bernstein Collaborations"—kicked off with 1944's *Fancy Free*, put 1974's *Dybbuk* in the middle, and finished with 1995's *West Side Story Suite*, a concert version of dances from the 1957 musical. Eight year's gestation went into *West Side Story*, and almost thirty year's into *Dybbuk*. As for *Fancy Free*, the fledgling Robbins not only wrote a detailed scenario of the ballet, he drew a graph—a *graph!*—of its dramatic climbs and climaxes. These ballets are constructed.

Some critics have used the word "cartoon" to describe Robbins's style in these dances. I'm not sure why they want to reduce such a multifaceted vision to such a tiny particular (it's like citing the Tarzan mime in Balanchine's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and labeling the whole ballet Hollywood Primitive). Yes, the sailors in *Fancy Free* strut about and bulge their biceps like Popeye. But Robbins places these bits of pop-culture caricature within such sophisticated rhythmic arcs and classically infused phrases you just sigh with pleasure—it's High-Low decades before MOMA tried it. The three men's solos, like the solos of the three muses in *Apollo*, are portals to their personalities, all the more moving because the men are mortal. This is what they're hoping to bring back intact, from war.

The third solo—Terpsichore's solo, you might call it—was originally performed by Robbins himself, and it's a special pleasure, one of the most beautiful solos ever made for a man. Robbins wrote of this character, "His keynote is his intensity. There is a feeling of the Spanish or Latin about him... an attractive flashiness and smoldering quality." It begins as a Latin American *danzon*, rumba-like, a purring rhythm that opens into soaring expansion. You feel it's full of the dancey things this young man has seen in his young life—newsreels of Valentino, sports moves, Fred Astaire, ballet posters picturing grand jetés. Longer than the other two solos, more open-ended and airborne, the third solo is caught-up, so marvelously sustained it rises almost to the level of a dream ballet within the ballet. Pointedly, the short film that was a prelude to each performance of this

program showed Robbins coaching the solo, the very start of it, where a slicing downward arc of the arms and torso (like the umpire's "yooooou're out") claps and explodes upward. Robbins didn't want it balletic, he wanted a spinal snap to the sky, like a fired synapse. It's the flint of the dance—light in the choreographer's eye.

I saw three casts of *Fancy Free* and each was elating, testament to the struts and balances built into the ballet. Moreover, it was fascinating to see *Fancy Free* on NYCB after we'd been treated to a handful of performances by ABT last fall. Robbins made it for ABT, and it's a great showpiece for that company (Marcelo Gomes rides the third solo like a classical rollercoaster of ups and downs). But on City Ballet, with its coherent company style, its dancers who weight steps the same way and move with similar brushstrokes, the stage action transcended star turns to become a canvas with deep focus, full of shadows and contours—a complete theatrical experience. Of special note was Tiler Peck, the girl in the purple dress, innocent and streetwise, like catnip to the sailors. Peck has worked on Broadway, so she knows how to hold a stage, but it was the way she filled that 1940s *plastique*, inflating the role with fresh air yet beveling the edges—those jazz inflections—that made urban poetry of her portrait and gave the whole picture an aching historical resonance.

I continue to think *Dybbuk* one of the glories of Robbins's career, and in the context of this Celebration one could see him working toward it. On the program titled "Russian Roots," we saw Robbins's 1965 version of *Les Noces*, a project he yearned to do and was finally allowed to do (at ABT) shortly after the phenomenal success of *Fiddler on the Roof*. He was eager to take what he had learned of Russian folklore for *Fiddler*, and use it, unadulterated, in *Les Noces*. There are some fine moments in the ballet—the dance with rocking arms for the two mothers is memorable—but you don't feel that Robbins has quite transitioned out of Broadway's picture-window patterns into the more distilled structures of ballet. I agree with his own assessment of the work: "It's a little athletic," he wrote to Robert Graves, "more so than I want it to be." And when Robbins saw the revival of Bronislava Nijinska's 1923 *Les Noces* a year after his own *Les Noces* premiered, he wrote of her version, "It is as condensed and ritualized as a Japanese Noh drama." It is this insight he brought to *Dybbuk*.

Today, the only people in the audience who don't respond to *Dybbuk* are the old-guard critics. They seem to need conventional storytelling—the rest of us do not. The silence in the theater during this surpassingly beautiful fifty-minute ghost story was one of the experiences of the Celebration.

Dybbuk is now one of the great things to be seen on the New York stage. The dancers, coached by Jean-Pierre Frohlich to give more-more-more, are invested in the ballet. The Invocation of the Kabbalah, which I initially thought a choreographic weak spot, has reached a fever pitch of precision, and is a dance both intricate and spooky—"the engine" of the ballet, one critic called it. This suite of solos for eight men, orthodox theological students, is situated at the center of the ballet. The students are exploring ancient and potentially satanic alchemies, and Robbins's *plastique* here is snaky, acrobatic, pulled from the gestural repertoire of the tightrope walker. These young men *are* walking a tightrope—between life and death.

The roles of Leah and Chanon, so lyrically rendered by Jenifer Ringer and Benjamin Millepied in last year's performances, were jolted into greater theatricality when Rachael Rutherford and Joachin de Luz took over. Less lush than Ringer, more taut, Rutherford brought an Expressionist edge to Leah, one that dovetailed with the acrobatic *plastique*. This is a surreal world, the 1920s of Apollinaire and Dalí—and Ansky (*The Dybbuk*, which premiered upon his death in 1920, was a phenomenon of the Twenties). The fact that Rutherford was not an easy fit for de Luz, a fiery Chanon with the dark flare of Edward Villella, gave their dancing in the Possession a flashing physicality, a wrested-from-the-world whiteness. It was an explosive performance that proved the theatrical viability of the ballet. Robbins, I'm told, in his pursuit of classical purity, worked hard to suppress emotion in his dancers. He was wrong to do it in *Dybbuk*, and just how wrong we can now

see. Frohlich has pushed the dancers into a deeper connection, a bigger experience. When Janie Taylor came into the role of Leah—to Millepied's Chanon—bringing her fevered wildness, that feral hum so physically expressed, the sensual connection was gorgeous, and the Possession, a melting, flooding “little death” gone cosmic, looked like Eros Unbound.

This feeling for dangerous places—narrow ledges in the abyss, thin lines in space that must bear the weight of desire, of love blind to the surround and often offensive to the world—is pervasive in the work of Robbins, beginning with *West Side Story* and finding its most dynamic erotic expression in *Dybbuk*. This may be another reason *Dybbuk* worked and *Les Noces* didn't—the level at which Robbins engaged with it. The betrothed couple in *Les Noces* are locked into society. The betrothed couple in *Dybbuk* are locked out. The self-obliterating reach, the endless empty space beyond religious and cultural perimeters—Robbins, with his incessant self-loathing, his problems fitting in politically, sexually, socially, not only identified with *Dybbuk*'s vision of escape, he could honor the seductive, transgressive beauty of it.

The program titled “French Cuisine” was a charmer. *Mother Goose*, a stagedoor ballet, is playfully inventive, like kids in the attic on a rainy day—it's perfect for a matinee. *Afternoon of a Faun?* Mallarmé and Nijinsky modernized, of course, but the ballet is a floating island, a ripening apple, its nymph and faun held in a polymorphous, prelapsarian state. It's hot *and* cold—amazing. And *Antique Epigraphs*. When I first saw this ballet to Debussy at the time of its premiere in 1984, it seemed slight, a piece of calligraphy for eight young women of promise. Did I have enough background to see what Robbins was doing? I didn't. Is there sometimes a kind of haze around a dance that only time burns off, a feeling that it's just more of the same when actually it's not? I think so. This time around I found *Antique Epigraphs* alluring, a smokey topaz. It made me think of the ballet *Sylvia*, for it presents us with a sect of women in a mythological realm. And I see now that it shares gestural motifs with *Dybbuk*, specifically the eight young men of the Kabbalah solos. These young women in Grecian dress seem to be novices in a secret society, a world of shadows, groves, moonbaths, and myrrh. When they perform their solos, it too feels like a kind of conjuring—they're tending the flame of classicism.

“Generation Next” may have been the most grab-baggy of the programs, but it opened with the adorable *Circus Polka*—little girls from the School of American Ballet prance around, making formations, while a booted ringmaster cracks the whip (a self-parody by Robbins, who could be as whiplash sadistic as he was quietly generous). And it contained *Four Bagatelles*, the surprise of the season. This ballet was first performed at a gala in May 1973, and officially premiered in 1974, so it dates to that early-1970s period when Robbins was churning out a lot of labored work and critics were getting annoyed. One went so far as to say *Four Bagatelles* was “unperformable,” though that's obviously not true. It is a pas de deux of rather loose enjambment, yet with intricate twists, turns, and reversals cued by Beethoven's pianism, and described at the time as “tricky.” Such dislocations do not look tricky today, but quick and bright, with something of the sunny stitching and incalculable stops of springtime birdsong. Bournonville's glancing classicism meets Beethoven's fresh fingers. *Bagatelles* proved a wonderful showpiece, and a tutorial, for Ashley Bouder, a dancer with buckets of bravura but hardly a drop of subtlety. The pointillist phrasing in *Bagatelles* requires focus and fine-tuning, and for once Bouder looked lovely.

The last three ballets Robbins choreographed—*A Suite of Dances* and *2 & 3 Part Inventions* in 1994, and *Brandenburg* in 1997—were set to the music of Bach. In the last hours of Robbins's life, as he lay in bed in a coma, a recording of Bach was playing in the background. One imagines that for Robbins this music was a place of peace, aloof from the persecutions of life, a sort of anteroom, if you will, mathematical, celestial, eternal. Each of these Bach ballets has its beauties. But they are impersonal. The ballet that reads most persuasively as a summation, a farewell that is also a deeply kinetic experience, was the one that preceded these three in 1988, choreographed not to Bach but to

the shadowed, slanting, piercing music of the Connecticut-born composer Charles Ives (1874–1954), whom Harold C. Schonberg called “a bewildering combination of seer and practical man, mystic and democrat.”

Ives, Songs was begun when Robbins became enthralled by the monotypes of the neo-Impressionist Maurice Prendergast, whose paintings pictured turn-of-the-century Americans in towns and at play. Deborah Jowitt, in her 2004 biography *Jerome Robbins*, tells us that Robbins went in search of music that could support his plan for a ballet, and upon hearing a recording of Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau singing songs by Ives—revelation. “They seemed perfect,” he wrote, “made for Prendergast.” Robbins studied over a hundred of Ives’s songs and chose eighteen (now seventeen; he cut “White Gulls” shortly after the premiere, though I wish he hadn’t—the dance was full of shore and sky). Robbins organized the songs to suggest the cycle of life in a small American town. As Jowitt writes, “Gradually the composer crowded out the painter.”

The ballet that resulted is akin to Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*, but seen from a distance, through the telescope of time. And where Wilder’s play heads toward a direct confrontation between life and death, in Robbins’s *Ives, Songs* mortality is ever present, pressed into the ballet like leaves and flowers in a book (just as Ives pressed fragments of American hymns, anthems, and popular tunes into his songs). Robbins himself described the ballet as “an album, filled with mementos, photographs, postcards, memos and journal notes—like turning the pages of a picture book.” His description, however, does not do justice to his masterful construction, which has the sensation of a deathbed journey, a mind bringing up imagery born in another century.

In *Ives, Songs*, Robbins’s years on Broadway and in ballet meet on Transcendentalist ground, a world of old elms and white steeples, town halls and moonless walks. The backdrop is an elemental wash of color, the patinated coppery gray-green of an old weather vane or gutter. The ballet is lit low, a sort of sepia, with sudden flares of brightness. The engine of *this* ballet, well, it’s actually embers—a solitary man walking through visions, seeing ghosts. He is like the solitary walker in *Watermill* (1972), who surveys his past in slow motion. But where that was a Robbins experiment in Eastern theater, the opaque and durational methods of Butoh, in *Ives, Songs* we see, and feel, New England meeting places and main streets, backyard gardens and lovers’ lanes. The lyrics of the songs—rousing, tender, haunting, heartbroken—have freed Robbins from that bull-headed pursuit of his, the desire for a Balanchinean classical purity, a point we never needed him to prove. In *Ives*, he’s back in America. He gives himself over to a very narrow sill of story and choreographs with stunning transparency. And yes, purity. It’s another leap into the void, this one arrayed in the rich simplicity we associate with late-period genius.

I love the way it opens. An aged man in a dark suit stands downstage right and looks upstage left to three little girls in smocks, posed casually on the floor, quiet as cats. A setting of Longfellow’s “The Children’s Hour” begins. “Between the dark and the daylight,” the first line goes, “When the night is beginning to lower.” One by one the girls reach upward, pointing a muse-like finger or toe. They reach downward as if invoking a flame. The man takes a long walk around them as they play floatingly, their pointe work idyllic, a round. The tone is set: the circling hour, a circling back, perceptions pressed between daylight and the dark.

The pointe work of the little girls will grow, enlarged, into dances for young women. And their budding beauty will be echoed, forlorn, in the second to last song, “Like a Sick Eagle,” a dance of ascension for three men. Charming vignettes anchor the action—excitement in a theater, awkwardness at a first cotillion, a new baby in the house—only to be pulled wayward by Ives, his atonalities sliding into abstract states of connection or disconnection. Robbins goes hand in hand with the music. Many of the dances are pocket classics, highest among them the congregational “At the River,” the hallucinatory, wartime showstopper “He is There!,” and the devastating “Tom Sails Away.” They lock into the whole with a hush. And while the ballet flows forward with pictorial

grace, Robbins lays in reversals—motifs of walking and moving backwards—that seem to burrow the ballet deeper into space, creating a sense of complexity within memory.

Twentieth-century ballet saw quite a few solitary men walking through dreamscapes, clouds of longing, but I can't think of a single sojourner as moving as the man in *Ives, Songs*. There is another wanderer, though, who is present here—the prodigal. It was Balanchine's second great ballet, premiered in 1929, and a work he revived in 1950 for a young man new to the company, Jerome Robbins. "It was distant, mysterious, thrilling," the playwright Robert Sealy has written of Robbins's performance in *The Prodigal Son*, "like reading an illustrated Bible story by flashlight in the dark." In his relationship with NYCB, Robbins was prodigal as well, coming and going, leaving for new experiences, pursuits with other troupes, other shows, but always and finally returning to City Ballet, the company that was his home. The male lead in *Ives, Songs* has also, one presumes, left home to seek his destiny in the wider world. He returns not stripped or broken as the prodigal was; rather, he is closing his eyes to the present so that he can see the past. He is, in a way, both father and son of the story.

Ives, Songs premiered as the AIDS epidemic was taking grim hold in New York. Loss was all around. Men young and old, prodigal sons, died daily. It is a measure of Robbins's tonal discipline and theatrical subtlety that no one reference or reading takes over his ballet, no power other than time, and the speechless feeling of facing death. *Ives* gives us that gravity. In the last song "Elegie," he turns the words of Louis Gallet—"Now you are gone from my life! Forever gone with my love!"—into a cry of anguish, musically overwhelming. In this song Robbins, too, is overwhelming, drawing his wanderer into a whirlwind of ghosts, bringing him face to face with the entire cast, his history. It is a Whitmanesque moment of sweeping sensory overload, crowding emotion. And then like the tide they pull back, slowly and forever into the four dark corners of the stage.

"If someone asked me what it was about," Robbins wrote in his diary after the premiere, "I could easily say it's about me and my dancers. I see them & my life as children, as enthusiasts, as worshippers or believers, as lovers, as losers—as at the last collected, loved, & outside me—left alone."

Laura Jacobs's most recent novel is *The Bird Catcher* (St. Martin's Press).

[more from this author](#)

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 27 January 2009, on page 36

Copyright © 2012 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/Prodigal-son-3985>