

# West Side Story Suite

## Ballet Notes

### West Side Story Suite

Choreography: Jerome Robbins

Staged by: Jean-Pierre Frohlich and Jenifer Ringer

Co-Choreographer: Peter Gennaro

Music: Leonard Bernstein

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Lyrics: Stephen Sondheim

Set Design: Oliver Smith

Scenic Supervision: Rosaria Sinisi

Costume Design: Irene Sharaff

Costume Consultant: Holly Hynes

Lighting Design: Jennifer Tipton, recreated by: Penny Jacobus

Repetiteurs: Rex Harrington, Peter Ottmann

Performed by Permission of The Robbins Rights Trust.

*West Side Story Suite Suite* is generously supported by Walter Carsen, O.C., Ira Gluskin & Maxine Granovsky Gluskin, Judy Korthals and Sandra & Jim Pitblado.

Premiered: New York City Ballet, 1995

The National Ballet of Canada Premiere: 2007

### Jerome Robbins

In the history of American ballet, two figures, both associated with New York City Ballet, tower over all other choreographers: George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins. The Russian-born Balanchine took the classical style of the Imperial Theatre in St. Petersburg and gave it his own distinctive twist, with particular attention paid to the ballerinas whom he serially adored (saying famously, "Ballet is woman"). The American-born Robbins, on the other hand, created his own kind of fusion of dance styles, a particularly American one, taking elements of jazz dances, social dances, Broadway pizzazz, and even the everyday movements of sailors on shore leave or New Yorkers hurrying down a busy street, and combining them with the more rarefied movement of classical ballet. If the male dancers in Balanchine ballets are often subordinated to the ballerinas, in Robbins ballets they come into their own, able to display their virility, exuberance, and not least their strength and stamina in notoriously difficult and lengthy pas de deux which require deft partnering. Feeling very strongly that the princes, fairies, gypsies, peasants, and mythical characters which were the standard fare of ballet failed to speak to the contemporary American

experience of real human beings, Robbins set out to create a type of dance that would. Accordingly, his earliest “smash hit” was *Fancy Free*, a one-act ballet about three brash sailors prowling for girls on a hot summer night, which incorporated everyday movements like the flipping of a coin, gum chewing, and cartwheels. The composer was Leonard Bernstein, with whom Robbins would collaborate again for *West Side Story*. *Fancy Free* was expanded into the Broadway musical *On the Town*, which led to a string of Broadway hits for Robbins, including *Peter Pan*, *Funny Girl*, *The King and I*, and *Fiddler on the Roof*. He concurrently had a long association with New York City Ballet, as associate director from 1949 to 1959 and as ballet master and choreographer from 1969 until his death in 1998.

An extreme perfectionist, Jerome Robbins was notoriously demanding of the dancers he worked with. Among the more than 60 ballets he created are *Afternoon of a Faun*, *The Concert*, *In the Night*, *Glass Pieces* and *West Side Story Suite* which are in the repertoires of New York City Ballet and other major dance companies around the world. In addition to two Oscars for the film *West Side Story*, Mr. Robbins received nine Tony Awards, five Donaldson Awards, two Emmy Awards, the Screen Directors' Guild Award and the New York Drama Critics Circle Award. He was a 1981 Kennedy Center Honors Recipient and was awarded the title of Chevalier in France's Ordre national de la légion d'honneur.

This mixed program presents three central aspects of Jerome Robbins' creative work: *Glass Pieces* typifies his use of naturalistic movement, *In the Night* is one of his romantic piano ballets, and *West Side Story Suite* embodies the exuberance of his Broadway musicals.

## West Side Story Suite

When it burst upon the Broadway scene in 1957, Jerome Robbins' setting of the *Romeo and Juliet* story amongst the youth gangs of New York's Upper West Side redefined the Broadway musical. With its complex but catchy musical score by the then up-and-coming Leonard Bernstein, tragic ending, story by a “serious” playwright, and above all its integration of dance, music, and text, *West Side Story* was a revelation. It was a huge hit both on stage and on film, and its popularity has continued unshaken ever since. It has been said that if Agnes de Mille, another great American crossover choreographer, managed to fully integrate dance into the musical for the first time with *Oklahoma!*, with *West Side Story* Robbins integrated the musical into the dance.

So important were the dances that the idea of performing a New York City Ballet version of the musical soon arose, only to be opposed by Balanchine, who told Robbins, “*Our* boys can't fight.” But after Balanchine's death, Robbins did put the dances together into *West Side Story Suite*, one of the few ballets in the world in which dancers are required to sing and talk as well as dance, and almost certainly the only ballet in which the words “Beat it!” are heard on stage. It is invariably fun for ballet dancers to perform, not least because, in jeans and baseball jackets or swifty skirts, they find themselves released from the strictures of pointe shoes, tutus, and classical precision to indulge in some Broadway razzmatazz.

The opening scene is an extended “ballet” between the rival Jets and Sharks. Like *Glass Pieces*, this piece starts with a basic (but very non-balletic in the classical sense) movement,

the snapping of the fingers. From this the dancing gradually emerges, becoming more vigorous and virile until it builds to a climax. As Robbins was inspired by the loping (and fighting) of punks in the street, he was also inspired by the Latin dances of the Puerto Ricans, which he integrated into the scenes of the Dance at the Gym and the show-stopping *America*. With *West Side Story Suite*, a tale of immigrants, urban life, intolerance, and love that conveys the irrepressible energy of the American spirit while also depicting the dark side of life in the USA, Robbins achieved his goal of translating the American experience into dance with the strong dramatic impact that was essential to him. He made ballet speak to a 20<sup>th</sup>-century American public.

– Katherine Barber

### **Further Reading**

*The International Encyclopedia of Dance*. Edited by Selma Jeanne Cohen and the Dance Perspectives Foundation. Oxford University Press, 2003.

*Dance with Demons: The Life of Jerome Robbins*. Greg Lawrence. Berkley Books, 2001.

*Somewhere: The Life of Jerome Robbins*. Amanda Vaill. Broadway Books, 2006.