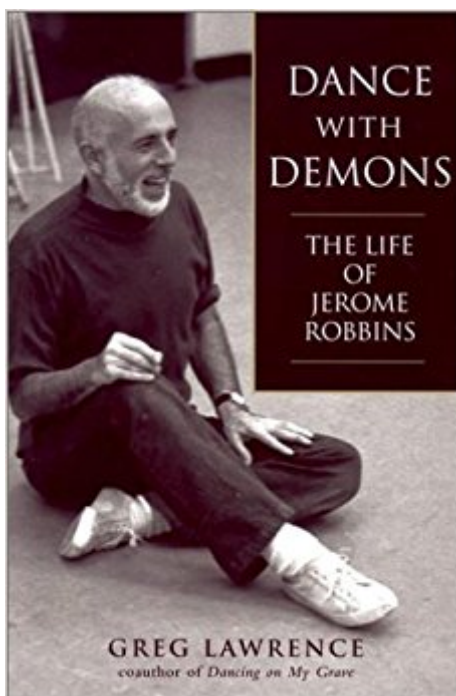


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# Dance With Demons: The Life Of Jerome Robbins



## Synopsis

The first biography of the celebrated choreographer/director of Broadway, ballet, and Hollywood—a man of towering achievement and extraordinary personal demons. For decades he was one of the most commanding creative forces in America. His work on such shows as *On the Town*, *The King and I*, *West Side Story*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Gypsy*, and Jerome Robbins's Broadway earned him five Tony Awards and two Academy Awards. His brilliance with American Ballet Theatre and New York City Ballet established him as one of America's great ballet masters. But when Jerome Robbins, nÃ© Rabinowitz, died at the age of seventy-nine in 1998, he was a haunted man. All of his life, he had struggled with demons: his bisexuality, his Judaism, his often bitter relationship with his parents, his betrayals of others during the McCarthy hearings, and his perfectionism that bordered on the sadistic. He was loved and hated in equal parts; and only now, in this groundbreaking biography by insider Greg Lawrence, based upon two years of research and dozens of interviews with Robbins's family, friends, and colleagues, can the full measure of both the artist and the man be taken. It is a fascinating portrait of light and dark—like its subject, a work rich in complexity.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Choreographic and theatrical genius Jerome Robbins was born in 1918 in New York City into a materially comfortable but emotionally bleak Jewish immigrant family in New York City. Lawrence (who coauthored Gelsey Kirkland's *Dancing on My Grave*) points to this emotionally bereft childhood and paternal disapproval ("My son's a fag how can I talk to him?" was reportedly his

father's attitude), as well as Robbins's struggles with his Jewish heritage, his sexuality and, most famously, his decision to name names before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in the 1950s, as the definitive aspects of Robbins's life and creative legacy. The sum total of Robbins's work as reported here is staggering; his decades at the heart of the golden ages of American ballet, musical theater, theater and film, as director or choreographer, often in collaboration with such giants as Leonard Bernstein and George Balanchine, left the American public a cultural gold mine. Lawrence interviewed hundreds of dancers, actors, directors, family members and other contemporaries all, whether they loved or hated him, recognized both Robbins's genius and his clearly tortured soul. Most of the remarks herein tell us far more about the speaker than about the subject, but as such, they form an indelible picture of the various eras during which Robbins worked (he was active almost until his death in 1998). Robbins himself made numerous attempts over the years to write his own autobiography, only to abandon them repeatedly when the emotional cost became too great. In the end, Lawrence's account, though comprehensive and lively, can only give us a solid picture of Robbins's times and contemporaries the man himself remains a mystery. Illus. not seen by PW. (May)Forecast: Readers in New York, the center of the ballet and theater worlds, will grab this much-touted book. First serial in Vanity Fair; forthcoming reviews in the New York Times by Janet Maslin, the New Republic, the Washington Post Book Review and Variety; an interview in New York Blade; and a May 1 spot on NPR's new show, Studio 360, will bring lots of attention. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

Lawrence (coauthor with Gelsey Kirkland of *Dancing on My Grave*) tells the life story of legendary American choreographer Jerome Robbins from many different perspectives. Robbins is known for choreographing major Broadway musicals like *West Side Story* and *The King and I* and also many ballets. This biography is dominated by quotes from a variety of sources, including critics, dancers, family, and Robbins himself. Rita Moreno of *West Side Story* is quoted as saying, "What he did that was so unusual [was] that he choreographed for character. He choreographed the way a writer writes." Robbins's demons of the title include problems with his family, his sexual orientation, and his testimony to the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC). The most interesting sections of this hefty tome concern his choreography and its creation, his collaboration with Leonard Bernstein and George Balanchine, and the artistic process. This first full-length biography of this important choreographer is recommended for all libraries. (Photos and index not seen.) Conrad's photographic biography is a good companion to Lawrence's work. Conrad, a screenwriter and longtime friend of Robbins, has combined photographs of Robbins's childhood, insider looks at

rehearsals, and lovely photos of performances of his choreography with excerpts from his journals and brief biographical narrative. The result is a heartfelt tribute to a man she clearly loved who contributed much to his art. Recommended for public libraries with broad interest in dance. Barbara Kundanis, Batavia P.L., IL Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Jerome Robbins was a monster to many throughout his career. He was imperious, quick to take offense, both personally and politically treacherous (he turned on friends and lovers as easily as he turned on those whose left-wing sentiments he had once shared, naming names freely when he was called before the House Unamerican Activities Committee). But he was a brilliant choreographer and director; he introduced a modern-day American vernacular into ballet with "Fancy Free" and went on to create, direct, and/or choreograph such Broadway classics as "On the Town," "Peter Pan," "The King And I," "The Pajama Game," "Bells Are Ringing", "West Side Story," "Gypsy." and "Fiddler on the Roof," among many others. He imposed a reign of terror on his productions, often (like David Merrick) playing creative principals off against each other, he hogged billing and created whole new ways of being credited (the "name in a box" thing was his idea), and generally left a trail of bodies wherever he went. In the case of "West Side Story" he re-orchestrated Leonard Bernstein's score while Bernstein removed himself to a bar and got quietly drunk -- and Bernstein was no shrinking violet. But people fought to work with him on virtually every project because he had the golden touch: in addition to the shows listed above, he transformed out-of-town dogs into hits, including "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum" and "Funny Girl." He was bisexual although he leaned toward homosexual, and the book is very good about his relationships, many of which ended in ruins; the one that endured, in off-again, on-again form for decades was with Montgomery Clift. One of the things I like best about this book is that Greg Lawrence neither demonizes nor whitewashes his subject, seeking instead to understand him. And I have to say that in the end we understand Robbins' bad behavior much more clearly than we understand where his astonishing talent came from.

An incredibly researched book. It is definitely a book only for those who are interested in the dance world. This book gives you many insights into the person of Jerome Robbins and makes you appreciate how complicated the human being is. There is no yes or no about the book; i.e. you don't finish it either loving Robbins or hating him but maybe, as all those who worked with him, respecting him. I, being, an old war horse from that period, an old dancer and an x-New Yorker, could really identify with what Lawrence talks about, including ballets, places and dancers. It gave me a

tremendous amount of knowledge about the professional world of dance, the people involved and the difficulties of choosing such a lifestyle. More than anything, you can appreciate what a genius Robbins was in a world that is so full of talent and egos.

This book should have been edited to a substantially smaller volume. There was no need to itemize every career effort by Robbins, even the works that went nowhere. After about 300 pages, my interest waned and I started skimming. His upbringing, personality, demons and genius had been well established by this point. It wasn't necessary to have multiple people say essentially the same things over and over again, both positives and negatives. We got the picture. The chapter related to Robbins' relationship with Balanchine was held back until almost the end, this seemed to be a carrot to keep the reader hanging in there.

This was a very interesting book about a very interesting person. I've always been fascinated with Jerome Robbins and this book tells everything I wanted to know. He had such a wonderful life and was so talented as a dancer and choreographer, but sadly in many ways he never got over his personal demons. He had a very troubled relationship with his parents, especially with his father. He also spent most of his life trying to come to terms with his Jewish back ground. There was lots of detail to read through, but it was a book well worth reading.

Loved this book. Learned a lot about the world of Broadway and ballet theatre. Great gossipy read!

When I reviewed Christine Conrad's book on Jerome Robbins ("Jerome Robbins: That Broadway Man, That Ballet Man") I wrote that the book on Robbins had yet to appear. Well, that book is here. Greg Lawrence's fascinating DANCE WITH DEMONS is so painstakingly researched and so fair-minded, so interestingly written that it speeds along as if it were a novel, that it will, I believe, in years to come, be regarded as a very important document of life in the Theatre and the Ballet from the 1930's to the 1990's. None of Robbins' "psychological problems" are glossed over and none of his matchless successes as a classical choreographer and as a director and choreographer of Broadway mega-hits is given short shrift. Any reader with an interest in life in the New York City Ballet, under George Balanchine and then under Peter Martins, or in the Golden Age of Broadway's Musical Comedies, can afford to miss this book. Years and years of research obviously went into its writing. Just a very few examples of people quoted at length about Robbins, the artist, are his collaborators on WEST SIDE STORY (Arthur Laurents, Leonard Bernstein, Stephen Sondheim,

Harold Prince), his collaborator and boss on THE KING AND I (Oscar Hammerstein,2), his dancers on Broadway (Yuriko, Robert La Fosse, Charlotte D'Amboise, Grover Dale, et al) and his dancers in the ballet world (Peter Martins, Suzanne Farrell, Bart Cook, Violette Verdy, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Rudolf Nureyev, et al). We also get to read what the critics said about the various works when they premiered. What makes the book terrific reading is that time and time again, through the years, we read of no one who has anything negative to say about Robbins, the artist. And yet, over and over we read of peers being crushed, other artists being "named" in the HUAC hearings, friends and lovers being used and abused. Demons, indeed. HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.

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