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MAKING BROADWAY DANCE, LIZA GENNARO (2022)

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Reviewed by Kevin Winkler, Independent Researcher and Writer

Near the end of Liza Gennaro's insightful new book on the art of creating dance on Broadway, she describes the finale from *Coco*, the 1969 musical about famed French fashion designer Coco Chanel starring Katharine Hepburn. In 'Always Mademoiselle', choreographer Michael Bennett masterfully deploys a stage full of high-fashion models in intricate, ever-shifting patterns across moving turntables and mirrored staircases, all surrounding its non-dancing star. 'There is a high level of craft at work here but there is also a degree of wizardry' (175), Gennaro writes. 'An intangible instinct and visual sense that some choreographers have and that makes their work astonishing and crystalline in its ability to convey ideas through movement' (175).

In *Making Broadway Dance*, Gennaro succeeds in capturing that wizardry, as well as the craft behind it. She goes inside the dances that have animated Broadway musicals over the last century and examines the various ways and means of their making. She demystifies the often-opaque process of making dances that must interact with music and words and voices, slicing through the hyperbole and breathless wonder that so often comprises discussion of Broadway's star dance makers. She does the choreographers the honour of revealing them as focused, hard-working professionals making art despite time and money constraints, uncomprehending colleagues, and prejudices both spoken and unspoken. In looking at how Broadway choreography has absorbed influences from other dance forms, including modern, ballet and jazz, Gennaro engages with sources and influences too often ignored by others writing on the subject. And she reclaims numerous unsung choreographers – many of them people of colour – and rightfully places them alongside the field's more acclaimed stars.

Gennaro brings a unique perspective and skill-set to her task. Following success as a dancer and choreographer, she devoted herself to academic studies with a focus on Broadway dance as a distinct and highly specialized creative endeavour. Her observations about the punishing time pressures of creating dance in the commercial theatre are as persuasive as her analysis of archival resources. In both cases, she has been there and done that.

Gennaro charts a historical timeline of Broadway dance that offers fresh perspectives on familiar names while including those who are often left out of dance histories. She challenges the accepted view of 1920s Broadway dance as one of cookie-cutter chorus line-ups through discussions of the work of Seymour Felix and Sammy Lee. Gennaro shows how their Broadway work

in this period sought to integrate dance more fully into their shows' narratives and gave dancers individuated opportunities beyond ensemble formations. Similarly, the contributions of an entire roster of Black choreographers, including Lawrence Deas, Charles Davis, Lyda Webb and Buddy Bradley are reclaimed in Gennaro's discussion of the matter-of-fact appropriation of their work by white artists.

Two figures loom large over the field of Broadway dance: central chapters of the book are devoted to detailed analyses of work by Agnes de Mille and Jerome Robbins. Gennaro examines both de Mille's utilization of modern and folk elements in her Americana dances and her efforts to integrate those dances into their shows' narratives. Gennaro's best writing comes in extended, deeply informed dance descriptions. I doubt anyone has more fully explored ballets from *Oklahoma!* (1943), *One Touch of Venus* (1943) and *Carousel* (1945). She draws fascinating parallels, as well as notable differences, between the use of country dance movement by de Mille in 'The Civil War Ballet' from *Bloomer Girl* and by Martha Graham in *Appalachian Spring*, both created in 1944. De Mille's determination to portray the viewpoints of women in her dances gave the pieces a soft, rounded quality as compared to the 'angular, masculine [...] confrontational' (66) style of Graham. Stressing the collaborative requirements of Broadway, Gennaro asserts that, 'Graham confronts the audience with movement, while de Mille invites them into a shared experience' (66).

'No action unless it contains character' (80), Jerome Robbins once jotted in his notebook. His insistence on character-derived movement, driven in part by his early exposure to Stanislavski's acting techniques at the Group Theatre and studies with the Actors Studio, led him to more persuasively place his choreography within his shows' narratives than did de Mille. Robbins's dramatically motivated staging – along with a sharp sense of theatrical humour, something that eluded de Mille – led him naturally, inevitably to the role of director–choreographer. A cavalcade of mid-century Broadway dance comes thrillingly to life in Gennaro's descriptions of numbers from *Billion Dollar Baby* (1945), *High Button Shoes* (1947), *Look Ma, I'm Dancin'* (1948), *The King and I* (1951), *West Side Story* (1957) and *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964), through which Gennaro threads both the dance movements and the who, where and why underpinning them.

Robbins's demand that movement spring directly from character meant that he sometimes needed the input of those with dance skills he lacked. Gennaro authoritatively affirms the foundational contributions made to *West Side Story* (1957) by her father, the dancer–choreographer Peter Gennaro, whose expertise in Latin dance informed the steps created for the Sharks, including 'America' and 'Dance at the Gym'. Gennaro offers incisive analysis of the differences between the two men's work:

Gennaro's Sharks were exuberant, emerging organically out of character and demonstrating a proud people staking their claim in an unwelcoming country, while Robbins' Jets' dances were psychologically dense, representing a disenfranchised group of white Americans who perceived immigrants as a threat they must destroy.

(131)

A stunning series of rehearsal photographs underscores Gennaro's crafting of these dances and his intense collaboration with Robbins. The book's

numerous well-chosen photographs, many rarely seen, illuminate the graceful text. The cover image, catching Gwen Verdon and Peter Gennaro joyously fooling around as only two accomplished dancers can, makes for the most delightful book jacket in some time.

A new group of choreographers-turned-directors followed in Robbins's wake, and they dominated the staging of Broadway musicals for several decades. Gennaro rounds up the usual figures – Bob Fosse, Gower Champion, Michael Bennett – and offers probing analyses of key works in their storied careers. She reclaims Donald McKayle as a creative force in Broadway musicals and places him alongside these other, more celebrated men. She also pointedly discusses the difficulties McKayle experienced in the white Broadway environment, writing that

unlike his male, white contemporaries [...] who were offered a wide range of shows and forgiven for their failures, he was restricted to participation in 'Black Shows', and if his productions faltered he was quickly replaced by white, male directors.

(170)

Photographs and Gennaro's discussion of McKayle's staging of *Raisin* (1973), a musicalization of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, leave the reader thirsting for a revival of this nearly forgotten entry.

Any book that discusses Broadway dance in the final decades of the twentieth century has to grapple with the devastation of AIDS, and Gennaro suggests that its heavy toll among the theatrical community disrupted the line of male director–choreographers who might otherwise have come up through the dance ranks, thereby creating space for women such as Graciela Daniele and Susan Stroman. AIDS also broke the cycle of director–choreographers who adhered to the methods of Robbins and de Mille; the book's final section looks at the postmodern choreographic systems of Bill T. Jones and Steven Hoggett and their impact on Broadway dance in the twenty-first century.

The 'physical theatre' stagings by Hoggett, a non-dancer, in *Once* (2012) and *The Last Ship* (2014), reject legible step combinations in favour of movement phrases arrived at through improvisation with his casts. His influence extends to his assistants and associates now choreographing on Broadway, who combine structured dance creation methods with Hoggett's actor-driven movement approach. As she does throughout the book, Gennaro finds meaningful connections across generations, observing that while Hoggett's methods may differ from those of Robbins and de Mille, their aims are in alignment: they create dance movement that flows realistically from character, situation and experience. It is an elegant conclusion to a dance history told with precision and authority.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Kevin Winkler enjoyed a career of more than twenty years as a curator, archivist and library administrator at the New York Public Library, prior to which he was a professional dancer. He is the author of the new book *Everything is Choreography: The Musical Theater of Tommy Tune* (Oxford University Press, 2021). His previous book, *Big Deal: Bob Fosse and Dance in the American Musical* (Oxford University Press, 2018), won the Theatre Library Association's George

Freedley Memorial Award, Special Jury Prize, was a finalist for the Marfield Prize and was cited as an ALA/ACRL CHOICE Outstanding Academic Title. He is an on-screen commentator in the acclaimed documentary *Merely Marvelous: The Dancing Genius of Gwen Verdon*.

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