



Something to Dance About:

A New Ballet Pays Tribute to Jerome Robbins' Broadway

Jerome Robbins was a man of many parts, straddling the worlds of Broadway and the ballet, and, for his centennial, New York City Ballet paid tribute to him this spring with *Something to Dance About*, a new piece that provides a retrospective of his Broadway work. It provides a reminder, if any were needed, of the breathtaking range of his theatre choreography, from the exuberant trio of sailors in New York for one day only in *On the Town*, to the male wedding guests executing the "Bottle Dance" from *Fiddler on the Roof*. Also featured is "All I Need is the Girl," from *Gypsy*; the polka to "Shall We Dance," from *The King and I*, and "Dance at the Gym," from *West Side Story*. Other gems include "The Music That Makes Me Dance," *Funny Girl's* eleven o'clock number, and the speakeasy sequence from *Billion Dollar Baby*, one of Robbins' wittiest dances.

Something to Dance About features direction and musical staging by Warren Carlyle, whose extensive Broadway resume includes the current hit revival of *Hello, Dolly!*, told the website Playbill.com, "I think it's like curating a great exhibit. It's finding the right order to hang these works of art and walking the audience through it. Certainly, this is not a dusty old exhibit. I'm asking the audience to look at these from a different point of view. In

the number 'America,' from *West Side Story*, as traditionally performed there are sung sections, then dance sections, but because I was eager to just examine his dance I took out the sung sections. You now have 90 seconds of powerhouse choreography and dance. That's a way of looking at something we know and doing it in a new way."

Working out the running order took some time, which affected the work of Beowulf Boritt, the piece's scenic designer. "I knew for two years that I was doing it, but I didn't start working on it until November, for a May opening," he says; in the end he had about six weeks to have everything ready for the tech in February. In the fall, he had recently completed work on the Manhattan Theatre Club production *Prince of Broadway*, a retrospective of numbers from musicals produced and/or directed by Harold Prince, so he was familiar with the concept of evoking classic designs without reproducing them. "We weren't so much trying to copy the original designs as to get a poetic, balletic experience of them," he notes. And, staying in the spirit of NYCB's approach to design, he restricted himself entirely to drops.

Among these is an angled depiction of a theatre proscenium, which has an enigmatic, almost haunted, quality about it. "It was Warren's idea," Boritt says. "He wanted something that ref-

erenced the Broadway theatre. We hoped to put lightbulbs around it, but that turned out to be more than we could afford. It's a little off center and slightly out of whack, and it was always meant to serve as a bookend to the piece. Of all the drops, it best shows the artistry of the scenic painters. It's a 2D drop painted on black velour and it looks 3D. Irina Portnyagina, one of Joe Forbes' [of Scenic Art Studios] painters, did it using a ketchup squirter filled with gold paint. When you look at it close-up, it's like mashed potatoes; step back a bit, and it's beautiful." He adds, "The collaboration with the scenic artist is so important; it's a kind of non-verbal communication and when I find someone with whom I'm simpatico, it really makes me happy."

Other drops include, for the *Fiddler* sequence, a depiction of an enormous full moon, which adds a kind of cosmic dimension, and for *The King and I*, a scrim featuring an Asian-style arch. "It was technically the trickiest piece," Boritt says. "We did the chandeliers on the scrim. During the February tech, you couldn't see anything on it. We sent it back to Joe and it was repainted, but it had to go back two more times. We kept lightening the sky part of the drop to get a good contrast with the chandeliers."

Equally challenging was the drop

for the *On the Town* sequence, which features a New York skyline. In a twist, the outline of the buildings was, essentially, negative space, cut out of the drop. "I worked with Joe on changing the profiles of the buildings, to get an unframed drop that would hold the right shape," Boritt notes.

"It's a lot of scenery for New York City Ballet," says Mark Stanley, the company's resident lighting designer. (Stanley has been at NYCB for many years and is the only artist involved with the project who worked on a regular basis with Robbins, who co-founded the company with George Balanchine.) "We had to work on it carefully, because it's scenery fitting into a repertory plot. You have to put the drops where they can fit. It's a jigsaw puzzle that had to be worked out from Beowulf's original design. For example, the skyline was going to be a double-height drop and was going to grow onstage. We couldn't figure out how to make that work. In the end, the piece we have is stronger."



He adds, "The skyline drop was fascinating to work with. We are using color to define the solid silhouette of the buildings. Normally, the skyline would be solid, and the sky would be washed with light. The first time I lit it, I put a blue light behind it and it just wasn't popping the shapes of the skyline. The use of contrasting orange

really made a difference."

Working with Carlyle led Stanley, who has worked extensively in musical theatre, to rely on that style, as opposed to a relatively austere ballet approach. "When Jennifer Tipton lit *West Side Story Suite* for Jerry at NYCB, having done it for [the 1989 Broadway show] *Jerome Robbins'*



Top photo: Erin Baliano; Bottom photo: Paul Kolnik



Broadway, the section featuring the song ‘America’ had one cue in it. That’s how we’ve done it all this time. The excerpt of ‘America’ in *Something to Dance About* is half the length and I probably have ten cues in that sequence. And, probably, another ten could be written if we had hit every musical and choreographic change.”

The approach, he adds, is “a hybrid of ballet lighting and musical theatre lighting—Jerry lighting. There was an impulse to keep it simple, even though it has a lot of cues. Working with Warren, we figured out how much of it should reference the past and how much we allow audiences to see it through a contemporary lens.”

One big addition to the ballet’s rep plot was a set of **Chroma-Q Color Force II LED battens**. “I could never have done all those scenes, and been specific to them, with three-color ground rows,” Stanley says, “The

Color Forces gave me flexibility and range.” He used that freedom in different ways: “In the *Fiddler on the Roof* scene, the statement had to be moonlight, because of that big drop. In the case of *Gypsy* (“All I Need is the Girl”), I took a lot of liberty with color, because it consists of only two people on a huge stage and it demanded that we move into a color world that was not the alley behind a theatre, where it takes place in the musical, but more of an emotional space defined by color. I had fun with it, too. The NYCB gray floor takes color beautifully, and I created moments where the colors on the floor and backdrop reverse themselves, an effect that helps to bring the characters forward.”

Stanley added some moving lights. “I didn’t want to commit stuff in the rep for this purpose,” he says. “Because we teched it in February, at

the end of our winter season, I would have had to refocus lights that were already in performance. It was also a question of style. Adding moving lights gave me a range of intensity that I wouldn’t have otherwise had. I’ve learned from working with Susan Stroman at the ballet that to get the intimacy of a Broadway house on the larger scale of our stage, we need a lot more light.” Philips Vari-Lite VL3500 Spots provide the extra illumination.

The production climaxes with dancers from each show entering, either in small groups or individuals, while a singer [during the premiere run, Jessica Vosk] performs, “Something Wonderful,” from *The King and I*. A photo of Robbins is projected on the proscenium drop. The members of the company turn and bow; all are too young to have worked with Robbins, but, as this lively, lovely piece shows, his legacy is still very much with us. 🎭

Photo: Erin Balano