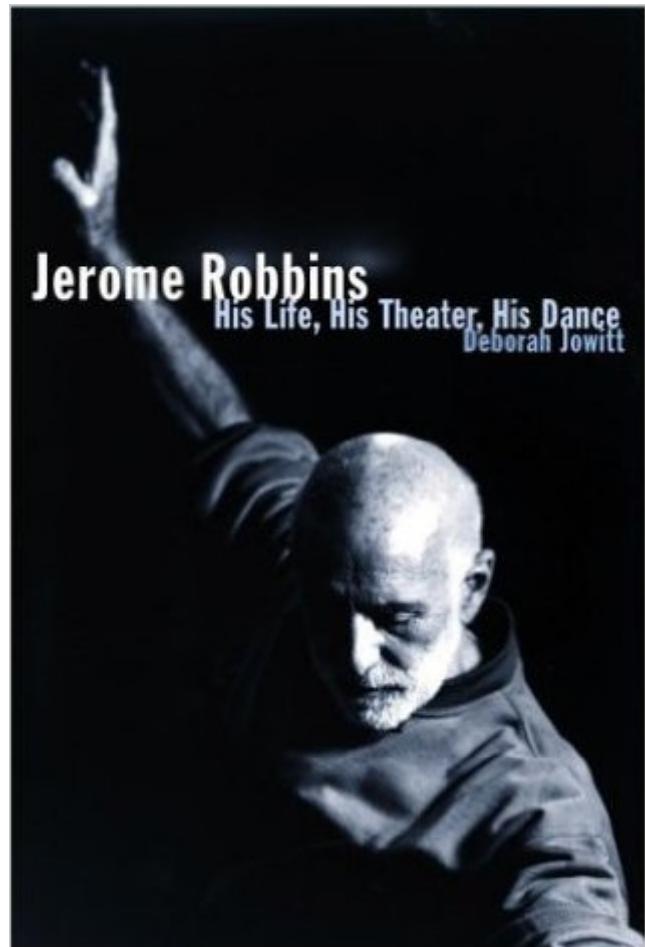


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# Jerome Robbins: His Life, His Theater, His Dance



## **Synopsis**

In this authoritative biography, Deborah Jowitt explores the life, works, and creative processes of the complex genius Jerome Robbins (1918-1998), who redefined the role of dance in musical theater and is also considered America's greatest native-born ballet choreographer. Granted unrestricted access to an enormous archive of personal and professional papers that included journals, correspondence, sketches, photographs, production notes, contracts, and more, Jowitt also interviewed more than one hundred performers and others who had collaborated with Robbins. Her book gives insights into his lively curiosity, his volatile temperament, and his constant striving for perfection, revealing not just how others saw him, but -- through the thoughts, feelings, and passionate outbursts he put down on paper over the course of almost eight decades -- how he saw himself. His career was closely tied to the development of both ballet and musical comedy in America. The only son of Russian Jewish immigrants, he began as a modern dancer and Broadway chorus boy. He joined Ballet Theatre shortly after its founding in 1940 and the New York City Ballet when it first became known by that name in 1948; his choreography, beginning with the smash hit *Fancy Free* in 1944, contributed to the emerging profile of both companies. He created ingenious numbers for lighthearted musicals like *On the Town* and *High Button Shoes*, but his imprint on *West Side Story* and later on *Fiddler on the Roof* helped lift the Broadway musical to a level in which dancing illuminated character and plot. Jowitt recounts how this richly creative life in the theater and out of it was shaped by Robbins's affairs with both men and women, his close friendships with other major artists ranging from Robert Graves to Robert Wilson, and the political and artistic climate of the times he lived in. Her investigation of his career includes the brief existence (1958-1961) of his own immensely successful company, *Ballets: U.S.A.*; his travails "doctoring" such musicals as *Funny Girl* and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*; his more experimental work directing plays during the 1960s; his attempt in the aborted *Poppa Piece* to come to terms with his Jewish heritage and his appearance before the House Committee on Un-American Activities; and the final glorious period beginning in 1969, when he returned to the New York City Ballet to work again beside the man he considered a mentor, George Balanchine. This meticulously researched and elegantly written story of a life's work is illuminated by photographs, enlivened by anecdotes, and grounded in insights into ballets and musical comedies that have been seen and loved all over the world.

## **Book Information**

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## Customer Reviews

Excellent biography of Jerry Rabinowitz, who as Jerome Robbins, shone brilliantly as dancer and then creator of dance, both for Broadway and Dance stages until his death at age 80. Given the difference in audience size, he is most likely best to be remembered for his theater work and its reproduction in Hollywood films than for his ballet work centered in the Old City Center and New Lincoln Center buildings in New York City. (As the author points out, his perfectionist approach to filming dance lost him his chance to direct his own work in Hollywood...put more precisely, he was fired while working on his first assignment there.) I cannot compare this with other of the several biographies available since I have not read them. I can say that this will tell you all that the average reader wants to know about the choreographer, his career and personal life. She has had access to his voluminous personal records as well as many others relevant to his life and work. Many co-workers, friends (and enemies) have been interviewed and the published material scoured as well. One of the reviewers found her writing quite repellent, I did not. The author writes clearly and balances his virtues with his uncanny ability to behave so as to alienate even a Saint. He was an anxious perfectionist, as she portrays him, and also had an ungovernable temper, easily touched off by almost anything done by those whose work he supervised as well as by collaborators in his various endeavors. Extensive but intermittent psychoanalysis presumably led to some of the self-understanding manifest in his diary and letters, but understanding, unfortunately, never insured self control.

All in all, I'm touched by Deborah Jowitt's well meaning and comprehensive biography of Jerry

Robbins. She digs under the surface of his ballet and Broadway work and finds a whole lot more than I had ever imagined. Again and again she returns to the paradox of the name, how "Jerry Robbins" was a fake, all-American and showbizzy place name for the real, suffering, inward, outcast Jerome Wilson Rabinowitz, and how Robbins could never be happy knowing this. He loathed himself from the inside out and the outside in: no wonder he treated others so terribly. Deborah Jowitt's years of research into the Robbins papers, those revealing scrapbooks and journals, have really paid off, for although I think in general Greg Lawrence's biography better in most ways, Jowitt's contains innumerable examples of revelation right from the horse's mouth, scraps of diaristic strip-tease that really pay off in almost every case. We can see how, in *Gypsy*, there had to be a strip-tease number in which three women explain, "You Gotta Have a Gimmick," because Robbins realized early on that was the path to artistic greatness--not the gimmick per se, but the emotional and psychological undressing. Along the way Jowitt sketches in many portraits, some of them ravishingly done. Leonard Bernstein has never seemed so much himself before. John Kriza, the gadabout dancer from Ballet Theater days, seems as "Fancy Free" as the roles he created in Robbins' early work. Jowitt's greatest "creation" as it were is Tanaquil Le Clercq, the tragic, French-born ballerina who came down with polio while Balanchine's fourth wife.

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