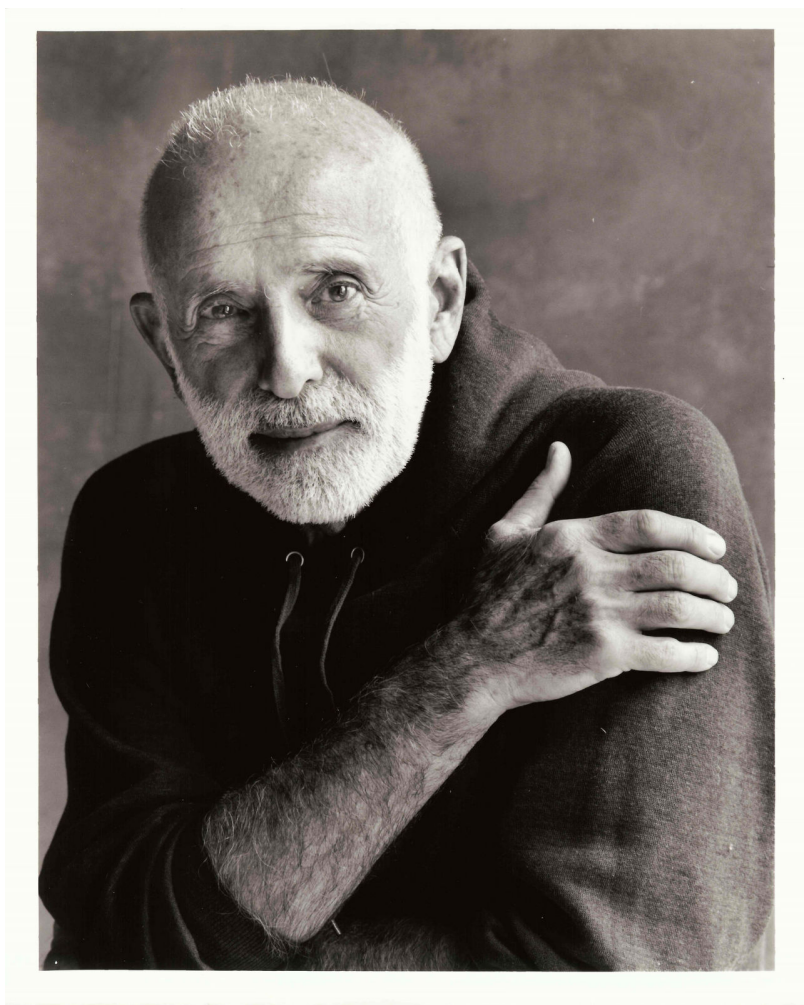


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TOP STORY

'West Side Story' choreographer celebrated by Spoleto Festival

By Eliza Ingle Special to The Post and Courier May 24, 2018 Updated May 24, 2018



"Celebration: The Art of the Pas de Deux" on May 25 commemorates Jerome Robbins' centenary and his unique relationship with the Spoleto Festival. (Photo by Jesse Gertein, courtesy of The Jerome Robbins Foundation)

Photo by Jesse Gertein, courtesy of The Jerome Robbins Foundation

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On stages around the globe this spring, performances will honor the centennial of the birth of Jerome Robbins, the award-winning ballet-cum-Broadway dance icon who choreographed "On the Town," "West Side Story" and many other productions, and who had a special relationship

to Spoleto Festival USA.

The festival kicks off with a one-time-only event called "Celebration: The Art of the Pas de Deux," which pairs three of Robbins' duets with film and a discussion about his life and work. The May 25 event features dancers from the Miami City Ballet and from the New York City Ballet, where Robbins worked alongside George Balanchine for decades.

Lourdes Lopez is one of few females who holds the position of artistic director for an esteemed ballet company. Her Miami City Ballet will present alternate programs throughout the first week of Spoleto Festival.

"Lourdes has exceeded expectations in making Miami City Ballet a company that rivals companies all over the country," said Nigel Redden, general director of the festival.

Redden worked with Lopez and the Jerome Robbins Rights Trust on this special celebratory performance, which was inspired by Robbins' 1973 visit to the Festival dei Due Mondi (Festival of the Two Worlds) in Spoleto, Italy. Robbins was previously in Spoleto in 1958 for the inaugural Italian festival as resident choreographer.

In a recent interview, Redden talked about the summer of 1973 when he was a young student interpreter. "(Robbins) was wonderfully at ease in Spoleto, very different than when he was working in New York," Redden said, remembering when Robbins was looking for a house to rent while the two of them engaged in a poetry-reciting duel. "Ultimately, Jerry was defeated," Redden said with a mischievous smile.

The current "Celebration: The Art of the Pas de Deux" was inspired by a 1973 performance of the same name that included five duets by popular choreographers and dancers of the time, with Robbins narrating. This century celebration will be different: the three duets are all by Robbins.

"Afternoon of the Faun" (1953) is a romantic atmospheric duet with music by Debussy. The other two works, "Into the Night" and "Other Dances," both use music by Chopin, whom Robbins greatly admired.

"His work creates a microcosm of life," Lopez said.

As a young dancer, Lopez often worked for Robbins. She will moderate the performance and oversee the reconstruction of the choreography. In a phone interview from her home in Miami, she described her first impressions of Robbins.

"Jerry was a genius," she said. "He was a task master, but was always very nice to me, treating me with integrity and respect. I was impressed by his storytelling and the importance of detail in his work. His talent was to show the poetic expression of humanity. For the dancers learning this work now, they understand how every step had meaning and dramatically expressed the story. As an artist, this way of working makes you learn a lot about yourself."

Robbins was as important to musical theater and narrative ballet as George Balanchine was to neo-classical ballet, and the two prolific choreographers worked together closely at New York City Ballet. Robbins' seminal 1957 hit "West Side Story," a street-savvy Romeo-and-Juliet story with music by a young Leonard Bernstein, changed musical theater forever.

"It was Jerry who magically blended ballet and musical theater by using performers who could equally dance, sing and act — the ultimate triple threat," Redden said. "Jerry and Leonard Bernstein did it masterfully, satisfying audiences who wanted work that had both intellectual artistry and great popular energy."

The show, a fast Broadway favorite, was made into a film in 1961. It remains today a popular musical theater offering.

Lopez reflected on the Robbins mystique.

"Jerry had a very American approach to dance," she said. "Every situation had to be real. He knew his audience very well and could make them laugh or cry and created timeless relationships on stage. As he crossed between the lines of ballet and theater, the audience loved his work. He was the greatest American choreographer of all time."

Miami City Ballet will be performing the "Celebration" program only once.

"This will be a distinctive event and a wonderful way to celebrate both Jerome Robbins and his particular connection to Spoleto," Redden said.

The company will offer three other performances — at 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. Saturday, May 26, and at 2 p.m. Sunday, May 27 — which will include work by two eminent choreographers, Justin Peck and Alexei Ratmansky, as well as Balanchine's joyful Walpurgisnacht Ballet.

Dance programs also not to be missed during the festival: the innovative tap of Michelle Dorrance; the thought-provoking modern choreography of Kyle Abraham and his company A.I.M; and the postmodern footwork of a few New York City Ballet stars, including Columbia native Sara Mearns.

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