Dance in the contemporary American musical theater: What has become of the dream ballet?

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DANCE IN THE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN MUSICAL THEATER

WHAT HAS BECOME OF THE DREAM BALLET?

by

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Simon Fraser University, British Columbia
1994

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

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ABSTRACT

Dance in the Contemporary American Musical Theater. What Has Become of the Dream Ballet?

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The dream ballet is defined. The discussion explains the inception, subsequent rise and eventual disappearance of the dream ballet. The research follows the development of the dream ballet and identifies its contributions to the American musical theater. The thesis specifically examines the amplification of the emotional realm of character and plot development, as elicited by the dream ballet.

The study evaluates the void left today by the absence of the dream ballet in relation to an examination of the climate of contemporary American musical theater. The analysis explores the correlation between the decline of the dream ballet and the decline of the caliber of American musical theater. The conclusion recommends the need for the re-inclusion of the command and the dynamic of the dream ballet.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

For the choreographer of Broadway musical theater:

The real failing, the killing off, is not in taking risks but choosing some work beneath his capacities and in doing it in a slick and routine fashion purely for recompense. This hurts the whole field of work, dirties and dulls down the audience, and destroys the individual.

(De Mille, *And Promenade Home* 191)

Agnes de Mille (1905-1993) voiced this warning concerning the creative work ethic of the choreographer in 1951. These words of wisdom hold true today and seem especially poignant when examining the role of dance in contemporary musical theater. In recent years, the Broadway dance community has lent its talent to efficient well-packaged musicals while their ingenuity and creative energy has lost momentum. De Mille advises that this is unacceptable and potentially destructive to the integrity of the field of work.

Today critics have noticed an absence of fresh, original and innovative choreography to explain the plots of musicals. There has been a decrease in the use of innovative dramatic dance in musical theater. Dance is not as tightly connected to the plot of a show as it once was. Dance has become more of an accessory and less of a visceral element firmly married to the dramatic action of the story.
Agnes de Mille highlighted the dramatic use of dance in her dream ballets starting in 1943 with *Oklahoma!*. Subsequently, choreographers such as Jerome Robbins, Michael Bennett and Bob Fosse built on what de Mille articulated in her initial dream ballets. This discussion will explore how these choreographers collectively brought dance to a new dramatic level and how today’s choreographers are struggling to keep dance alive in musical theater.

Today there does not seem to be enough original dance ingenuity in Broadway musicals except for that which is layered upon predictably successful revivals or a tribute to other choreographers. This dance, while successful and popular in its style today has already been proven so in its original inception and is not as noticeably genuine and thought provoking as it once was. I believe the absence of new creative movement has left a void in the coherency and integrity of original musical theater today.

Musical theater previously offered a solid product with a purposeful mission that was completed only by the inclusion of all elements in the creative process. The wholeness of musical theater has decreased as the various elements have branched out individually. While these saplings have been successful in their own right, it will be shown that they lack the unity and harmony previously characteristic of musical theater. The collaborative approach to creating a show that compliments all the elements is less apparent than in the past.

Certainly there are some very successful revivals today like *Chicago* (1996), *Cabaret* (1998) and *Annie Get Your Gun* (1999) that are packed full of innovative movement. The catch is that these musicals resuscitate previous shows, or, in the case of *Fosse* (1999) amalgamate the hits and styles of various shows. These shows, while often stunning in their use of dance, have used the astonishing accomplishments of their original
choreographers as a springboard to success. Financially this is safe, but creatively it lacks spirit. The excitement and anticipation of a new opening is controlled by presuppositions formed by the impact made by the original show. When an original show opens its effect is unknown. Reactions to the show could go either way. The enthusiasm and energy of a new show is raw and fills spectators with emotions that have not been previously determined. Revivals have a predictability that can tarnish the overall effectiveness of the show.

There have been few successful original musicals of late where the dance spoke like it did in *Oklahoma!* (1943), *West Side Story* (1957) or *Chorus Line* (1975).

The dream ballet developed in the forties and fifties illuminated the dramatic possibilities of dance. This histrionic use of dance is missing today. Contemporary Broadway should look back to these times as inspiration towards generating new ways of constructing musical theater dance today. The previously tight connection of dance to the dramatic themes of musical theater has loosened over the years. The exploration of this separation is needed because it continues today and may have an affect on the overall quality of musical theater.

There has been a gradual move away from the traditional format of the American musical. The format of years past often involved an equal emphasis on music, song and dance. In the past ten years the dance in successful new musicals has been leveled down by impressive technological or textual prowess as in *Les Misérables* (1987) or *Ragtime* (1998). These new musicals do not seem to need or embrace dance like they did in de Mille's time. The successful new musical today seems to have more emphasis on song and language to unfold and carry the plot than on dance. The necessity for dance in new Broadway musicals has lapsed along with the caliber of new musicals as a whole. This
essay will investigate this phenomenon. Exploring this shift reveals the need for a return to the inclusion of dance as a dramatic tool in musical theater as exemplified by the dream ballet.

Dance and the images of dance surround us in many areas of life. Rites, rituals and play are enveloped with movement protocol and dance traditions. Our history is partially recorded in modes of movement and gestures in drawings and paintings. Movement is a way for a culture to attempt to understand and establish itself. Richard Kislan argues, “Man’s fascination with dance stems from the preoccupation of the living with the signals and symbols of life” (236). Dance is an emblem of life because it is a natural mode of celebration of the human spirit. Kislan continues, “Where there is life, there is dance. Where there is joy, there is dance. Where there is hope, religion, society, art, and drama, there is dance” (236). Dance is a primary manifestation of human emotions and awareness. There is a universality in movement and gesture that is not attached as tightly to national boundaries or culture as language. Because dance is such a direct expression of feelings and sentiment it is beneficial to musical theater. Kislan describes why dance should be included in musical theater:

Dance humanizes expression in a way that music cannot. Harold Prince chose Jerome Robbins to direct Fiddler on the Roof because he sensed the need for a director-choreographer who could tell a story of Russian Jews in the universal language of dance.

(237)

Movement is a part of humanity’s culture and is a window into the soul of the individual, group or society that engages in it. Dance is telling of the capacity of imagination that one is capable of and has tremendous power of communication that can be used in a
variety of ways. Dance for these reasons can be an asset to the musical theater that commonly uses song to celebrate dramatic moments of intense emotion. Dance can help to amplify these feelings and suggests a more expansive reflection of the human experience.

Dance became a noteworthy and integral part of musical theater when it was used to carry plot. When dance was used to deepen interest in character and theme, the possibilities of dance were revealed to the musical theater world. Dance is a tool that can be used in many ways to expand on the show’s themes. Choreographers can use dance to establish mood or atmosphere, to embody a theme or idea, to replace dialogue, generate comedy, extend a dramatic moment, overwhelm in spectacle and carry plot. It is this last aspect where the success of Agnes de Mille was strongest. She created a new vehicle for dance in musical theater called the dream ballet.

In the dream ballet the unique and unmatchable passion and vigor of dance bloomed in musical theater. The dream ballet is a section of a musical where a character’s dream is brought to life and explored through dance. The clearest and primary example of this is found in Rogers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!* (1943). Agnes de Mille created the first dream ballet in *Oklahoma!* In the story, Laurie, the female protagonist, drinks a potion and falls asleep on the porch. What ensues is an investigation of her anxieties through dance, with the clear suggestion that Laurie is dreaming. Laurie is caught between her love for Curly, a cowboy and the rival for her affections Jud, a farmhand. The dance, which lasts over fifteen minutes and ends the first act, emphasizes Laurie’s fears of Jud’s aggressiveness. There is no spoken text or song but by the end of the first act it is clear why Laurie decides to go with Jud instead of risking provoking his anger.
All of this is achieved through dance. Hollis Alpert argues, “No musical, until then, had integrated dance with plot and music to so complete a degree” (142).

The dream ballet did not remain specific to this “dream” status, despite its lasting title. The term quickly evolved to mean any section of dance that explored character feelings, choices and relationships through comprehensive dance sections. The title “dream ballet” largely stuck metaphorically to simply mean an extensive dance section that was tightly connected to or explained the plot and characters in a way the other disciplines could not.

De Mille creates a dream ballet for Rogers and Hammerstein’s Carousel (1945) which is not a dream at all. In Carousel, she uses a fifteen-minute dance to show how Louise, the daughter of Billy Bigelow the carnival barker, was faring with the reputation Billy laid upon her by his own selfish and destructive behaviors before his death. This dance section, as observed by Billy (from the gates to Heaven) is the inspiration for his attempts at helping those he loved and his efforts to come to peace with his actions.

The dream ballet could be used to define cultural boundaries and physical character traits, as in the prologue of West Side Story (1957) or a nightmare, as in Fiddler on the Roof (1964), where the dance displays Tevye’s anxieties. Richard Kislan writes that:

Dance becomes the ally of plot in the ballet sequence. This type of dance can precipitate action (“The Dream Ballet” in Oklahoma!), comment on situation (“Ballet Sequence” in West Side Story), or advance an argument (“The Small House of Uncle Thomas” in The King and I).

(247)

The basic requirement for a dream ballet is that the emotions of the characters in relationship to the plot of the story are explored with the physical metaphor of the dance as “other” than speech or song.
The respect for dramatic dance in musical theater increased with its constant application using the dream ballet concept. Dance was no longer limited to a line of identical chorus girls. Dance fulfilled a dramatic need of the show previously left unattended. Dance in the dream ballet conveyed emotional rapture and turmoil using the infinite physicality offered by movement.

In discussing the importance of the dream ballet concept we must first investigate how dance became an integral part of the plot in the first place and then trace its subsequent fall from favor. The purpose of this study is to find out why dance, which was previously inseparable from the plot of the musical, is missing from such a position in Broadway musicals today and to suggest what is needed for its return.

Choreographers for new musicals of late have lost their roles as plot molders and have had to step aside to allow space for technologically advanced sets and essential dialogue. Dance seems to have an expected and efficient place in new musicals today that often turns out to be rather predictable. The new musicals largely used dance for energy and excitement, which is completely valid, but there has been a move away from plot driven dance in musical theater. This move, I think, has contributed to the decline of the new musicals as a whole. This decline emphasizes how important dance is to the overall success and lasting power of a new musical.

I believe a return to the unique possibilities offered by the dream ballet concept will expand dance in Broadway musicals. If dance is not making a purposeful and unique statement within the musical, its intention is obscured and the dance becomes less essential. The dance eventually gives way to the strong scores, lyrics and mammoth sets. Dance should not be placed on the back burner since it provides such a unique perspective on the story. This perspective will be described throughout this study.
Dance needs to return to the vigor that was born out of de Mille's creativeness in order to give life to future musicals. Agnes de Mille pioneered dance evolution in musical theater. De Mille's dream ballets planted the seeds that allowed dance to become a powerful dramatic tool. An examination of how de Mille struggled and endured in a similar time as today, sixty years ago, may be helpful towards offering a cure to what seems to be ailing dance in the new American musical theater. In terms of this thesis, the exploration of how de Mille created and shaped her work illuminates how the creative process should be approached today.

Dance will only have a strong and worthy future in musical theater if the command and dynamics of the dream ballet are embraced again. Unless there is a change in the role of dance in new musicals, it may only thrive in revivals. This study will show that the loss of the dream ballet has caused the American musical theater to suffer. The exploration of the roots of the dream ballet dance reveals an important aspect of musical theater not to be cast aside. We clearly need to renew the respect for the dream ballet. This will open up a gateway towards understanding dance in musical theater today and evaluating it with the insight and sagacity the American musical theater deserves.

In short, this thesis will explore the rise and demise of the dream ballet starting with Agnes de Mille and her influences, and continuing with the contributions of Jerome Robbins, Bob Fosse and Michael Bennett. These four choreographers and others will be examined, not as simply the best in their field but as those who have raised the bar for dance and character in musical theater. Despite their extremely different movement styles, the four giants all amplified the emotional realm of character and plot through dance. Their creative discoveries provide potential road maps for contemporary artists.
regarding the methods of discovering the true essence behind the blending of dance and drama.

These choreographers manipulated the dream ballet in ways that led dance to forefront of musical theater. The replication of their work is not the key to the survival of today’s musical theater, but the intimate evaluation of their methods might stimulate an environment of creativity that is lacking today.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Agnes de Mille

Agnes de Mille, despite her ties to her Uncle, the Hollywood producer Cecil B. de Mille, and the fact that her father was a renowned playwright, was largely alone in her struggle to establish her style of dance. Armed with only her mother's constant encouragement, de Mille set out to make her statement. Her first job choreographing was for the infamous Lee Shubert, who promptly fired her for not accommodating to his artistic ideas. She quickly packed up and went to England in 1932, where she studied under Marie Rambert, an accomplished ballet teacher and choreographer attempting to create a national English Ballet. In this environment she had the opportunity to train with some of England's most talented dancers: Fredrick Ashton, Antony Tudor, Alicia Markova. This setting allowed de Mille to experiment with and hone her style that would shine 11 years later in Oklahoma! (1943) and Carousel (1945).

De Mille sacrificed all for the stage. She owned nothing that was not geared towards performance. It emerged in class and in recital that de Mille had a style all her own that did not conform to the traditional English ballet. De Mille's late start in dance and American upbringing was not at all familiar to the ballet world and showed through in her dance. Richard Philp suggests, "She was a victim of her genetic heritage – her body was not suitable for the ballet she loved and studied with such determination" ("Agnes"
7). De Mille tried fervently to adapt to her shortcomings. Because of her peculiarity of style she continuously had to defend her work and fight for its inclusion in company recitals. She set her standards at a high level and rarely compromised her artistic integrity despite Rambert's hovering over her.

De Mille was often frustrated that everyone constantly asked about and wanted to engage in gossip about Hollywood. She wanted to establish an identity of her own independent from her family connections. She found herself often bewildered, lonely and without any love in her life. Her longing for joy was translated into her works. Her movements were large and fervent. She ignored the subtleties of ballet. This eventually directed her towards a career in the musical theater. Her dancing was emotional, purposeful and wrapped tightly around the story of the piece. De Mille explains, "I aimed to do character studies where the dancing was a natural incident in the episode and a revelation of personality, using dance like costuming" (Dance to the Piper 105). Her mode of dancing leaned towards pantomime. This preference was fueled by her growing desire to rebel against Rambert who distinctly hated this sort of acting dancing. De Mille explains, "I kept trying to find a gesture that was not literal, to become abstract without loss of emotional impact" (Speak to Me, Dance With Me 98).

De Mille recognized the vaudevillian and mime-like qualities of pantomime in her work. She sought to hone the successful elements of that particular style by connecting emotions, gestures and costumes to a dance form that would explain or forward the plot in an abstract and yet demanding way. De Mille was interested in exploring simple situations from an obscure point of view, as opposed to reinforcing the obvious with stereotypical gestures.
The young choreographer constantly struggled because she felt that what technique she had lacked an identity. She was scared of commitment and terrified of failure. Antony Tudor, who was de Mille’s mentor, felt that if de Mille were to harness her rage and frustrations she would find where the power lay in her choreography.

De Mille saw performances at every opportunity. She was generally unimpressed by the sugar icing and frilly dancing around her. She began to realize that she was distinctly different from her fellow choreographers. De Mille was intrigued by George Balanchine’s work. Her faith in her own work was shaken, and she immediately investigated his style. She found the dancers rhythms to be exquisite but felt that the dancers lacked emotion. De Mille did not feel that Balanchine’s dancing reached the heart. The technique was so exquisite that it made her cry, but she found it was not enough. The Ballet Club of Marie Rambert raved about Balanchine. This added to de Mille’s feelings of exclusion from the ballet world. By this time de Mille had a handful of pieces under her belt: *Gigue, Harvest Reel, Stagefright, Blues, Ballet Class*. These pieces were original and clever but lacked the grace and charm that separated ballet from folk dance.

Despite de Mille’s foreboding about her work she secured a position with producer Charles B. Cochran constructing the dances for his show *Nymph Errant* (1933), composed by Cole Porter. Working for Cochran provided de Mille with the opportunity to hone her style. The show forced de Mille to work fast and on the fly, something she certainly was not used to. Cochran was constantly demanding new dances and subsequently pressuring de Mille to adapt her work quickly towards the theatrical needs of the show. De Mille remained an outsider despite her opportunities to work with such accomplished people. Her style was not unique enough to garner the respect she felt she
deserved. Her style was not compelling enough nor was it memorable because it was reminiscent of pantomime and social dance. De Mille realized that she would have to dig deeper to achieve any lasting success.

De Mille had scattered her directions and lost her momentum. She did not receive attention from her ballet friends. They did not recognize the medium that she was working with as legitimate dance. She lost out as far as making connections with Cochran and the star of the show Gertrude Lawrence, because she was not sophisticated or cosmopolitan enough. Agnes de Mille did not fit in.

In the social circles of the theater world Agnes de Mille lacked sex appeal. It would be this very thing that would make her choreography unique. De Mille matured beyond the obvious choices to have her dances be sexy and seductive using cliché movements. She did not draw her material from the Broadway movies of the past or the burlesque houses, which is perhaps what Cochran wanted. She sought out new ways of expressing these emotions that were not as obvious. De Mille was constantly evaluating her connection to her surroundings and to her land. Her dances had an organic and honest quality to them. Unfortunately, she never seemed to find the appropriate venue for them.

De Mille was a hard worker; she steadily began creating stimulating, innovative, well-researched dances. This sort of work is admirable in its ingenuity, but the community within which she was working was just not recognizing it. The ballet world was not for her. De Mille had the artistic integrity to draw from her own palette and not be swayed by the trends around her. De Mille talks of her time in the ballet world:

I had developed my skill in storytelling and character delineation in my concerts, and I now brought this to the ballet world, adding, I hope, a new sort of lyricism.

The critics said that this combination sometimes achieved brilliant comedy and
sometimes seemed a break in style, but out of this divergence I was able to
develop my own style.

(America Dances 132)

While she remained in ballet, De Mille continued her professional relationship with
Antony Tudor who was exploring the relationship of emotions and gesture in dance.
Influenced by Mikael Fokine and Serge Diaghilev, he continued their explorations. De
Mille often took solace in Tudor's work. She describes her attraction to his
choreography: “Each physical statement sets up a rippling of contrary suggestions, and
each step is wreathed with doubts, regrets, aspirations, until the dancers seem literally to
be moving through the human mind” (Speak to Me, Dance With Me 235). The budding
choreographer praises her mentor's accomplishments: “In effect Tudor had translated
emotion in all its contradictions and suggestibility to the terms of visual movement. This
is magic and this is unique” (Speak to Me, Dance With Me 235). De Mille was earnest in
her respect for Tudor and constantly sought to maintain his level of commitment and
professionalism in her work.

The time de Mille spent in England also allowed for her to observe the likes of
Fredrick Ashton, Dame Ninette de Valois and Marie Rambert. These dancers and
choreographers had a definite individual sense of direction and style. De Mille
recognized this and admired ballet for all its diversification and multiple branches, but
she yearned for more. As she explains of her colleagues, “They created recognized and
accepted forms. I wanted a new theater, unknown as yet and only dimly guessed at even
by me” (Speak to Me, Dance With Me 247).

De Mille felt she had a flair for dramatic and theatrical dance but the opportunity to
put her talent to use was not there. She continued in her work to try to find some
common ground between pantomime and ballet. When asked to expand *Harvest Reel*, an earlier piece at the Hollywood Bowl back in America, she met notable American modern dancers such as Lester Horton’s pupils Bella Lewitzky and Mary Meyer and found some hope for her work in the open atmosphere of modern dance. She describes the discipline and dedication of these dancers that inspired her:

> They gave their whole time, their strength and their youth to the formations of these techniques, with no great hope of personal advancement and no guarantee of performing careers; asking merely to serve the art form and their chosen masters.

(*America Dances* 110)

De Mille was impressed by the dancers’ dignity and selfless commitment to the art form. The atmosphere was conducive to de Mille’s style, and she worked easily. She explains, “The great body of dances, technique and choreographic achievement built up in the second quarter of this century was voluntary, unrecompensed, an act of dedication” (*Speak to Me, Dance With Me* 316). This attitude catalyzed de Mille’s confidence and solidarity in her style.

Despite the rather lame press she received for this event, she was inspired by the down to earth qualities of the modern dancers. Fueled with a relaxed and open mind, de Mille set off for her first teaching experience in Steamboat Springs, Colorado. This was a wonderful experience for her as the group she worked with was very folksy and happy. The teaching provided her with a creative outlet that was not as stressful to her as choreographing. The teaching camp was particularly in touch with nature. This was a refreshing break for de Mille from the disciplines of the ballet world and the fast pace of Hollywood. De Mille describes the camp, “It combined camping, horseback riding, barn-dancing, local sightseeing, hearty food and the arts” (*Speak to Me, Dance with Me* 333).
The participants engaged in many social dances and square dances. This was an exhilarating experience for de Mille who proclaimed “I think Rodeo began that night” (Speak to Me, Dance With Me 337). Incidentally, this was when she first ran into Martha Graham stepping off a train.

_Rodeo_ (1942) was one of her first major successes. In _Rodeo_ de Mille had succeeded in explaining her love affair with America to others in a clear and compelling way through dance. De Mille was impressed by the spirit and verve that came out of such simple dances executed in simple settings as she had observed in Colorado. She applied this supple and organic temper to her work and found her voice. Her choreography had a levity and strength that extended throughout the whole body. Movements were angular and her gestures were purposeful. The limbs of her dancers were like the healthy durable tree branches that would swirl and sweep only with a strong wind behind them. De Mille seemed to let go of her dependency on those around her and stood on her own two feet. This liberation is detectable in de Mille’s description of her growing love for the West:

>The descending grassy slopes filled me with a passion to run, to roll in delirium to wreck my body on earth. Space means this to a dancer – or to a child! The descent through the air, the finding of earth footage, the embracing and struggle with the fundamental ground. These are to a dancer what strong scents are to an animal. (Dance to the Piper 15)

De Mille was involved in dance in a time where most choreographers were searching for a unique identity. She explains, “We risked everything. Every one of us had thrown overboard all our traditions, ballet, Duncan, Denishawn, or what not, and we were out to remodel our entire craft” (Dance to the Piper 145). Previous traditions were abandoned
and the search was on to improve the diversity of the art form. Every small concert or recital that was scraped together was used as a testing ground for new and uncertain creations.

De Mille was profoundly affected by Martha Graham. This influence was not so much Graham’s style as it was her dedication and passion for dance. De Mille was impressed by Graham’s faith “in the integrity of work and in the rightness of spirit” (Dance to the Piper 154). They became fast friends and helped each other through very challenging times. De Mille constantly went to Graham for reaffirmation as she was impressed by Graham’s determination and belief in her creations. Despite de Mille’s lack of consistent employment she was beginning to realize that although the big producers did not seem to like her work the audiences of America did.

Through her use of gesture, de Mille sought to break free of the long held traditions of ballet. Ballet had a handful of often used gestures which seemed to de Mille trite and two-dimensional in their presentation. To de Mille, traditional gestures from ballet seemed to fit only into fairy tales and were blatantly childlike in their simplicity. De Mille explains what she and the group she worked within were trying to do:

We were trying to diversify the root impulse and just as Gershwin impressed on the main line of musical development characteristics natural to his own unclassical environment, we were adding gestures and rhythms we had grown up with, using them seriously and without condescension for the first time. This is not a triviality; it is the seed and base of the whole choreographic organization. If dance means anything, it means the life behind the movement.

(Dance to the Piper 307)
New traditions in dance were being identified. A uniquely American dance form was emerging from the grips of the European ballet. The new choreography created gestures to suggest emotional tensions of the moment that had an honesty and visceral feel about them. Ballet seemed doomed to repeat over and over the gestures of hundred year old repertories. De Mille danced about what she knew in her time. Her naturalism was cutting and shrewdly realistic because of its common themes.

Once she was making strides in her choreography, as demonstrated by the success of *Rodeo* (1942), de Mille was asked by Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein to join them in creating *Oklahoma!* (1943). De Mille, of course considered this an honor, but after all her revelations and lessons learned from her previous efforts, she realized she was faced with a new animal. The dances would have to fit the demands of the book and follow the author's intentions. She describes the demands that the musical theater presented:

In a musical play all would be different: the dances would have to suit the book; they would have to build the author's line and develop his action, adding an element not obtainable through acting or singing and necessary if for no other reason than their dynamic effect.

*(Dance to the Piper 317)*

De Mille found the transitions especially challenging. The audience generally accepted dialogue turning into song. De Mille gave herself the task of finding the smoothest and most believable way for song to give way to dance. She promptly dove deep into the plot of the play and investigated the needs of the characters in search of motivation for her dances. This resulted in an exploration of the passions and sorrows of everyday life described without a word. There was a heartfelt sense of satisfaction from
all involved as de Mille brought dance to a new level. Oklahoma! was a hit. For the first time, de Mille had not compromised her ideals, and felt free to truly follow her instincts. De Mille succeeded in finding a voice for American dance that spoke of her time. It was not until World War II that audiences began to look for similar answers from their country as de Mille had been searching for the past ten years. Through Oklahoma! de Mille, Rogers and Hammerstein connected with them. De Mille suggests of Oklahoma!: From the first night there was a triple row of uniformed men and women standing at the back of the theater, moved often to the point of tears although the show was a happy one and full of jokes. The show appealed to their love of country and home; many of these men and women were in the greatest staging area of America and shipping out for life-and-death duty overseas.

(America Dances 188)

Soon after Oklahoma! de Mille engaged in her choice of a variety of projects; (One Touch of Venus (1943), Tally-Ho (1944), Carousel (1945)).

All the while, the young Jerome Robbins was coming up through the ranks as an innovative new choreographer. De Mille was immediately impressed by the virtuosity and athletics of Robbins’ dramatic style. She had attached dance to drama and was satisfied that others agreed with her statements and sought to further solidify them with a vigor de Mille felt deserving of the new form. De Mille set the standards for choreographic invention to be followed for many years to come. She had firmly established her career and was finally making money. Able to relax and look with fresh eyes at the work going on around her, she was in awe of Robbins’ creativity and truly felt that he was a poet of his time, as she had been in hers.
No sooner had de Mille inaugurated the dream ballet in *Oklahoma!* than it begin to evolve through the discoveries and talents of her contemporaries. What is most important about the dream ballet is that it opened the doors for dance to become an integral part of the complete show. Dance was shown to speak to the audience in a way that no other form had.

De Mille did not achieve her success until twenty years into her career. She had trouble always believing in herself, but she believed in her art form. She constantly pushed herself to explore new ground armed with the knowledge that dance could tell the story of the needs of a character in a way that was beyond words. She discusses the dances in the dream ballet in *Oklahoma!:

> They were an added comment, so to speak, an added dimension, and whereas the dialogue was folksy and realistic and the décor and action were, in a sense, frivolous and lighthearted, the ballet was in a sense tragic, even foreboding, and it gave the piece an additional aura of otherworldliness, poignancy and haunting nostalgia.

(*America Dances* 188)

De Mille never had a method to her ballets. She risked her reputation and any minimal stature she had built to find innovative ways to get her point across. She rarely knew what the end product was and constantly cried on her friend Martha Graham’s shoulder for reassurance. Graham listened to her always and after her success of *Oklahoma!* gave her these lasting words of advice, which today’s choreographers should heed:

> There is a vitality, a life-force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action and because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and

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be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is nor how valuable nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open. You do not even have to believe in yourself or your work. You have to keep open and aware directly to the urges that motivate you. Keep the channel open.

(Dance to the Piper 335)

De Mille’s and Graham’s messages resonate loudly and clearly: to call oneself an artist, a creator, one cannot sell out to easy jobs or big money, one must remain true to oneself. Under no circumstances should ideals be compromised. De Mille’s contribution, the dream ballet, awakened the world of dance in musical theatre to its infinite possibilities. Her dream ballet was a ground floor, grassroots approach to dance as drama. Choreographers have built upon this over the years and have used her work as a starting point from which to explore new ways of expressing character and plot through dance.

Mindy Aloff argues, “All styles of dancing that have any staying power build on the past in a deeper organic way and turn their practitioners into scholars and historians by default” (“Rediscovering” 2:1). Choreographers added to de Mille’s dream ballet in a way that eventually solidified de Mille’s successes for many years to come. Exploring how de Mille’s accomplishments were layered upon by other artists explains, at least in part, how dance gained such strength on Broadway.

Edwin Denby

A review of some of the criticism when the seeds of the dream ballet were being planted helps to understand the directions of dance at the time. If these artistic experiments and methods could again take root in today’s musical theater perhaps a
creation as poignant and lasting as the dream ballet may emerge, securing a place for
dance in future American musical theater.

Edwin Denby was a dancer and dance critic working in the mid-thirties to the mid-
forties. He was born in China in 1903, which he left when he was seven to move to
Europe. He studied at the same school as Marie Rambert, Hanya Holm and Mary
Wigman in Germany called Hellerau. Emile Jacques Dalcroze (1865-1950) created this
school in 1910. Dalcroze dedicated the school “to expression of rhythm in music, dance
and theater” (America Dances xiii). Dalcroze pioneered the pairing of dance, emotion
and rhythm. Dalcroze created a series of exercises that aimed at appreciating musical
rhythm and movement. Lincoln Kirstein comments, “Dalcroze, with remarkable
intuition, felt that rhythm in hearing, or in creating harmonies was not separate from, but
rather intimately linked to, rhythm in seeing and moving” (286). At Hellerau, Dalcroze
instructed many students who would go on to share his vision with others, like Rambert
did with Vaslav Nijinsky and eventually her students Tudor and Ashton, and as Denby
did through his writings. Dalcroze’s concepts and methods took a more scientific and
mathematical approach to dancing which “if correctly understood they were most
sensibly applicable to the science and craft of theatrical dancing, particularly in relation
to choreography” (Kirstein 286). Dalcroze’s teachings gave dancers a sense of timing
and execution of movement previously ignored.

Denby traveled to Russia in 1927 and studied under director Vsevelod Meyerhold
(1874-1940). Meyerhold challenged the boundaries of movement within the emotional
realm of theater. Meyerhold believed that different muscle movements elicited different
emotional responses. Meyerhold used movement as action and was interested in the
relationship between motion and drama. He applied his theories to directing drama. His
innovations pushed the boundaries of traditional theater and helped to solidify the
director as the major creative source in theater. These periods of study seemed to have
influenced Denby’s interpretation of dance. This young man worked and visited
throughout Europe at an extremely important and experimental time for dance. Through
Denby’s diverse training and practical experience he became especially in tune with
theatrical dancing, and this is why his opinion is of use when evaluating de Mille’s
inception of the dream ballet.

Denby was one of the major reviewers during the ten years when de Mille was
struggling to establish her style. Denby moved to America with a goal to “...find an
American voice that spoke of the power of dance” (Denby 5). Like de Mille, he was not
so interested in the technique of dance but rather the impetus behind it. Robert Cornfeild
explains of Denby’s mission: “Denby’s critical duty was to delineate the way dance
spoke to the soul, how its blunt imagery could terrify, where and by what means it
dazzled the senses” (Denby 6). Denby sought to educate the public concerning the
distinct emotional possibilities of dance. He was part of a school that thought dance had
immense capabilities to emotionally enhance a character and solidify its connection to the
plot. In his reviews, he translated the emotional voice of dance to the public. Denby
found that “...dance by its nature is about impermanence, it is an emblem of life’s
poignant glory” (9). Denby opened up a discourse concerning the transient journey of
dance as a symbol of life’s ongoing movement and uncertainties.

Denby explained all forms of dance for the American public thoroughly and
respectfully. Deeply interested in the poetics of dance, he was intrigued by the emotional
qualities of movement especially through the experiments of Leonide Massine, Martha
Graham and their contemporaries. He constantly encouraged the artists to go further by
justly explaining the weak spots or errors in their work. He found that when tableaus or pictures were formed that the drama of the dancing came to a halt. He described how the use of pantomime in its most primitive form was a disease in dance in need of a cure. This was the “disease” Agnes de Mille was struggling to cure. Denby explains his distaste for these sort of picture perfect dances:

They arrest the drama of dancing which the imagination craves to continue, stimulated by all the kinetic senses of the body that demand a new movement to answer the one just past. Until a kind of secret satisfaction and a kind of secret weariness coincide.

Denby warned of the emptiness of the static use of dance and explained the result of using dance in such a way.

Denby found satisfaction in Agnes De Mille’s work. He seems to have understood what it was she was striving for. Denby saw the naturalism in de Mille’s dances. Her movements were clear, fresh, and familiar. She did not have an awkward affectation of style that could weigh down her movements. Her dances had an airy, believable vigor to them that spoke easily of the American west.

The success of her dream ballet in *Oklahoma!* (1943) was founded in this naturalism. De Mille was able to push aside the snobbish, self indulgent and gratuitous commercial dance that was still popular at the time and concentrate on honing her own style. Her own gestures in dance were creative and simple. As Denby explains, “She has a real sense of how the body dances, she composes properly, and she has the gift of rhythm completely congenial to Americans” (77). De Mille’s recognition of her connection with the American people came to life in *Rodeo* (1942). In *Rodeo* she demonstrated through
dance how ordinary people live and function in the West. *Rodeo* captured the imagination of the public by offering a sincere look at life in the West. De Mille mixes styles and recognizable pedestrian movement with a celebratory spirit and cheerfulness much welcomed by the audience. Her clarity of conception drew Denby in. As he describes:

Somehow the flavor of American domestic manners is especially clear in that particular desert landscape; and that is its fascination. The dance, the music, the décor....each are drawn to that same local fact with affection: so they have a mysterious unity of a touching kind.

(96)

The steps themselves are innovative, keen to the eye and cleanly executed. De Mille danced the lead in the initial presentation. Denby specifically was fascinated by how de Mille, “by imaginative projection – she gave a completely clear sense of the West as a place she had lived in, quite independently of anything she did. It gave her performance the extra dimension of style; and the audience took to her completely” (97).

The success of de Mille’s gestures comes from the fact that they are cleverly blended within the dance and do not stand out. The gestures accent the characters who perform them and offer a window into their emotional tapestry. De Mille herself explains of the connection between dance and emotions, with her characterization of Laurie’s feeling in the dream ballet: “The ballet, however, showed what was going on in her mind and heart, her terrors, her fears, her hopes; so in fact the happiness of her life, her life itself, depended on choice” (*American Dances* 188). De Mille’s approach towards the interpretation of plot gave her a significant style that was comparable to that of the great balletomanes. Denby maintains that:
Style is the expression of the secret meaning of the piece as far as it relates to the individual dancer; in a way it is the dancer’s deportment. In another way, style is a question of giving a phrase of dancing an edge or vivacity by timing the point of emphasis, as in reciting poetry.

De Mille had achieved this in *Rodeo*. The dance style of *Rodeo* had a rhythm to it that echoed the public’s perception of their pace of life. Her poetics were familiar in an inarticulate yet commonly recognizable way. A return to a similar naturalism and honesty when interpreting contemporary themes may bolster dance on Broadway today.

De Mille’s choreography displays a warmth that is alluring in its naturalness while connecting with the spirit of humanity of her time. Her dances may not be completely transferable to today’s audiences because the material has now been overdone, but in her dream ballet she found the medium through which she could connect to the people of her day. As Denby comments, the dances in the dream ballet in *Oklahoma!:

...emerge unpretentiously from the action of the play, they heighten the sentiment of it, they have a sincere point to make. *Oklahoma!* is about our modest Western way of life, the emotion and myth of it.

Contemporary choreographers need to find the emotions and rituals of today’s youth, today’s women, today’s men, today’s workers, today’s elderly in hopes of striking an emotional chord which will make people demand dance in musical theater like they did after the inception of de Mille’s dream ballet. Denby indicates the success of de Mille’s choreography:
It is a subject we all cherish and believe in, like an image of home. When the audience recognizes the local flavor of Miss de Mille’s dances, it is not just a cheery matter of some folk-dance steps. It is a way of moving that looks plain and open, and Miss de Mille seems to come closer to the secret of our common movement than other native dancers have.

Other choreographers have pursued this same connection with the audience. Robbins and Fosse may have had a more distinct style then de Mille as we see, but de Mille’s understanding of her time and the places she lived has been unmatched.

Jerome Robbins

Jerome Robbins’ (1918-1998) accomplishments are woven into the tapestry of musical theater with lasting strength and meaning. His ingenuity took Broadway by storm and set a new precedent for dance in musical theater. After seeing Fancy Free (1944), the prelude to Robbins first Broadway hit On The Town (1944), Agnes De Mille describes Robbins choreography:

The comment is truthful and poignant, the humor superb, and the style altogether fresh. It is in the vernacular, the contemporary jazz idiom, but superimposed on the discipline and cleanliness of classic technique and it has inaugurated a new choreographic style.

(And Promenade Home 177)

De Mille passed the creative torch to Robbins. He expanded dance vocabulary and developed a style that solidified the place of dance in musical theater. Robbins was to become the new poet to explain our urban lives to us through dance. Like de Mille,
Robbins dared to challenge and change styles. He refused to compromise his artistic integrity, no matter what profitable or successful trend stared him in the face. Robbins was moving beyond de Mille's accomplishments. Richard Philp argues:

Robbins had a greater choreographic dexterity and dimension of human experience in his work than de Mille had in hers — and she certainly knew it. De Mille's Americana was a far cry from Robbins's grittier, more contemporary view, often rich with humor and wit.

("Robbins" 7)

Robbins had a fierce intensity in his creative process that was incomparable to de Mille. He was much more demanding. This vigorous attitude was consistent through his research and choreography. Robbins refused to censor or soften situations in order to shelter the audience from the realities of life. Robbins pursued a high level of authenticity in his dances. It is not that de Mille did not pursue this same goal, but she explored it at a more measured pace with greater subtlety.

Robbins firmly established his reputation and staying power on Broadway with the first completely movement conceived musical in 1957. He used dance to create characters and verbalize their anxieties and desires throughout the entirety of the show. In *West Side Story* dance had a solid through line like never before in musical theater, meaning that the dance was carried along with the plot at every turn. The dance unfolded as the story unfolded. The movement added a level of intensity to the gang rivalry, especially in the opening segment, where through dance character is defined and the story is set up. Lehman Engel describes the impact of the half-danced, half mimed opening section of *West Side Story* (1957):
Seeing and hearing a kinetic finger-snapping, fragmentary dialogue and music — that accompany the mime-dance and in an extraordinary way communicate tension and evil — we become immediately aware of the dark, hopeless social web that hovers menacingly in the very air. It will destroy. No one will be safe.

This creation was Robbins' own interpretation of the dream ballet that lasted an entire evening.

Robbins could not attain his goal alone and so he approached Leonard Bernstein to write the score, who had composed the music for Robbins' previous works. He found Stephen Sondheim for the lyrics, and Arthur Laurents to write the book. The 'Big Four' as the group was called immersed themselves in an intense collaboration. The success of this collaboration was due to the fact that all aspects of the musical including the dance were derived from an overall passion for the show. No one was trying to take credit for the various aspects. Robbins talks about how collective the creative process was: "...we were all of us just dedicated to making that show happen" (Guernsey Jr. 44).

Robbins felt, like De Mille, that dancers should clearly emerge as characters, not just as instruments for dance entertainment. The doors were wide open for dance to become more intimate. Keith Garebian in The Making of West Side Story explains: "...under Balanchine, de Mille, and Robbins, ballet evolved an elaborate vocabulary of movement particularly conceived for and suited to the visual presentation of psychological themes and conflicts" (16).

Robbins explored the facets and connections between dance and drama intensely in all of his work: Fancy Free (1944), On The Town (1944), The King and I (1951), Peter Pan (1954), to name a few. With each show, he delved deeper into the expression and
motives he was able to convey through dance. Robbins' main concept was that dance and body language were inseparable from drama. "With Jerome Robbins, dance was synonymous with emotion and thought and so the amplification of dance by the integration of song, music, speech and pantomime became an amplification of drama" (Garebian 16). Robbins' energetic desire for character and emotion to be born out of dance was fully realized in West Side Story.

Robbins began with character development through dance, shades of personality were added along with music, and integrity and meaning were solidified by the lyrics. Robbins describes part of the process:

Lenny would play something and I'd take off right there in the room, telling him, "I can see this kind of movement, or that kind of movement." I wrote a scenario for the second-act ballet, so that Lenny had that as a premise to start with. He would compose on that, and then we'd get together and he'd play it, and I'd say, "That sounds wonderful, let's have more of this or more of that."

(Guernsey Jr. 49)

These notions were part of the concept understood from the start by the collaborators. Each element was to enhance the other in order to form a complete unity. Robbins explains the concept in an interview with Terrence McNally in Broadway Song & Story:

I wanted to find out at that time how far we as 'long-haired artists' could go in bringing our crafts and talents to a musical. Why did we have to do it separately and elsewhere? Why did Lenny have to write an opera, Arthur a play, me a ballet? Why couldn't we in aspiration, try to bring our deepest talents together to the commercial theatre in this work? That was the true gesture of the show.

(Guernsey Jr. 54)
Where de Mille largely worked separately from the directors, Robbins sought continuous blending, collaboration and communication. The story of the characters was to be found within the dance. The movement would tell the real story. The other elements would be essential in drawing out further character dimensions. David Sheward describes Robbins accomplishments:

In addition to telling a riveting story, the show was a watershed in the development of musical theatre. Director-choreographer Jerome Robbins furthered the use of dance as both an expression of character and as a way to tell a story.

(143)

Robbins had huge aspirations and was extremely resourceful. Like De Mille, he did extensive research. He never felt at any point that success was owed to him; he earned it with hard work and individuality. He explored slum neighborhoods, observed gang behavior, and eventually attended a Brooklyn dance where separate groups were subtly engaged in social and territorial rivalry. From this immersion in his subject, Robbins developed movement styles for his opposing gangs, the Sharks and the Jets in hopes of allowing the dancers to find their characters. Robbins wanted youthfulness and honesty of emotion in the dancing. Like De Mille, he was less concerned with absolute technique. As Garebian remarks, "Exactness or precise replication of a line or step was not as significant as youthful springiness, grace of carriage, strength in stopping, pausing and releasing" (13). In short, Robbins was concerned with a complete portrayal of the gang characters. The dance style of each cast member, would tell their story and explain their gang loyalty. Sheward argues:
His dances utilize the main characters, not just the chorus, to physicalize all the relationships among the inarticulate gang members. Unlike the chorus members of previous musicals all of the West Side youth were individual characters with names and histories.

This concept required a complex blending of music, lyrics, and dialogue. The tightly knit collaborative group responded with verve. Arthur Laurents was perhaps the most accommodating. He paired down his script to allow for Robbins' dances, Bernstein's music, and Sondheim's lyrics to tell the story, explore the themes, and set the mood. The dance, like de Mille's dream ballets, became a mirror reflecting the characters' minds and hearts. The result was that West Side Story "...marked the most impressive body of choreography in a single show." (Garebian 9).

Robbins' choreography was intelligible and precisely suited to every character. He achieved a level of dance uniquely honest and telling of a large emotional spectrum. It is this passionate and expansive style that is Robbins' crowning accomplishment. Abe Laufe describes the experience the show created for the audience:

The dance movement not only epitomized perfectly the tensions, the brutality, bravado, and venomous hatred of the gang warriors but also had sufficient variety in themselves to hold audiences spellbound. The few quiet interludes between dances were, by way of contrast, not a letdown in suspense but more an opportunity for the spectator to relax before becoming engrossed in watching another vigorous ballet.

(226)
Robbins also brought changes to the performer work ethic. De Mille always felt her dancers worked terribly hard and were extremely disciplined. Robbins demanded this from everyone, not just the dancers. This was something new and caught a lot of the performers off guard. Robbins believed the only way the human body can achieve its very best is through anger, revenge, and a need to prove oneself to those who have belittled for so long. This attitude grew out of his experiences as a dancer. Robbins was experimenting with this work ethic from the director’s chair. Larry Kert, who played the original Tony, explains his experiences:

Jerry Robbins is an incredible man and I'd work for him again in a minute, but he is a painful man — a perfectionist who sees himself in every role, and if you come on stage and don’t give him exactly what he’s pictured the night before, his tolerance level is too low, so in his own kind of way, he destroys you.

(Garebian 111)

Robbins’ constant attention towards and berating of his dancers forced them to tap into talents they did not know they had. Carol Lawrence, who played the original Maria, underlines the positive results:

It was his *modus operandi* to berate and belittle us into anger so we would prove him wrong by jumping higher or turning faster or hitting each other harder in a fight sequence. But the result permitted us to experience a potential in ourselves that we would otherwise never have known existed.

(Garebian 115)

The result of this aggressive instruction was fascinating, nervily expressive and rawly thrilling dancing. Robbins achieved a style and energy never seen before on Broadway. George Chakiris, who played Riff in the West End and Bernardo in the 1961 film for
which he won an academy award for best supporting actor, emphasizes that the experience was educational, not just painful:

Working with Robbins was the greatest experience I've ever had, because it was Jerry who first showed me how a dancer could express himself in dancing rhythms and how an actor could intensify his dramatic performance with the graceful expressive body movements of a dancer.

(Garebian 143)

Robbins, then, was unmerciful in his demand for perfection. He originated a trend that would be inherited by Bob Fosse and Michael Bennett. The discipline and dedication required of all his cast members set a standard that was not around before West Side Story. Previously, the star or various featured performers exhibited ardent discipline and devotion. Robbins demanded this of everybody, no matter how small the part, or how small and subtle the movement. Robbins changed the mindset of dancers. He charged up his performers and made them realize it was time to get serious or get out.

Performers now needed to be singers, dancers, and actors; a "triple-threat", as it was quickly termed. The dancers de Mille used were rarely asked if they could sing. There was a clear separation between the dancers and the singers then. Robbins abolished this line and demanded more.

The element that constantly stands out about Robbins' work is its completeness. All the elements depend on each other. The dance is nothing without the music. The music is nothing without the set. His concept of a true collaborative effort resulted in West Side Story. Robbins believed the theme needed to be alive in all aspects; all the elements needed to be bound tightly around the theme in order to have a successful show. Philip comments on Robbins' contributions to de Mille's original forays into dramatic dance:
If de Mille can be credited with integrating choreography into the Broadway show, then Robbins must be credited with taking that evolution further by incorporating the choreographer into the Broadway show. He was among the first great Broadway choreographers-directors who gave their final staged products a feeling of wholeness and integration.

("Robbins" 7)

It was not until the Eighties that these binds began to loosen. Today there are musicals with no dance, or dance musicals with no text or story. There needs to be a reunion of elements in order to achieve a complete success in contemporary musicals. Certainly there are musicals that have made a tremendous financial success without the inclusion of all the elements, like Les Misérables (1987) which had little dancing, but won at the box office. However West Side Story captured all the elements of musical theater, and used each to its fullest to achieve a complete success. Musical theater is a collaboration of all elements that together make a success; otherwise the form and definition of musical theater could evolve to individual branches, thereby threatening the overall essence of the form. Richard Kislan defines musical theater:

Musical theater is the most collaborative form in all the arts. To measure a work accurately means to weigh the contributions of librettist, composer, lyricist, director, choreographer, actors, singers, dancers, and designers of scenery, costume and lighting.

(4)

If one of these items is removed the integrity of the art form can suffer, as this thesis will explore with the absence of dance. An equal case could be made for the other elements. Kislan concludes:
Musical theater is “total theater”... Total theater pursues extraordinary objectives through a total assault on the senses, opening up to the audience the grandest avenues of sound, color, and movement. Artifice, no doubt, but splendid artifice, capable of accumulating a power of performance characteristically grand, enveloping, and total.

Box office receipts are impressive and can control the life of a show on Broadway, but the form also needs to be respected to ensure a purposeful future for the form. *West Side Story* is a model for total musical theater. It is a haunting show not easily forgotten.

Garebian raves:

This was a show that had danced practically all night, to a music that had a jangled power, a macabre insistence, a cool insolence, a blues sadness, and a sometimes soaring beauty.

Today’s musical theater needs to produce something of this impact again in order to survive.

**Bob Fosse**

Bob Fosse (1927-1987) broke the mold of the integrated musical, where song and dance grew directly out of the story. He was a distinctive forerunner in what was to become the "concept musical" a progression from the dream ballet to encompass the whole show within the dramatic impetus of dance not just a section. Dance was to overtake plot and story in order to unshroud characters through form, movement and attitude. Body language was the essence of his work. Fosse was experimenting with the
strides Robbins made for dance in musical theater, but like Robbins did with de Mille’s work, Fosse was making it his own. Fosse pursued an artistic mission where overall style and the metaphorical treatment of story overshadowed the plot elements. Fosse was not concerned with lines or verbal explanations of situations. His dance would justify the atmosphere. Peter Stone talks of choreographers and their attitudes towards spoken lines:

Of course, a lot of director-choreographers who have so much power in the theater today get very nervous with words. Gower Champion did not like words very much. Jerry Robbins is slightly more prone to understand them. Fosse hates them. With Dancin’ he went so far to create a libretto-less musical.

(Guernsey Jr. 134)

Bob Fosse’s dance is not as clearly connected to the story as Robbins’, but his symbolic gestures are reminiscent of the roots of de Mille’s explorations. Where de Mille reached out for reality, but tended to fall back to folksiness, Fosse explored this reality pushing towards exploring the grim realities of his time.

In his initial investigations of dance expressiveness, Fosse was briefly baby-sat by Jerome Robbins in Pajama Game (1954). Fosse received the choreographer’s credit but Robbins kept an eye on him as he directed the show along with George Abbot. Fosse was quick to demonstrate responsibility and independence. He was bright, intuitive and ultra-sensitive to the perfection of his style. His innovations drew on images and symbols of his life and were transformed into dance movement. Fosse’s coruscating style became the focus of all the musicals he was involved with. Fosse’s concept musical emphasized form over content, and it worked. Eventually, he would go so far as to get rid of the book entirely in Dancin’ (1978).
Fosse was instrumental in developing the role of the director-choreographer in musical theater. This role allowed the concept musical to flourish and in turn, made a dynamic change to the face of musical theater. Dennis McGovern writes that:

*Pippin* and *Chicago* would turn out to be benchmarks in Musical Theater as Fosse steered Broadway’s evolution away from the more structured, old-fashioned musical into a kind of theater where dance, instead of helping the story along, became the medium and the main event.

Fosse rebelled in his own way from Jerome Robbins and Agnes de Mille who had achieved distinctiveness in using dance as a dramatic tool. Fosse’s work was a response to their accomplishments. He continued to evolve dance in his time, as they did in theirs. Fosse accomplished this by fleshing out the role of the aforementioned director-choreographer. Fosse maintained control, and firmly entrenched his artistic interpretation on Broadway. Librettist and lyricist Alan Jay Lerner suggests:

I think there is a trend, and I think it has started primarily because of the tremendous influence of the choreographic director. I don’t believe that a musical can realize itself unless it has a very pronounced style, as in the case of *Sweeney Todd*, as in the case of the things that Bob Fosse has done; a style that identifies, that keeps unity of that place.

(Guernsey Jr. 385)

Fosse’s style was the glue that held shows together. Fosse describes his approach:

Musicals are more of a piece now, not scenes directed by one man and dance numbers staged by another. The idea is to make the movement consistent throughout, make the actors’ movements blend with the dance movements.
Fosse's main influences were choreographers Jack Cole, Jerome Robbins, dancers Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly. Fosse grew up with Vaudeville routines, and his early performance career took place in dark, and sleazy strip clubs. Kevin Grubb describes the events of Fosse's youth in his biography Razzle Dazzle: The Life and Work of Bob Fosse. Throughout his life, Fosse was plagued by lack of training and a fear that his shortcomings would be discovered. He struggled daily to come up with inspirations that could compete with the work of Jerome Robbins and Gower Champion (Bye Bye Birdie, Hello Dolly!, 42nd Street).

Fundamentally, Fosse loved the dancer, he had respect for the dancer, and he related to the dancer because he grew up dancing. Once a director-choreographer, he no longer tolerated the compartmentalization of the dancer. Like de Mille and Robbins, he brought the dancer out from the chorus and allowed him/her to bloom. He refused stereotypes, and gave each dancer the precious gifts of character, individuality, and personality. "Dancers, traditionally at the bottom, suddenly became a sort of Greek chorus for the dramatic action" (Grubb xi).

The dancers told the story. Through their movements they reemphasized the themes of the story and maintained the narrative. The dance was used as an exposition to explain the personalities of each character. The dancers' movements were also telling of their response to the actions of the protagonist and antagonist because Fosse's dances were so intricately woven into the action. Fosse's choreography from the first hip-swivel set the mood for the story to revolve around. The attitudes that the dancers embodied while executing the steps created the atmosphere.
Fosse had to be economic in his dance choices due to his limited training and lack of mastery of ballet. Fosse only knew a handful of steps. He manipulated what he did know in a way that was alluring in its subtlety. His finite use of isolated body parts was fascinating in its creativity. This leanness of choreography was the tool he used to set off each dancer's personality. The isolation of a certain body parts would be telling of a mood, a feeling, or suggestive of an action. The style seems simple enough when verbalized: knees turned in or out, locked ankles and pigeon toes, slouched back, forward-thrust hips, pinched wrists, and splayed wrists. With these movements he created complex and unique characters. Fosse strove to achieve acceptance and recognition for a style that wasn't imbued with the athletic prowess and grace of ballet.

Samuel L. Leiter adds:

When he discovered he could not master certain movements, he created compensatory ones or developed other idiosyncratic methods to mask his deficiencies. He thus evolved a manner based on his own small-framed, tight and wiry physique. Fosse also overcame a musical illiteracy that prevented him from being able to count beats.

Fosse demanded honesty in his movements, and refused to be ashamed of his lack of ballet technique. He tried to make himself be better and stronger than ballet by incessantly rehearsing his steps and combinations.

Like Robbins, Fosse used extreme methods and manipulations in the rehearsal environment to draw out emotion and strength from his dancers. He was aiming for an unsentimental and blunt portrayal of society that was seen in much of his work, but exemplified in Chicago (1975). He had a shrewdness and cutting edge in his dance that
was acutely aware of the particular disparate human condition being probed. Martin Gottfried summarizes:

For in the process of eliminating gaiety, a grim honesty had emerged in this show. Fosse's uncovered and eruptive darkness had made *Chicago* one of the most powerful and original of musicals, a snarling entertainment that used vaudeville as metaphor even if the sense of the metaphor was ambiguous.

(349)

Fosse forced musical theater to grow up. His choreography celebrated sexuality and his use of tall, voluptuous, and sexy women was shameless. Fosse had struck a chord with his public, much like de Mille had in her time. The social climate of the time fueled Fosse's success and attached him to an accepting generation. Grubb intimates, "Within the dances quake deep sexual tremors reflecting the Sixties' uninhibitedness; they represent Fosse's own desire to express pent-up desires (127).

What Fosse was giving away in "Big Spender" (*Sweet Charity*, 1966), he was now caging up for the world to gawk at in *Chicago* (1975). Fosse was breaking away from the conventions that he had been tethered to for years. Fosse was cutting and fierce. To achieve the intensity he desired, he would tell his dancer/murderesses, "Dare the audience to look at you, and look back at them with murder in your eyes" (McGovern 136).

With *Chicago*, Fosse challenged his colleagues with his juxtapositions of justice and vulgarity. He had a fascination with antiquities. He would constantly explore the old vaudeville styles of his youth, and layer his own contemporary experiences over top. Grubb continues: "His ability to borrow heavily from these music-hall traditions without creating derivative pop-up facsimiles of show dances remains one of his greatest accomplishments" (71). He took familiar conventions of society and layered sarcasm and
scorn upon them which taunted the very tradition itself. He dared to question and spit on what the community treasured as sacred. This virtually forced people to take notice. He layered a dark contemporary style over sentimental favorites. He stared tradition in the face and forced comment on society's corruptness and misbehaviors. This was a brave choice and should be recognized as reflecting an honest and shrewd look at humanity, not just decadence for entertainment value.

Fosse was about form and concept. Chicago’s story is quite straightforward and brief, but Fosse fleshes out it and the characters through dance. Grubb argues:

But whereas Champion remained true to the spirit of Broadway at its most innocent and naïve, Fosse's later choreography intentionally corrupts old-time Broadway and Vaudeville shows, especially evident in the cynical number, "Razzle Dazzle" from Chicago.

(72)

Fosse's cruelty and morbidity about life was exemplified in his acerbic choreography. His choreography became a metaphor for all that was tainted and vulgar in his life and in his perception of society. His previous shows had stylish and attractive moments; now he wanted strength. In short, the story was not as important as the style. The emotion and the hard-hitting performance quality stirred the souls of the audience and forced introspection of the condition of society and themselves in it.

Fosse's style was his concept. His subtlety of movement and his aggressiveness of character were telling of such a frightening realism that the audience needed only a skeleton of a story, and the dance would make up the rest. In Chicago (1975) he exposed a slice of society that was unforgiving in its reality, and in turn laughed darkly and loudly at society. Fosse celebrated criminals. Grubb argues:
In his effort to depict the circus sideshow that results when law and journalism buckle to the allure of show-business, Fosse had imbued the entire production with an angst that cast a shadow on his homage to burlesque and vaudeville married brilliantly with stylized realism.

(201)

Fosse's incredible success was strong and is kept alive today by those who worked with him and who continue to have tremendous respect for his work. The concept musical lives on today, but sadly, that concept is no longer hinged on dance. Technology has usurped subtlety and in turn created a public demand for bigger and better 'tricks' with each new musical. Grubb concludes:

Without the vitality of human movement, The Broadway Musical has become so technically advanced that dancers are replaced by revolving stages. Today, people don't have to dance, the scenery does.

(xi)

Dance will find a place again, but it will take the dedication of a man like Fosse with a vision beyond applause and beyond ticket sales.

For some one whose choreography has been compared to "things that crawl under a rock." (Gottfried 440), Fosse retained his integrity and refused to change. He waited for people to change. Even after his death in 1987, his work continues to be extremely successful in revivals and tributes today. Fosse honed in on what people want to secretly consider and observe for themselves: sizzling lust, searing passion, sordid sleaze, and brooding deception.
Long before *A Chorus Line* (1975) became an icon of Broadway success and staying power, it was an experimental creation of necessity. The necessity was to provide an outlet that might offer a cure, or at least a distraction, from the moral and economic malaise that was hanging over Broadway in the mid-seventies. Society did not seem to offer much inspiration for dancers and Michael Bennett (1943-1987) suggested a look inward at themselves. There is a different sort of malaise hanging over Broadway today, but understanding how Bennett grew out of that earlier stagnation which was threatening may provide insight about the current one.

It was a difficult time for the community of artists that sought to keep Broadway flourishing aesthetically rather than just economically. These people were the many talented dancers, singers, actors, technicians, choreographers and directors who had experienced the precious, yet fleeting success of a grand show only to be disenchanted and pounding the streets the day after closing, starting all over again.

The hype that followed the first previews of *A Chorus Line* (1975) said very little about the long and deprecating grittiness and struggle that preceded the show’s success. Michael Bennett, director and choreographer offered dancers a chance to dig themselves out of their rut. This chance was not a star role in a new upcoming smash hit, but a chance to be involved in his “workshop”. There was no guarantee of being in a Broadway show. Bennett recognized the difficulties of the time, and sought to provide artistic stimulation for himself and the community of performers. As he comments: "In 1974, there wasn’t other work. If there’d been work, they [the dancers] wouldn’t have been at the Shakespeare Festival for 100 dollars a week. No one’s that noble" (Freedman vi). Bennett recognized the fatigue and stagnation of the economic situation, and sought
to help, proposing a twelve-hour workshop. He invited as many dancers and performers as he could find to talk about their experiences in show business. What began as a "one-night-only" gathering extended into a 16-month gestation period for what was to become the longest running Broadway show in history. Bennett had an idea for a show about dancers in the back of his head, but he had no concept direction. The workshops became his inspiration and experimentation grounds. Bennett was not the creator of the "workshop" concept, but was the first to take a musical born in such an environment all the way to Broadway. Samuel L. Leiter suggests:

The workshop idea was common to certain Off-Broadway groups, but was new for a Broadway bound project; many shows later attempted to follow its path. The collaborative process led to frequent legal and personal hassles, as there were conflicting claims about who created what, but it also helped create a show that was not only artistically ground-breaking but the longest-running hit in Broadway history.

Despite Bennett's success on Company (1970) and Follies (1971), he repeatedly found that old Broadway no longer functioned effectively. Bennett wanted control over all elements. A new approach was needed if he was to achieve this goal. The workshop method was his vehicle. Moderately influenced by Buddhism, Bennett and some 24 dancers got together with the idea of doing something positive. The idea was to create something valuable for oneself and others. Bennett wanted, as they all did, to regain hope for a better, more prosperous future.

Bennett had previously explored the concept musical in his work. He was intrigued by the idea that an emotional theme or image could take the place of a realistic, linear
plot, as Fosse was experimenting with. He was concerned with social structures and situations. He was interested in the difficulties and tribulations of life. Bennett never felt that he had the time in the past to perfect his work. The workshop would offer him that opportunity. As Ken Mandelbaum argues:

He was always distilling down, getting down to a minimal essence of something.
He used workshops to get close to the truth or the dynamic of the moment. He was always looking for some little bit of life that could come forward and take your imagination to another place.

(276)

Through his workshop process Bennett would blend the concept musical with the "musical-verity", meaning a true portrayal of life’s experiences through dance in musical theater. These transformations of the dream ballet are reflective of the growing emphasis on imagery and contemporary impulses to convey the truth through dance. Both Fosse and Bennett were developing the dream ballet into something purposeful and reflective of society. Bennett wanted to explore the truth. He wanted to translate the drives and emotions of his time (1975) into musical theater. In the pursuit of honesty, Bennett found the dancer to be the perfect model. As Mandelbaum clarifies, "The dancer is of necessity a creature of honesty. The mirror into which the dancer spends his life looking does not lie, and the effort involved in expressing oneself through body movement cannot be faked" (94). A dancer is often ultra sensitive because his body is his tool and he can not easily step away from his work to have it evaluated. Criticism comes directly at the dancer, and he must figure out how to cope in order to survive in the field emotionally and physically. Bennett was intrigued by this.
In the workshops, Bennett took on the role of father confessor, and the dancers poured their hearts out to him. This gave him the essence that would make up *A Chorus Line*. By introducing this new method, he temporarily saved musical theater. Bennett provided an alternative way of catalyzing the artistic and collaborative process.

As the workshop continued, Bennett’s role evolved into maintaining focus and direction. Leiter writes that "Bennett’s brilliance drew from all collaborators not only their finest material but pointed their multi-faceted talents toward a common goal" (28). The newness, the excitement and the bohemian lure of this project brought dancers from all over who opened up their souls for Michael Bennett.

The verisimilitude of *A Chorus Line* was one of the main reasons for its staggering success. The dancers life stories were recorded on tape then transposed into script. Of those who shared their stories, only eight got into the actual show. Dancers became frustrated. Their deepest fears and secrets, which they divulged in moments of trust and love, were becoming a commodity. Some dancers’ stories would make the cut some would not. Some were told to read their own stories, and then were stopped and told that they were not doing it correctly. The dancers were absolutely bewildered. They felt like they were auditioning for their lives. If they didn’t get the job their “lives” would be given away to someone else. Some kept their “lives” others did not.

Unlike Jerome Robbins or Bob Fosse, who browbeat dancers into the emotional reactions they wanted; Bennett would take a dancer’s emotional reaction, and give it to someone else. The dancers in Bennett’s workshops often felt emotionally raped. The bitterness that ensued as Bennett proceeded to give the dancers’ lives away to others, was not the end of the world, but it was an unfortunate result of what had started as a safe, honest and truthful commune.
Mandelbaum explains the consequences of Bennett’s actions:

_A Chorus Line_ changed the life of every member of the original cast, but for many it would ultimately prove a disorienting, traumatic experience, leaving some with deep-seated problems that took years to overcome. Some said they felt they had given away their lives to the show, been exploited or used by it, and were left feeling uncertain about themselves and their careers when they left the show. Some felt abandoned by Bennett after _A Chorus Line_, and deeply resentful and hurt.

(181)

The specific emotions of individual dancers did not get put on stage for one character to portray. Bennett cut and pasted stories every which way, his patchwork spanning a wide spectrum of emotional experiences.

The purging of emotions by the dancers was meant to touch the audience, and awaken levels of self-reflection. Bennett wanted the audience to participate in the sharing. As Mandelbaum suggests:

The impulse to share, the feeling that in spite of all the suffering exposed, one was not alone but was part of the human race – all this would be conveyed theatrically and form the bedrock of emotion that would make _A Chorus Line_ so powerful.

(104)

Bennett recognized that dancers were people worth exploring. He showed that dancers had wit and humor and were painfully human. He brought these people together gave them his trust and encouraged them to share. Bennett was working 33 years after de Mille’s _Oklahoma!_ and embraced de Mille’s concept that dance was the key to an honest reflection of human nature.
Throughout his career Bennett relied on the individual skills of his preferred dancers. That style of construction can be a collaborative dream, as everyone gets to put in their two bits. Bennett did use his preferred dancers over and over, and they enjoyed successful and extended careers on Broadway.

Bennett exhibited to the Broadway community the ins and outs of a workshop experience that actually succeeded. The workshop format can be very successful for many reasons. The cast is readily available to the writers when questions arise concerning intent or motivation. The performers get a feeling of importance, of belonging, of being individuals with ideas, not just pawns, in some director's game. All the collaborators involved enjoy the luxury of virtually endless rehearsal time. Experimentation and failure are acceptable. Audiences of intimate sizes can be casually allowed to come and make suggestions. For the most part the workshop format seems artistically healthy and productive.

Bennett eventually realized the magnitude of those first 37 contributors and did include them in a small portion of the writers' royalty payments. This workshop experience with Bennett led to a new agreement, at the time, with Actor's Equity stating that workshop performers should be paid 150 dollars a week, but must also share in a percentage of the royalty payments. In the next ten years many musicals were developed in the workshop manner. Finally, Bennett comments on his workshop experiences:

Workshops allow you to be wrong, then fix it. One day you go, "Gee, this is pretty good, time to show it to people." Sometimes it's never pretty good, and if you're smart you abandon it in workshop. And a workshop costs one/hundredth of what it costs to do a Broadway show. That means that anybody with
an idea for a musical can really go employ a lot of out-of-work actors and can try things. It is I think the solution to the problem of musical theater.

(Mandelbaum 192)

The workshop environment seemed to be a seedbed for creative exploration; however Rosenberg points out that “Bennett’s workshops, which he financed, are the only evidence that this road to Broadway works both creatively and economically” (50).

Bennett expanded on the foundations of the dream ballet and used it as a vehicle to connect dance and emotion. There is not a dream ballet in *A Chorus Line*, but the show demonstrated that movement was inseparable from feelings and personalities. The workshop concept did not become a household word in musical theater construction, but it proved an unforgettable experience that ultimately glorified the dancer. Rosenberg notes that:

The workshop practice is still viewed with skepticism as a cost saver by some Broadway practitioners, among them [Hal] Prince and [Cy] Feuer. Prince regards the musical theatre too 'highly crafted' a business for workshop treatment; anything can be done informally, but real reckoning comes after the workshop stage. The only major exception, *A Chorus Line*, was unique: “They wrote it themselves along the way.”.

(Bennett’s workshops seem to be the only evidence that the road that the workshop format takes to Broadway works both creatively and financially.

Finally, Michael Bennett’s brother, Frank Di Filia, speaks fondly of Bennett’s accomplishments, “He showed us deep truth about ourselves. He made us more aware of
being alive, to use the words of one of his great collaborators. The Greeks, I think call this a catharsis – Michael called it a Broadway Musical” (Mandelbaum 5).

Summary

Turning points in musical theater are rare and unpredictable. These musicals were the vehicles that took dance to the forefront of American musical theater. The director-choreographers had visions that only seemed attainable through dance. They all had the opportunity and honor of collaborating with those who were the best in their field. As Joseph P. Swain declares, “Any tradition of art is first of all a collection of artists with a common purpose” (355).

De Mille, Robbins, Fosse and Bennett all seemed to overlap time periods while reaching towards the constant common goal of giving dance a dramatic voice. These choreographers made cardinal contributions, through dance, to advance the dramatic impulses of the plot and themes of the show. Their artistic integrity never faltered, a commitment worthy of remembering. As Swain explains the glory of American musical theater, “The best reasons for celebrating the tradition are those rare and brief bursts of creativity marked by musical dramatic integrity” (361). Agnes de Mille proved that dance could be intrinsic to musical theater with her dream ballets. Robbins, Fosse and Bennett followed suit improving on and solidifying the place for dance in musical theater. Richard Kislan comments:

Their legacy is considerable both as entertainment and as art. It deserves to be studied by all who participate in the American musical theater just as it must command the attention of anyone interested in the American scene. “Theater
dance," said the late dancer-choreographer Jack Cole, "is the way the American dancer expresses his culture, his understanding of his time."

(248)

Dance was no longer gratuitous. The dream ballet, the concept musical, and the subsequent fruitful mutations of de Mille's original creation gave a unified identity, an aesthetic wholeness to the musical that is surely missed in our contemporary styles.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Exploring the dream ballet in contemporary musical theater, here, includes an exploration of the impression dance has made in musicals of recent years. The best of these have made an attempt to incorporate the essence of the dream ballet, for the substance and foundation of the dream ballet uses dance to its fullest dramatic capability. This dramatic application of dance conveys the emotional journeys of the characters and explores the themes of the play in a manner beyond what is possible through dialogue. Dance communicates the emotions, the intimacies and anxieties of relationships and situations in a way that is not often accessed by words alone. Dance propels itself off the nuances of body language and non-verbal communication. The physicality of dance validates or criticizes or evokes human behavior in a recognizably symbolic fashion that helps to enrich audience comprehension of the verbal elements.

The dream ballet proper, as defined by Agnes de Mille, evolved due to the contributions of the previously mentioned choreographers. How the dream ballet fell out of favor is explored by looking at musical theater from a broader perspective. The intellectual and artistic altitude of musical theater has faltered in various areas to be investigated. Dance suffered in this situation because it became an afterthought of the creative process and no longer a primary dramatic component. The need to restore its centrality to musical theater becomes clear in the context of this survey. Reviews and
criticism will be consulted to demonstrate how dance did or did not make a dramatic impression.

Dance that made an impact on the dramatic development of a musical’s plot is pinpointed. The triumph of this mode of dance often depends on the reinvention of the dream ballet. These achievements, some more major than others, resound in the reviews as pointing toward a redevelopment of the dream ballet and a revitalization of musical theater where dance is used as a medium to communicate.

The method to communicating with dance has a similar base to it as a character speaking does, despite the divergent mediums. In good drama a character typically says something only if he needs something. This need creates dramatic conflict if not immediately fulfilled. In other words, dramatic conflict occurs when an obstacle is in the way of what a character wants. What a character says is in direct relation to what he desires. The quest that a character engages in to get what he wants creates dramatic action and is the key to successful drama. A character speaks and takes action because he wants something. If a character does not want something, he does not say anything. The same is true for dance.

A dancer does not move unless he wants or needs something. The dancer’s movement is founded in emotions that translate into needs, the basis for character motivation, and in turn produces action in the form of movement. The concept that action determines character is wonderfully evocative in dance because action is amplified by movement. Every movement on stage is an action.

Actors move because of their stage directions or because of their choreographer’s direction. This movement, if directed properly, enhances character by exemplifying what a character is saying in order to achieve his goal. If staging is a useful tool towards
explaining dramatic action, then dance adds a dimension only hinted at by director’s staging. This is because dance uses greater movement plains, steps, and sequences than simple blocking of characters.

Dance in its highest form in musical theater functions to enhance character anxieties and desires through action. This is often found in the dream ballet. When dance adheres itself to the dramatic action of the story it becomes a plot-forwarding device. Richard Kislan argues, “When a show needs a rapid forward movement of the plot, dance can initiate, advance, or complete the desired dramatic action” (242). Dance helps to unfold the story by revealing character motivation and causing dramatic action. Dramatic actions are the building blocks of the story.

When dance is attached to dramatic action it becomes a vital component to the intrigue and scheme of the story. Kislan gives an example from West Side Story of how dance forms dramatic action and forwards the story: “Through a dance sequence of only forty measures of music, Tony and Maria see each other during “Dance at the Gym,” approach, and fall in love, an action that could have taken pages of dialogue to develop” (242). Dance also initiates conflict between the gangs in the opening of the musical. These instances illustrate how dance can become part of the plot and an integral element of the musical. To accomplish this the choreographer has the task of making every dancer’s movement of utmost importance and pregnant with purpose.

More often than not, and certainly in today’s musical theater, the choreographer is not all-powerful, as he or she is in concert dance. Bob Fosse or Jerome Robbins may have had this luxury in the past, but today choreographers should be certain that their dance is firmly linked and necessary to the dramatic action of the play if it is to continue in
musical theater at all. The study of the musicals of the past ten years will show that
dance has become more of an accessory than a plot-directing vehicle.

I believe choreographers in musical theater must realize that their movement needs to
be understood by more than just the dancers. The movement must be understood by
singers, actors, writers, musicians, set designers to name a few. There does not seem to
be a large place in musical theater for elitism in dance like there is in concert dance
because of the collaborative nature of musical theater. For dance to survive in musical
theater I believe choreographers must again demonstrate that dance is a worthy form of
communication, like de Mille did in her time. The following exploration of various
musicals of late imparts that the dance, while expertly executed and potentially successful
in the concert format, is of less importance than the other elements. I suggest that
choreographers make their dance, however minimal its inclusion in the show, rich in
dramatic detail. I believe this will remind producers and directors of the capabilities of
dance.

Rose Eichenbaum interviews choreographer Graciela Daniela (Annie Get Your Gun
(1999), Ragtime (1997), Once on this Island (1990), Dangerous Games (1989)) who
explains her method of creating the dramatic purpose in her dances: “I remind my
dancers that when they have something to say, they speak, and when they don’t, they shut
up. The same applies in dance. If they have something to convey, they should move. If
they don’t, they don’t move” (65). As demonstrated by Daniele, choreographers need to
be innovative and creative but clear in their dramatic intentions. Choreographers need to
be certain of the objective of each movement combination, to avoid gratuitous dance or
movement that is only incidental to the plot. Choreographers for musical theater should
have an awareness and understanding of the other elements of the show because the audience is not usually there just to see the dance.

Dance requires a lifetime to perfect and its essence often becomes internalized by those who do it. This internalization, while seemingly normal to the dancer or actor, is often difficult for outsiders to interpret. A dancer may feel that dance is the most important thing in the world, but in actuality only a small community cares deeply and solely about dance. Successful Broadway choreographers are not overly precious about their work and allow their dances to serve the show in the best way possible while still trying to make Broadway care about dance. The best are offering to share their communication tool with the other aspects of musical theater in hopes of creating truly spectacular theater that has a deep and lasting connection with the audience.

Daniele concludes, “In musical theater, dance has to move the story or character forward. I don’t like to be a voyeur who is removed emotionally from what’s there. Dance is a language of communication” (Eichenbaum 65).

Broadway choreographers need to strike a contemporary emotional chord in order to make audiences understand the importance of dance. The exploration of the creative process of the previously discussed choreographers should be looked to when trying to establish a method for returning dance to the dramatic plateau it once enjoyed. The evaluation of musicals of recent years will demonstrate how shows have been successful or disappointing in their use of dance. An understanding of the past will give direction and perspective for a prosperous dramatic growth of dance in the future.
CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS

Dance reigned supreme in the Broadway musical for some forty years. Growing out of George Balanchine's *On Your Toes* (1936), to Agnes de Mille's inception of the dream ballet (1943) to Jerome Robbins' *West Side Story* (1957), to Bob Fosse's *Chicago* (1975) and Michael Bennett's *A Chorus Line* (1975), dance became an integral dramatic factor of musical theater. With the Eighties came the invasion of the British, and a new monopoly over musical theater that was unbreakable until several years ago. Between Andrew Lloyd Webber, Trevor Nunn and Cameron Mackintosh, the British made new rules.

Each musical was to have its feat of technological amazement: *Cats* (1982) had the old tire, *The Phantom of the Opera* (1988) had the chandelier, *Les Misérables* (1987), had the barricade, *Miss Saigon* (1991) had the helicopter. These shows are not all about gadgets and technological prowess; however, the inclusion of such elements rocketed the standards for musicals out the roof. The effects enhanced the atmosphere of the show to an awe-inspiring level unlike anything previously seen on Broadway. Richard Kislan defines the debate over extravagant stagecraft and effects: "Admirers defend visual extravagance as a strategy needed to attract electronic age audiences. Detractors regard the trend toward sensationalism as creatively regressive and financially suicidal" (276). Dance has suffered under these circumstances. The emotional intensification provided by

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these feats added to the drama but resulted in an inferior position of dance. Whether there was dance or not, there now also had to be some technological gimmick and wizardry that surpassed the previous show. The dance in these shows was often not as memorable as the elaborate sets and lighting and was becoming old news.

Frank Rich describes *Cats*, the first of these spectacles:

As for Miss Lynne’s profuse choreography, its quantity and exuberance do not add up to quality. Though all the cat clawings and slitherings are wonderfully conceived and executed, such gestures sit on top of a repetitive array of jazz and ballet clichés, rhythmically punctuated by somersaults and leaps.

("Cats" C3)

The dance was not of a cutting dramatic caliber or style like that of Fosse or Robbins, but with the incredible sets, lighting, and background it did not seem to matter. The dance, while charming in its portrayal of character did not have the purposeful intention of connecting to the plot like musicals of the past. The dance was not thematically loaded and its steps and combinations were seemingly plucked from class. Rich concedes, “But maybe it’s asking too much that this ambitious show lift the audience – or, for that matter, the modern musical – up to the sublime heaviside layer. What *Cats* does do is take us into a theater overflowing with wondrous spectacle – and that’s an enchanting place to be” (“Cats” C3). *Cats* romanced Broadway audiences with its poetics and spectacle but did not make any resounding dramatic discoveries, which audiences did not seem to mind.

Joseph P. Swain comments that the showings on Broadway in the eighties, “have been choked with revivals, revues, and tremendous stage spectacles such as *Cats* that entertain without dramatizing” (361). Copious dance was not necessarily a good thing. Dance was
wearing itself out. For some time, ballet had been going overboard and virtually every show scrambled to include a dream ballet. What originally left so many people awestruck was in fact becoming tiresome. The opening for and interest in the expansion of other elements was growing which the British picked up on. Abe Laufe argues:

Ballets were considered so essential that they were injected into musical comedies whether they fit the plot or not. In fact, ballet became so common in the theater that within a few years the same critics who had praised the dance routines in *Oklahoma!* became almost ecstatic when leading players would break into an old familiar tap routine.

Dance wore itself out, and in doing so left the door open for something entirely technical to generate the awe that dance once did.

*Les Misérables* (1987) was to be such a show and enjoyed success comparable to that *West Side Story* (1957) garnered. *Les Misérables*’ triumph had little connection to dancers. The choreography of *Les Misérables* did not use bodies as much as it did sets and lighting. The masterfully done musical with its breathtaking score did not seem to have a need for its characters to dance, and subsequently the sets and stage moved around them. Large strides were taken in the technical ingenuity, and these feats were worthy of the attention they received. Rich explains: “...directors Trevor Nunn and John Caird choreographed the paces of their players and a revolving stage so that spatial relationships mirror both human relationships and the pressing march of history” (Rich, “Miserables” C1). The dream ballet here seems to be performed by the staging, lighting and singing. The dramatic effects of these continuously moving stage sets followed a
compelling and dramatic narration of the emotional turmoil churning within the
characters. Rich adds:

This isn’t a show about individuals, or even the ensemble, so much as about how
actors and music and staging meld with each other and with the soul of its source.
The transfiguration is so complete that by evening’s end, the company need
simply march forward from the stage’s black depths into a hazy orange dawn to
summon up Hugo’s unflagging faith in tomorrow’s better world.

(Rich, “Miserables” C3)

The minimal movement suggested a return to the effectiveness of the physical gestures of
the dream ballet although it was not memorable enough to make any lasting statement for
dramatic dance. Except for a waltz, there were no dance numbers: the dramatic gesture
was reborn in the staging and blocking. The marching forward and formations of
characters, while pedestrian in its dance qualities, did capture the essence of the dream
ballet in its dramatic poignancy. This could have been taken further.

Phantom of Opera (1988) took Broadway by storm and like Les Misérables continues
to run today. A show with only a hint more to its story than Cats does not push the
envelope of creative dance. Gillian Lynne’s work is described as “repetitive, presumably
satirical ballet choreography” (Rich, “Phantom” C19). Phantom is worth seeing, but
certainly not for its dance innovations or any possible hint at a dream ballet which might
have been a noteworthy alternative to the simple repetitive lyrics. The show however
became a raging success and has taken on the role of Broadway dinosaur, perhaps the last
of its breed.

In 1991 Miss Saigon came along and hinted at a return to the sentimentality of the
musicals of Roger and Hammerstein. Despite the helicopter, which was largely
gratuitous, *Miss Saigon* offered a return to the subtleties and intimacies of character portrayal using the Vietnam War as a backdrop. Rich wrote that, "The most stirring interludes feature two or three characters on an empty stage or in a bar girl’s dingy hovel, and for once the production has been made leaner rather than fattened up for American consumption" ("Saigon" C1). Previously, the British musicals seemed to avoid or were unable to dive deeply into the complexities of character relationships. *Miss Saigon* at least dips into this area timidly. Perhaps a more purposeful use of dance would have facilitated the exploration of characters. The flavorful dance of Bob Avian added to the atmosphere, but did not mold the plot like a dream ballet. Edwin Wilson describes the effect of the use of movement and lighting: "One moment Kim and her son will be on stage alone, isolated by a pale white light; the next moment the stage will be awhirl with movement and color" ("Old-Fashioned" A10).

Dance was not a primary factor but was used more as a satin dressing room gown, to be worn when needed and cast aside when it was time to get down to business. The dance created atmosphere. Unfortunately, the dream ballet was left behind along with complex character investigation and the attempt to interpret emotional, psychological and sexual relationships with any depth.

Lloyd Webber did not want to be simple or too personal and sought to give the Broadway audience what he felt they needed, an escape, and for a time he succeeded. As Hollis Alpert suggests, "What Lloyd Webber proved was the existence of a deep-seated desire to be transported into another realm, where emotions are spun out in music, words, and movement amid wondrous décor" (243). The notion of capturing emotion using the wonders of musical theater was not new; however his invitation to escape from life was contrary to the path musical theater was seemingly taking with the accomplishments of
composers such as Stephen Sondheim. Sondheim’s “unwillingness to cater to public sentiment” (Kislan 164) produced a caliber of musical theater that “trades the world of emotion for the world of intellect, sweetness for bite, warmth for detachment” (Kislan 155). Lloyd Webber swept that away in his shows and replaced it with fantasy, especially in the case of *Phantom*.

Lloyd Webber’s shows were particularly successful and profitable on Broadway but seemed to land American musical theater in a creative rut. His monopoly over Broadway extinguished creative sparks as smaller companies struggled to compete with the mega-budget of Lloyd Webber’s mega-musicals. This impaired the progress of innovative dance, as the shows needed to achieve blockbuster status merely to survive and this was largely demonstrated from the technical departments. With this mentality there was not room for the subtleties or intimacies of dance, and dance began reverting back to its role as an accessory that dressed the stage, common to the 1930’s, and from time to time offered high-energy entertainment.

Broadway choreographers struggled to work creatively within these demands and tried to keep dance alive despite the monolithic control of the new super powers on Broadway. The choreographers who had previously ruled the “Great White Way” and evolved the all-powerful role of the director-choreographer now had to take a back seat to the popular extravagance of the mega-musical. Choreographers are having to rebuild their craft, using even further innovation and ingenuity, if only to capture the audience’s attention to a couple of gratuitous dance numbers. The dream ballet seemed very far away.

After *Rent* opened in 1996 Ben Brantley proclaimed “…the waiflike hopes of the American musical are living in fancier digs” (“Enter Singing” C13). *Rent* hit a key with
the Broadway public because it hinted of a tenderness reminiscent of the Rogers and Hammerstein musicals of years past, like Miss Saigon tries to offer.

Unfortunately in Rent the dance seemed to be forgotten. There was teaser of choreography but that was it. The absence of substantial dance was felt even more emphatically because it seemed for a change that there was a place for it. Rent was constructed in such a way that it seemed obvious that dance was the missing element that would glue it all together. As Brantley comments:

Mr. Larson’s music has an infectious pulse that begs to be danced to. And Marlies Yearby, the show’s choreographer, brings such wit and verve to the first-act finale (the banquet number, ‘La Vie Boheme’) that you feel frustrated that it’s the only thing approaching an ensemble dance number.

(“Enter Singing” C16)

Dance seemed to be edging back, but it did not recapture the distinctive role it had of reflecting the naturalness and honesty of society like it did in de Mille’s work. Rent made a start though in its exploration of the youthful would-be artist castaways in New York City. The relationships between the characters are absorbing in their lyricism and honesty. The desires and anxieties of this community are misfortunate yet hauntingly genial. Brantley concludes:

But there’s no denying that Mr. Larson discovered a winningly accessible and ground-breaking musical formula that combines rock’s drive, pop’s memory-grabbing melodiousness and the leitmotifs and harmonic counterpoints of opera.

(“Enter Singing” C16)

There does seem to be a slow formation of an artistic movement that is trying to speak for a contemporary culture. Rent brought current issues likes AIDS, homosexuality, and
drug addiction to audience consciousness and allowed these issues expression in musical theater through character actions. *Rent* provided a sort of catharsis for the thematic content of musical theater. The issues are not now static and forgotten, but illuminated in an attempt to secure a place for a grassroots, honest attempt at a forum in musical theater for the exploration of contemporary issues. This movement would richly profit by the dream ballet concept because it can provide an interpretation of relationships and issues outside the realm of words. In contemporary musical theater, the language of dance is necessary because it crosses the boundaries that words generally must stay within. The dangers of labels, titles and generalizations are lessened in non-verbal movement. Words are much more obvious and blatant in their meanings; dance is often up to greater interpretation. Dance has greater ambiguity than verbal communication because there is not a concrete dictionary of gestures. For this reason it might be more effective and less damaging to discuss sensitive and potentially volatile issues through dance than words.

A show can exist without dramatic dance, but its potential for communication adds to the wholeness of what musical theater is based on. Kislan argues: “Although music reinforces the atmosphere, it is the dancer’s body, alone or in combination with others’, that gives visual expression to the impact of the surrounding environment on the character” (243). Dance is capable of bearing dramatic responsibilities. The efforts of de Mille, Robbins, Fosse, and Bennett have demonstrated this, and their successes justify dance as a necessary element in musical theater. *Rent* could have benefited from more dance.

Peter Applebome, a critic for the *New York Times*, finds that dance may begin to thrive again because of mere trends. He explains in "Dancing Booms on Broadway: More Jobs, More Competition, Same Old Drive.":

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There is a certain logic for the resurgence of dancers. In an age of body lust, the long lean Chicago dancers on the ads running the length of city buses have the best abs and thighs around. And in the cyclical rhythms of Broadway fashion, dance has been out so long, it is probably time for it to be in.

Ann Reinking, who has an long list of Broadway shows under her belt, (Dancin’ (1978), Chicago (1975). Film: All That Jazz, Annie) has hope for the resurgence of dance. She feels fertile times lay ahead. Reinking, choreographer of the Chicago (1996) revival, co-director of Fosse (1998) and one time partner of Bob Fosse, is certainly not at a loss for projects. Reinking gives her thoughts on the situation of dance on Broadway:

Balanchine is gone but at some point another choreographer like Balanchine will come along. It’s the same on Broadway. It might take 50 years, it might take 5. But in the meantime there’s incredibly good work for us to dance and explore and re-explore.

(Applebome, “Dancing” E1)

Reinking, along with Gwen Verdon, choreographer Chet Walker and director Robert Maltby Jr., have put together Fosse. Reinking is making an attempt to bring back the dance revue format, which was so successful with Bob Fosse’s Dancin’ (1978) and Jerome Robbins Broadway (1989). Fosse is a collection of works of the late choreographer Bob Fosse.

The dance revue format of Fosse is exciting but it does not give dance derived from the musical theater format the respect it deserves. Fosse does not shine as well out of the context of the musicals the dance numbers come from. Fosse warns of the potential
resting-place for dance if changes do not occur. Brantley describes why the show feels incomplete:

Watching *Fosse* is something like looking at an album of glossy uncaptioned photographs. These pictures are arresting and beautifully composed. But it takes your own memories of what they represent to animate those scenes with the sorcery they once possessed; otherwise, they’re just pictures.

(“Album” E1)

A dance show like *Fosse* needs the boundaries constructed by a story to truly create the shine that such inventive dancing deserves. Anna Kisselgoff describes an audience member’s experience with *Fosse*: “‘Again?’ a child in the audience said as still another group of dancers slinked in, splayed hands to the brim of a bowler hat. A signature style is one thing, a tic is another.” (“Dance Card” E1). There is no doubt that the dancing on Broadway is phenomenal, that the technique is flawless, but it needs more. *Fosse* is a glorious celebration of a talented man, but it is “oddly affectless” (Brantley, “Album” E1).

Ben Brantley is not quite as optimistic as Reinking and expounds his dissatisfaction in his description of the 98-99 Tony award nominations in “The Year Broadway Became the Boonies”: “As for the roster of musicals, well, one can only shudder at the line up of misfired, pandering revivals and bland sanitized revues that suggest nightmares of elevator music assuming physical forms” (2:1).

The future of the American musical is hazy, as is the place of dance within the form. No risks are being taken, an unfortunate choice settling for less than musical theater could actually be. Brantley continues:
Expectations were not high for Footloose, a stage adaptation of the movie, or Frank Wildhorn's Civil War, a singing history pageant. Yet both managed to sidestep even the satisfactions of spectacular badness, by being merely so bland as to fade away before your eyes.

("Boonies" 2:1)

Peter Applebome finds consistencies with Brantley's opinion as he talks with Scott Wise, a dancer for 36 years whose Broadway credits include two Tony awards, Victor/Victoria, State Fair, Damn Yankees, Guys n' Dolls, Jerome Robbins' Broadway, A Chorus Line, and a current role in Chicago:

Wise is not sure Broadway will ever take the same risks with dance or see the same kind of commanding choreographer-directors of the past like Fosse or Robbins or Bennett. And he thinks the tempestuous autocrats of the past demanded a consistently higher level than choreographers now do.

("Dancing" E1)

American musical theater seems tired, and producers seem clouded in their criteria of what makes a good musical. The opportunity to provide original dance has virtually disappeared. Brantley reinforces the lameness of last year's lack-luster season:

Even under the direction of the mighty Harold Prince, Parade, seen at Lincoln Center, was little more than an animated civics lesson, warranting the damning epithet "worthy". The dance revue Fosse somehow bleached all the wit and sensuality from the work of Bob Fosse, the choreographer it celebrates, just as the songfest Ain't Nothin' but the Blues tasted like soul food from a can.

("Boonies" 2:1)
He was equally unimpressed with the revivals, calling them "synthetically cheerful", "shrill" and "tasteless" ("Boonies" 2:1). In fact, what he did like was the production of Oklahoma! at the Royal National Theater in London, which for Actors' Equity reasons probably will not be seen here for a long time.

Director-choreographer Tommy Tune (The Will Rogers Follies (1991), Grand Hotel (1989), Nine (1982)) shares these disparate thoughts. He writes in 1996 that:

It seems that little on the musical front is really happening now – just revival after revival, rehash after rehash, warmed-up leftovers, the occasional anger-based social criticism show set to music, but no exciting, entertaining new cuisine. No joy. No entertainment.

(108)

Tune's frank description is not far from the truth. The joy needs to be rekindled in American musical theater. The roots of dramatic dance need to be re-embraced with a fresh approach. Risks need to be taken. Tune shares his desires:

I would much rather be struggling to create a new show with all the accompanying fights, than reinterpreting an old one. There is a certain safety in doing revivals – you know you've got something even before you start rehearsals – but I greatly prefer the quest for the new, the unknown.

(107)

Choreographer Graciele Daniele reminds choreographers of their mission when she comments: "I believe in something that Martha Graham once said in a wonderful conversation with Agnes de Mille: It's not up to you to decide if you're good or bad – it's up to you to keep the channel open" (Bell 177). Until a purposeful choice is made to

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pursue the artistic mission Tune and Daniele embrace, industry seems to have won out over inspiration in America.

The industry of late is Disney. Disney has maintained a consistent hold on Broadway over the past few years and has Aida coming soon. With their mogul-like theme park ideal, Disney stepped up and did battle with Britain. They began with Beauty and the Beast (1994), a carbon copy of their successful movie, with a few extra songs thrown in for character development. Disney's offering to Broadway was not poignant or mature but more of a tourist attraction. David Richards of the New York Times explains after the show's debut:

*Beauty and the Beast* is Disney's first official Broadway musical, with more, apparently to come. Nobody should be surprised that it brings to mind a theme-park entertainment raised to the power of 10. Although not machine-made, it is clearly the product of a company that prizes its winning formulas. Inspiration has less to do with it than tireless industry.

(“Beauty” C15)

*Beauty and the Beast* is entertaining, but really does not have much redeeming artistic value. The Lion King (1997) would prove that Disney could dig a little deeper.

Dance prevailed in *The Lion King* as an innovative tool to capture the organic movement of the animals. Choreographer Garth Fagan, founder of Garth Fagan Dance, a modern dance company, had quite the task, but he proved that dancers could stretch their limits and work beyond their training. The open-mindedness and discipline of the dancers allowed Fagan a smooth transition from concert dance to successfully exploring an entirely new plane of movement regarding manipulation of costumes and puppets. Valerie Gladstone comments in *Dance Magazine* that "Fagan's ability to integrate
movement into every stage moment propelled the show like a warm breeze – an amazing achievement" (74). The success of the show was largely attributed to the enthusiasm of Fagan and the dancers. The dancers displayed self-assurance and humility while allowing the prop or costume to be of utmost beauty and importance. Each dancer not only had to care how he/she looked, but how the prop or costume was working within the space or how it was being manipulated by the air. This was something new. Dance was creating character shapes.

Fagan’s love, like many choreographers, remains with concert dance. He was not perfectly comfortable working in the musical theater venue, as with The Lion King. As Gladstone describes:

In The Lion King, the dancers move with seeming ease while wearing incredibly elaborate costumes – massive headgear, ornate masks, flowing robes, and in one number, trays of grass on their heads to symbolize grasslands. What Fagan prefers, however, is an almost completely unadorned body, so that the lines he creates are clearly apparent.

(75)

The apparatus were a challenge for Fagan, which Ben Brantley of the New York Times quickly picked up on. He describes Fagan’s choreography as "clumsy" (“Lion King” E1). Brantley credits Fagan with a good concept, but one in need of being thoroughly worked out. Still, Fagan’s accomplishments represent a new beginning for dance in musical theater, where technology and movement can blend together. Fagan’s use of costume and prop as a tool for dance is intriguing; he is on to something, and it is that essence and ingenuity that made The Lion King something more than Beauty and the Beast.
The Lion King may be an invitation to a new era in all disciplines. Brantley concludes: "...it offers a refreshing and more sophisticated alternative to the standard panoply of special effects that dominate most tourist-oriented shows today. Seen purely as visual tapestry, there is simply nothing else like it" ("Lion King" E1).

Due to the current place of dance in contemporary musical theater, choreographers, like Fagan, continue to explore other venues this keeps them vitalized and productive while they wait for the excitement to die down around the automated theme park shows. Choreographers have returned to their roots in concert dance, which can only make their craft richer, as they can delve into the pure movement and expression of concert dance.

Single, characteristic dance styles may not have a place in the future of Broadway. Dancers and choreographers need to be versatile and familiar with many styles for a lasting career. Garth Fagan, Graciela Daniele, and Susan Stroman are such talents.

Susan Stroman, the dominant choreographer of the nineties (Crazy for You, Showboat, Steel Pier, Big, London's Oklahoma), is an enormous talent. She works in many domains of dance and through her rigorous discipline and dedication enjoys a wonderful freedom in her style of choreography. She, like many Broadway choreographers, readily branches out from the elitism of Broadway for a breath of fresh air. For example she recently finished working with The Martha Graham Company. Stroman does not forget her experiences as a dancer and the privilege she had of working with great choreographers. She says of Fosse, "'From Fosse I learned that every step is motivated by thought,' she says. 'A step is a realistic. It might not always be pretty, but it's an action'" (Bell 126). Graciela Daniela, also does experimental, non-Broadway work, and Garth Fagan's roots are deep in concert dance and foreign movement.
For Broadway to grow artistically and culturally, not just economically, it must embrace a wider vision of creativity and diversity. Critics should applaud and encourage ingenuity and alternative visions, while supporting a path to a future solid with artistic integrity.

The Broadway musical should be respected and admired because it filters down through so many veins of life. Competition for fresh ideas should be in all elements, not just technical design. A great technological feat is amazing, but if there is a weak story, a bland score or mundane dance steps, the show is potentially lifeless. Creativity and collaboration are the keys to the future of American musical theater.

I believe a return to the grass roots approach provided by the dream ballet will help to stimulate creativity among all elements. Judging from how many choreographers have borrowed from or added to de Mille's accomplishments, it seems like a simple and safe place to start. De Mille's connection with the dynamics and human nature of her time was genuine and hard earned. This is where contemporary Broadway dance needs to start rebuilding, and directors, set designers, costumers, lighting directors and producers need to encourage the inclusion of the dream ballet because it provides them with an incredible opportunity to showcase their talents as well. This is evident in several upcoming shows to be discussed. The dream ballet does not need to be the spotlight of a show but its inclusion will add a sense of wholeness and coherency that contemporary musical theater is lacking.
CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY

Recommendations

In the very recent past there has been some progress towards a rejuvenation of dance in contemporary musical theater. The reinvention of the dream ballet is on the horizon of future musical theater. The choreographers who will bring the essence of the dream ballet back to musical theater are busy working in whatever venue necessary that gives their dance a voice that might be heard in the upper echelons of Broadway. The choice of choreographers to move between disciplines is reminiscent of de Mille’s work with Ballets Russe and Robbin’s work with the New York City Ballet. Choreographers’ styles are fine-tuned by these experiences. Their dance vocabulary increases, as does the skillful application of dance to precise dramatic requirements because of their interdisciplinary experiences. Today, some Broadway choreographers have grown beyond the obvious and safe choices and are taking some respectable risks.

The amplification of the emotional realm of character development through dance, as initiated by the dream ballet is being integrated in shows in a subtle and intimate fashion that has previously gone unexplored. The rejuvenation of the essence of the dream ballet is gaining momentum from success in concert dance settings and smaller venues to be discussed. This is the recommended manner that the dream ballet will begin its return to
American musical theater. The choreographer should attach the discipline and ingenuity of concert dance to the supple emotions of dramatic interpretations from musical theater.

This recent return of choreographers to concert dance as well as those in concert dance coming out to work on Broadway is one factor that will contribute to a greater emphasis of dance in musical theater. This is because the movement between disciplines can create an open attitude and understanding of fellow choreographers. By working within many disciplines choreographers avoid their style being categorized and thereby isolating them from the other venues. Working with a hand in various pots keeps work fresh and alive. This vitality can be attributed to the faster pace of repertoire changes of dance companies. Dance company performances are not generally geared towards product purchase and lasting power, which could be suggested of musical theater, and so they have greater freedom for style studies.

By blending and overlapping the two arenas the potential for innovative dance is increased. For example, Agnes de Mille's work on Rodeo for Ballet Russe company was the inspiration for the dream ballet in Oklahoma!

There was a tremendous attempt in 1998 to bring innovative choreography back to the forefront, but the dance was more often than not used in a secondary nature. The dance was fresh, but there was not the right place for it. Kisselgoff comments:

If 1998 saw a remarkable attempt to make choreography on Broadway so much of an organic whole (Cabaret, The Lion King) that dance sequences were not readily visible as such, productions that opened since have veered mostly in the opposite direction.

("Dance Card" E1)
Dance provided atmosphere or handled prop requirements. The dance was certainly functional and enhanced the other elements of the show, but there was not sufficient pay back. Dance was more of an after thought in musical theater, and so a move to the concert format like could not necessarily be blamed.

The dance-dominated revue format shows took the spotlight while new musicals as a whole struggled for something to say. Broadway choreographers did not wait for the musical to rejuvenate; they invented something of their own to gain some attention that ended up serving a specific function. The function of these all-dance shows was to allow audiences to re-discover the power and passion of dance. This is something already known in the concert dance world that needed to infiltrate Broadway. This worked. Audiences are beginning to get more excited about dance.

Kisselgoff writes that “Perhaps that is why so many of the new Broadway productions use dance as an overblown metaphor. Dance is suddenly seen within these shows as the road to salvation and redemption” (“Dance Card” E1). According to Kisselgoff, American audiences have a renewed awareness of the ability of dance to amplify the emotional and dramatic meaning behind a show.

In the past the demand for technological feats of amazement to accent the plot was pressing. Dance slowly dug its way out of this and for the past several years has served as a sort of patch, servicing whatever show required it. Kisselgoff clarifies:

Dance on Broadway made a comeback in 1992, regaining equal time with songs and dialogue after British musicals had kept choreography subordinate to music. Since then, there has been a considerable seesawing among musicals that use dance as set pieces or, in integrated fashion to move the action along.

(“Dance Card” E1)
More than just a passing trend or fashion, as suggested by Applebome earlier, dance is earning its way back into the heart of musical theater. Dance has proved it can survive on its own, but artistically it deserves so much more. The theme and plot provided by the musical and lyrics are essential to musical theater dance. As much as the latest new musicals seem to need dance, so do the all-dance musicals seem to need the theater musicals. There seems to be a swing back toward the theatrical values embodied by traditional shows like Oklahoma! and West Side Story. The elements of musical theater are pointed towards each other and coming closer to rejoining.

Certain musicals should be watched closely because they have initiated a fresh experience for dance in the musical theater setting. However, it should first be mentioned that the Royal National Theater of London recently did a production of Oklahoma! (1998) and for the first time did not include the choreography of Agnes de Mille. This was the choice of director Trevor Nunn, and who hired Susan Stroman to accomplish the task. Oklahoma! has been the model for the dream ballet for over fifty years. A change in a show that launched the exploration of the dramatic capabilities of dance might inaugurate some invigorating dance or could put an end to the dream ballet once and for all because of its drastic changes.

Hilary Ostlere talks with Theodore S. Chapin, president and executive of the Rogers and Hammerstein Organization. He explains the touchy nature of trying something new, "‘Part of what made Ms. Stroman an interesting risk to take was that Agnes de Mille’s own feelings about Oklahoma! were primarily about the ballet.’" (Ostlere, “Oklahoma!” 2:31). There is not universal unconditional love for de Mille’s choreography, and this particular group was brave enough to suggest that a change was needed.
De Mille's work is not regarded by all as a pillar of perfection in dramatic dance but some regard it as an ideal on which to base exploration. Many shows have been revitalized over the years, but it is remarkable that it is happening to the supposed statue itself for the dream ballet. Ostlere argues that:

Until now, it has been part of theater lore that Agnes de Mille all but revolutionized dance in musicals with her 15-minute dream ballet and movement more fully integrated into the plot than ever before. Held sacrosanct, those dances have largely been the ones re-created in revivals.

(“Oklahoma!” 2:31)

Stroman stated that if she was not permitted to re-stage de Mille’s dances that she was not interested in the project. Once permission was granted Stroman proceed to cut and paste music and dance styles that she felt flowed more naturally into one another. She introduced some ragtime melodies and added some clogging. “Ms. Stroman said the team ‘hoped to make the production more authentic’” (Ostlere, “Oklahoma!” 2:31). This is precisely what they did and enjoyed satisfying reviews all round.

Some found this Oklahoma! the best achievement in a musical since Chicago (1996). Many commented that this show was a revelation of how musical theater should be, and that it was better than the original Oklahoma! Ben Brantley of the New York Times found this Oklahoma! to be the best thing of the entire musical theater season of 1998. Nunn and Stroman hit on something. Along with Stroman’s boisterous dances, Nunn had explored the musical and the original play it was based on, Green Grow the Lilacs by Lynn Riggs, from a darker perspective. Using this scope the production was brought closer to a contemporary realism.
One of the biggest changes Stroman made was that the roles in the dream ballet were danced by the actual characters and not by stand in dancers, the traditional practice. Stroman brought dance closer to the plot by having competent dancers playing roles previously reserved for singers and actors. This is a huge leap from de Mille's *Oklahoma!* as her dancers were rarely asked to sing or participate in non-dance scenes. Stroman's overall inclusion of dancers throughout *Oklahoma!* revealed a harmony in the show never before touched on.

Stroman made great strides towards revitalizing dramatic dance. She has updated the very dream ballet de Mille began with. However, while it is progressive and exciting to see a musical that had basically become a Christmas "cash-cow" given a major makeover - it is still a revival. The athleticism and vigor is commendable, but the show still safely coasts on its golden reputation. For Stroman to be added to the list of truly accomplished choreographers like Robbins or Fosse she needs to create something new and innovative that pushes the boundaries of the art form itself.

She has done just that. Stroman has a potential Broadway hit on her hands called *Contact*. Stroman is the choreographer and co-director of *Contact*, a show that has enjoyed much success off-Broadway. In the spring of 2000, *Contact* moves to Broadway from its previous home at the Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater. This show is a modern dream ballet called "A Dance Play by Susan Stroman and John Weidman". Hilare Ostlere comments on the show in *Dance Magazine*:

> It may seem a slight fare on which to hang a musical, but *Contact* is the most original conception of dance-theater that has come along lately, eclipsing in excitement such bright retreads as *Fosse* and *Jerome Robbins' Broadway* with its
up-to-the minute theme: In this world of swift communications, human beings have serious problems making contact.

(64)

The show is a triptych where each section deals with peoples’ relationships with those around them. As Stroman explains to Slyviane Gold,

All three pieces have to do with contact” she says, “the ability or inability to connect. And all three are about fantasies: The first is lived out in real time; the second is a daydream that helps you survive, and the third is subconscious. All three ended up connecting through the word ‘contact’.

(67)

The show began in the workshop setting with the goal being that dance was to be the vocabulary used to tell the story. This hints of Bennett’s experiments with the workshop in the seventies. Stroman however, enjoyed a more sophisticated and financially secure approach than Bennett. After observing a woman dancing at an after-hours club, Stroman was intrigued by her communication through dance: “The notion that this person was using dance as a very limited and defined way of making contact with other people seemed like a riveting image to me” (Gold 64). She did research much like de Mille and Robbins. Stroman’s idea, that does not follow any preexisting format, is like a breath of fresh air for dramatic dance. Like de Mille, she shows just how powerful the language of dance is in her time.

Stroman uses movement to create all the characters, and the dramatic purpose of the dance resonates clearly. Dancer Deborah Yates, explains Stroman’s style: “...there is no separation between acting and dancing. Every step, every gesture, every movement has a
reason behind it. There’s not a moment where you can say, ‘Here I’m dancing. Now I’m acting.’ You’re always doing both” (Gold 67).

Stroman is rejuvenating dancing on Broadway. Her success so far has been due in part to her refusal to turn down any opportunity to work in different disciplines. She has gone from working with the Martha Graham Company, the New York City Ballet, to Broadway and the West End. She seeks versatility in her career and applies it in her dance. Sylviane Gold concludes:

Her career has been rolling since then, and Contact has without question propelled her onto the short list of people who get called the minute someone plans a Broadway musical. With her directing credit on this show, she’s now officially entered the ranks of director-choreographers – like Jerome Robbins, Michael Bennett and Bob Fosse – who take complete charge of a production.

(67)

What is especially compelling about this new work by Stroman is that it has a maturity that has been missing in dance in musical theater. It displays a smooth and suave attitude that may make people take notice of dance again. Ben Brantley explains that Stroman has:

...created the unthinkable: a new musical throbbing with wit, sex appeal and a perfectionist’s polish. Brimming with a sophistication that is untainted by the usual fin-de-siecle cynicism. Contact restores the pleasure principle to the American musical. It’s the kinetic equivalent of Rogers and Hart.

(“Musical Elixir” E1)

Brantley is certainly not unaware of the current caliber of musical theater of late. He has been unimpressed by the showings of the past several years and had all but given up hope
for the rejuvenation for the Broadway musical. *Contact* has given this shrewdly honest and aware journalist some hope.

Stroman has connected emotions to dance in a way that leads the audience through a nostalgic journey that pulls fantasies and anxieties from a reality all too familiar to us all. She has taken one of the most fundamental needs of human nature and explored it though dance. *Contact* explores individual needs for physical contact in a gracious yet nervously intimate and realistic setting. Brantley explains that the dances “define character with the conversational ease that Ms. Stroman brought to Trevor Nunn’s first-rate revival of *Oklahoma!* in London” (“Musical Elixir” E1). This sort of psychological exploration of character emotions reminds one of the original dream ballet in *Oklahoma!* (1943) that brought Laurie’s desires and anxieties to light through dance. Peter Marks describes the issues that Stroman addresses:

> The stories Ms. Stroman and the author John Weidman have created are linked in all kinds of nuanced ways; one of them is in the idea of identity, of accepting yourself for who you are. Another is in the tension between holding back and letting go, of the damage done to the psyche in bottling up one’s emotions, and the surprising payoffs in opening the heart to all life’s possibilities.

(“For Those Who Dance” 2:6)

Stroman showcases each dancer as an individual by displaying, through dance, the emotions they experience while desperately trying to function in society. Brantley explains that “…you’re astonished by the clear, distinct presence of every performer on stage, each of who hints at a myriad of untold stories” (“Musical Elixir” E1). *Contact* is an evening-long contemporary dream ballet.
The question is not if *Contact* is the anxiously awaited turning point for dance in a musical theater, because I believe it is, but rather if Broadway will accept it. The move from the small Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater to the larger Tony eligible Vivian Beaumont Theater may strain the intimacy and audience connection.

*Contact*’s success on Broadway, will be a test to see if Broadway audiences are willing to be moved by the subtle, by the sophisticated and by the honesty of a show like *Contact* or if they are still vassals to the mega-musicals. Robin Pogrebin believes that *Contact* has a chance; as he comments, “It [Contact] demonstrates that in an age of corporate theater ownership and risk-averse mega-musicals, it is still possible to create a small gem that proves to be incandescent” (“Making Contact” E3).

Finally, *Contact* has a hauntingly familiar air about it that soothes anxieties about individual inadequacies if only for a few hours. Brantley comments: “But *Contact* also has a pulsing urban anxiety, a feeling of being alone in a crowd that will be familiar to anyone who has ever spent time in a singles bar with nothing to talk to but his glass and the bartender” (“Musical Elixir” E1). Stroman has established that her choreography has a dramatic impulse to it reminiscent of the achievements of de Mille and Robbins with the dream ballet concept. Pogrebin concludes:

Ms. Stroman has become known for presenting dancers who think and have inner lives, for creating choreography that is organic rather than merely cosmetic, for using movement to advance the main story rather than decorate or distract from it.

(“Making Contact” E3)

Another musical *James Joyce’s ‘The Dead’* has similar intimate foundations as *Contact*. *The Dead* “makes a sterling virtue out of a trait rarely associated with American musicals: shyness” (Brantley, “Willing to be Quiet” E1). The show, while
somewhat incongruent in its construction, has made some strides. This show refuses to
tell all. This show is shy, frigid, gentle and quiet. Through these unexpected qualities
character is revealed. *The Dead* may challenge Broadway audiences to be more aware
and sensitive to character needs. *The Dead* may not last long on Broadway for other
structural reasons, but it has achieved new ground and worthy of notice. There is not as
much dance in this musical but subtle movement tableaux compliment the overall
diffidence of the show and traditional Irish folk dances choreographed by Sean Curran
are smoothly linked to the plot.

The amplification of the emotional experiences of character offered by dance, as
revealed in the dream ballets has not fallen out of sight. When dance is embraced for its
dramatic qualities the caliber of the show is often increased. The dream ballet qualities
have caught the attention of the West End with *Oklahoma!*. Meanwhile, with intimate
shows on Broadway like *Contact* and *James Joyce's 'The Dead'* that shine in their
subtleties, dance in musical theater may rejuvenate. Mindy Aloff comments on the
growing interest in dance:

> The current generation's attempt to reinvent the wheels within wheels that once
> made Broadway choreography a distinctive and useful contribution to the lyric
> stage is a touching effort. And, given the sea change in American culture over the
> last two decades, a daunting one.

("Rediscovering" 2.1)

There is no doubt a challenge ahead for today's Broadway choreographers, but there are a
few, like Stroman, who have proved they are capable of the task. Stroman has shown
that ingenuity in her craft is achieved by constantly challenging herself and continuing to
work at a project until it is done. She refuses, to work beneath her capacity.
Choreographers may be taking heed of de Mille’s warning of 1951 to avoid making choreography a commodity rather than art, which can hurt the whole field.

Choreographers should be aware of the accomplishments of their predecessors and support the ventures of their contemporaries. Earnest observation and intrepid forays towards inventive movement should be pursued. An acute awareness of our surroundings and relationships can only help to better comprehend life’s struggles. Ann Daly proposes that contemporary choreographers should strive to:

...understand that the material expressiveness of the dancing body, in guises ordinary or extraordinary, is a text that already wonders and wishes, whispers and wails. They understand that the dancing body...is constituted in relation to its environment – to time and space, and to the dustballs of life’s drama that cling to every little movement.

Movement is the language of living and of surviving. Dance amplifies and clarifies this language with a heightened consciousness of the uncertain and changing environment in which we live. Choreographers need to return to a more decisive exploration of humanity through dance in order to give American musical theater the coherency, vigor, and integrity it deserves. Susan Stroman has set a good example to follow along with the creative dexterity of Garth Fagan’s innovations in *The Lion King*.

Joseph Swain suggests that choreographers need to demand respect for their dances and work within a frame of reference that the audience knows. Choreographers need not be too precious about their work while also maintaining a level of pride and probity. He argues that dance “...survives today not because of its supposed innovations, which, real or not, inevitably fade with time, nor because of its original popularity or its historical
position, but because of its own integrity” (74). Agnes de Mille consistently exhibited this maturity and sophistication in her dream ballets that made her a success in her time. By embracing this attitude today contemporary Broadway choreographers should prosper in theirs.

Conclusion

This study has attempted to show why dance should be included in contemporary American musical theater. The dream ballet, as created by Agnes de Mille solidified a place for dance in 1943. This study has shown that there is beginning to be a place for the dream ballet concept again and that public understanding of and desire for the dramatic use of dance is growing. The dream ballet holds a different form than it did before but is no less compelling. Today's dream ballet has subtle nuances and is composed in its perspective. The dream ballet today does not play with familiar pantomimes or common gestures. Today's dream ballet does not have the fanciful safety it used to while remaining separate from the rest of the show. The dream ballet today is visceral and unfolds throughout the show. The dance grows out of a need in the plot of the show which can only be confronted through movement. Dance provides an exploration ground where characters can search for their innermost value and begin to understand their function in society. Dance provides characters with a medium to explore themselves free from the world of spoken opinions, stereotypes and verbal abuses.

Choreographers of late have become especially in tune with the physicality of society and have convincingly broadcast human desires and anxieties through dance. Choreographers have begun to understand that success lies in the interpretation of the problems of our time, just as de Mille, Robbins, Fosse and Bennett did in theirs. Dance,
which had in the recent past only been an afterthought, now seems to be an extremely poignant way of connecting the audience with the show. Before this could be achieved dance had to prove that it was an economic and artistic asset, which it did in the revue format. In doing so, it was noticed that dramatic dance needed a context to work within. The medium of communication of dance was lost in revues style show. The success of these shows however proved that dance is worthy and deserving of all the elements of musical theater.

Hopefully Broadway producers, directors and choreographers will grow beyond the need for the safety of the revival and realize with patience and perseverance an appreciation of and desire for new musical theater can be achieved. Musical theater is a potent medium to communicate and should be manipulated as such. Ann Daly describes that distinctive and valuable art should suggest “an artist in conversation with the contemporary world” (23). I believe today’s audiences may accept an investigation, analysis and discussion of their own time through dance because of its non-verbal and personal nature.

A naturalism in dance that speaks of our time with the vigor and command of the dream ballet is beginning to emerge in musical theater. Richard Philp, Editor-in-Chief for Dance Magazine, attempts to predict the future of dance when he says, “I see a return to the values and colors and textures of nature, our natures. We need to find the self within ourselves again” (7). The search for a contemporary identity for dance in American musical theater should be approached with an honesty and desire for the experience not just recompense. This is what Agnes de Mille suggested in 1951 to avoid dissolving the potency of dance on Broadway and the probity of the choreographer. I believe that an exploration of contemporary human behavior and instinct through dance
using the essences of the dream ballet, as explored in this essay, will lead to valuable forays of innovative dance in musical theater. This may be one way of returning the coherency to musical theater and in turn improving the caliber of new musical theater on Broadway.
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