

Bob (Robert Louis) Fosse (1927-1987)

by Larry Billman

Bob Fosse is a rarity in the world of dance. He became a brand. There are few dance figures who attained this one-name status among the general public: Astaire, Balanchine, Baryshnikov, Robbins, perhaps Graham.

The Fosse brand is sheer Americana: a combination of vaudeville, striptease, magic shows, nightclubs, film and Broadway musicals, all based on social dance. From early exposure to burlesque and nightclubs, Fosse developed a very personal style that had bits of Astaire, Kelly, and Cole in it, but was fueled by a never-ending fascination with the female that ignited his freedom of sensual dance expression. His distinctive style and dance vocabulary grew with each show, until he joined the ranks of director-choreographers on the Broadway stage.

His stylized, from-the-hip, hat-over-one-eye work is distinguished by its economy (the power of a single gesture), humor, and non-musical rhythm breaks (often performed by clusters of moving humanity—writhing, talking, and taunting the audience or camera—called “The Clump”). All of his dances build from tight-controlled intensity to expansive expressions of freedom through dance. With Fosse, everything is contrast: fast to slow, little to big, contained to explosive. It is cute and vulgar. Broad and delicate. Rude and provocative.

In *Hoofing on Broadway – A History of Show Dancing*, Richard Kisland writes, “The Fosse idiom wears a decidedly urban look built on the foundation of the gyrating body. Pelvic grinds, undulating shoulders, backward leans, hip isolations, and turned-in feet subject to a tremendous economy of movement describe the essence of that idiom. Little room for aerial ethereality here. Everything is earthbound, physical, percussive, and sexy.” In her book, *Bob Fosse’s Broadway*, ex-Fosse assistant Margery Beddow adds another element: “There was always a feeling of danger around him.”

At Fosse’s memorial at the Palace Theater on

October 30, 1987, writer and close friend E.L. Doctorow summed up his journey when he said that *Big Deal* (Fosse’s last original show, which was not a success) “was misunderstood by the critics but also misunderstood by Fosse. What he did was compose a folk opera in operatic time using found material of American standards...In American culture there is a great tradition of artists coming out of the vernacular. Out of the street, like Walt Whitman, Theodore Dreiser.”

Early Life and Career Beginnings

Little Bobby Fosse started as a dance-happy kid in Chicago who took some early dance lessons but whose prime educational process was absorbing all he could from the films and live performances he saw at theaters and clubs in the Chicago area: “And then I’d go home and try to do what I saw. I couldn’t afford a choreographer to teach me things so I started doing my own things” (in *Bob Fosse – Steam Heat*).

Born into a family of one sister and three older brothers, Fosse “couldn’t play baseball or sports so to get attention I started dancing around” (*Bob Fosse – Steam Heat*). Inspired by parents who loved ballroom dance and always enjoyed letting the kids “put on shows” in the house, at 13 he and a fellow student, Charles Grass, formed “The Riff Brothers” a duo that performed in Chicago area service clubs, theaters, nightclubs, and burlesque houses. At the age of fifteen he choreographed his first nightclub routine (a line of girls with feather fans performing to “That Old Black Magic.”) After graduating from high school in 1945, Bob enlisted in the U.S. Navy, serving in the Entertainment Branch’s Liaison Unit for 18 months, performing, choreographing, and staging shows that toured the world. Rather than returning to Chicago when he mustered out of the service, Bob Fosse headed to New York.

When he was cast in a touring company of *Call Me Mister*, he met Mary Ann Niles (1933-1987),

a talented, humorous dancer much loved by the theater community, who would become the first woman to lead him on his journey. As the dance team "Fosse and Niles" they appeared on Broadway, in prestigious nightclubs, and on many of the major music variety television shows of the fifties. Married in 1947, they appeared in the ill-fated Broadway musical *Dance Me a Song* (1950), where Bob would meet and become infatuated with Joan McCracken (1917-1961), soon to be his next wife.

McCracken was an intelligent, charismatic and talented dancing actress who had been discovered in [Agnes de Mille's](#) *Oklahoma* (1943), and who would be Bob's guide to formal training, as well as introducing him to the work of de Mille, [George Balanchine](#), and [Jerome Robbins](#). It was also Joan who encouraged Bob to use the G.I. Bill to study acting at the Neighborhood Playhouse with Sanford Meisner, and in multiple classes at the American Theater Wing, where he studied acting, diction, singing, ballet, and modern dance with [José Limón](#) and [Anna Sokolow](#).

Bob Fosse arrived in the movies in 1953 as a result of being "spotted" and offered a screen test by a MGM talent scout who saw his choreography in a New York Stage Manager's union benefit show. Though he had hoped to follow his idol, [Fred Astaire](#), on film Fosse seems "movie star lite." Although he had been called "pretty" as a youngster, on film he is not effeminate. His singing voice is high and slightly wispy, but when he dances, it is with all the assurance of masculinity. He was not as elegant as Astaire, not as working-class as [Gene Kelly](#), and not as energetically funny as Donald O' Connor. While he was appearing in MGM's *Kiss Me Kate* (1953), supervising choreographer Hermes Pan allowed Fosse to choreograph his own section of the number "From this Moment On" with partner Carol Haney (1924-1964), giving film audiences their first glimpse of Fosse the choreographer.

Development of the Fosse Style

With the support of Jerome Robbins, who signed on as "co-director" for the assurance of the show's director, George Abbott, and the financial backers, Fosse was given the opportunity to choreograph his first stage musical, *The Pajama Game* (1954).

Collaborating with Robbins, Fosse would later admit that he "learned more in a couple of hours watching him than I had learned in my whole life...I think it was a turning point in my career as a choreographer. I get the idea now and I see what you can do and what should have been done and how to go about it and everything, and it's been something that's been of value to me for the rest of my career" (*Bob Fosse - Steam Heat*).

The highlight of the show was "Steam Heat," performed by three of the best jazz dancers of their time, Haney, Buzz Miller, and Peter Gennaro. *New York Post* critic Clive Barnes wrote of the number: "It was a kind of mechanized movement we hadn't quite seen before and it was this mannerism, this complete control of the dancers, complete control of the medium, almost complete control of the music. This seamless kind of thing that he was able to do. It was mannerism made into art." A trio of androgynous figures in tight black suits (with pants rolled up to show white socks a la Gene Kelly), black bowler hats and white gloves, clapping and making sounds with their mouths, moved as one. This accomplishment won Bob Fosse his first Tony Award for choreography.

He was next asked to choreograph *Damn Yankees* (1955), which would bring his strongest muse, and next wife, Gwen Verdon (1925-2000), into his life and career. This flame-haired American musical theater legend had become the consummate example of the [Jack Cole](#) style, and it was now her turn to enable Fosse to form his style, which Ann Reinking would later define with the description, "It's elegant, yet it's very funky. It's fragile, yet it's also quite tough. It has fragile weight. It's sensual, yet it's witty. One of the things he always loved about Gwen...he said she was so sensual, but she always had a

twinkle in her eye and a wink” (in *Fosse-A Celebration in Song and Dance*).

Verdon would give him his greatest stage success with the shows he created for her; she would nurture and assist him, and ultimately be the one who was with him when he fell to a Washington D.C. street having his second – and last – heart attack on September 23, 1987. After his death, she created the Fosse Foundation and began to codify, revive and honor the man and his creativity. She believed in Bob Fosse more than he did himself. She also would give him his most enduring love on March 24, 1963, their daughter, Nicole.

Signature Works

When *Damn Yankees* was filmed in 1958, directed by another dancer-turned-film-director, Stanley Donen, Fosse appeared dancing one of his most famous duets, the Jack Cole-inspired Mambo spoof, “Who’s Got the Pain?” with Gwen. He continued to create successful vehicles for Verdon: *New Girl in Town* (1957), *Redhead* (1959, Tony Award), and *Sweet Charity* (1966, also directing and receiving a Tony Award). Above and beyond the soon-to-be iconic movement pieces he created for Gwen (“If My Friends Could See Me Now,” “I’m a Brass Band”), it was “Hey, Big Spender” and “The Rich Man’s Frug” that would be among the most copied from the Fosse vocabulary. In “Big Spender,” it is the emotionally shattered dance hall hostesses who walk backwards out of the darkness along a downstage railing raised out of the orchestra pit, to face the audience and stand like zombies with turned-in knees and feet and “broken doll” arms and faces, breaking the fourth wall and staring into the audience’s faces. Another show-stopper, “The Rich Man’s Frug,” was simply a slick, stark and satiric number to show the hedonistic and world-weary denizens of a sixties disco.

With his studies in acting and directing, he began hiring dancers who could act and had individual strengths in dance, character and physicality, using varied individuals to build a group of characters, rather than the “dancing

chorus” of the times. As rehearsals began, he took the dancers through social dances of the period and would ask them all to go to his famous trunk and select a feather boa, a fan, a hat, a cane, or any prop to help create their character. Margery Beddow, in her book, recalled his methods to give the dancer subtext: “He’d say things like ‘Now feel like a fat girl doing this step’ or ‘This pose has the same feeling as the Petty Girl poses in the famous calendar’ or ‘Now you’re the girl in the melodrama begging to be saved.’ Every step had a thought behind it – ‘You can’t be a good dancer unless you’re a good actor. Otherwise it’s all just so much animated wallpaper.” Fosse later recalled that acting teacher Sanford (Sandy) Meisner had a sign in his office that inspired him: “‘Don’t just say something, stand there.’ And I found out in choreography frequently less movement, more economical movement makes a stronger statement than fierce activities” (*Bob Fosse – A&E Biography*).

In 1962, Bob Fosse joined the new breed of stage directors/choreographers--Jerome Robbins, Gower Champion, and eventually [Michael Bennett](#), and Tommy Tune--who were melding and moving all of the elements of the show--dances, blocking, scenery, and lighting--into one seamless vision. Film techniques such as cross-fades, dissolves and even close-ups now became possible on the stage. Fosse moved to the next level as a film director for *Sweet Charity* in 1969. His next film, *Cabaret* (1972), would win him an Oscar as best director, and he continued to move between Broadway “concept musicals” like *Pippin* (1972), *Chicago – A Musical Vaudeville* (1975), *Dancin’ - A New Musical Entertainment* (1978) and *Big Deal* (1986), and films: *Lenny* (1974), *All That Jazz* (1979), and *Star ’80* (1980). He left behind a personal illustration of the Fosse style by playing a cameo role in Stanley Donen’s *The Little Prince* (1974), and a look into his life and demons with the autobiographical *All That Jazz* in 1979. Television had not seen an original Fosse work since the 1960s, but after his star-making and Oscar-winning direction of Liza

Minnelli in *Cabaret*, in 1973, he co-conceived, co-produced, choreographed, and directed *Liza with a Z: A Concert for Television*, a landmark television special.

Wanting more control of his projects, with *Pippin* (1972) Fosse also began conceiving and writing the shows. He took a simplistic book with a soft rock score, threw all that into the air and re-envisioned the show as a “concept musical.” The opening number, “Magic to Do,” introduced audiences to a group of misfit and demonical “Players” who appeared onstage as floating heads and hands in a light curtain, surrounded by smoke, to present the tale. It was alternately a magic show, a minstrel show, and Gothic miracle show, with the Players appearing in and out of the haze, hanging from the proscenium walls, waving fire and taunting the naive lead character—and the audience. The show also introduced Fosse to his last muse, Ann Reinking (1950-), who was in the cast and brought her classical training and mile-long-legs to add dimension, nuance, fluidity, and precision to his movement palette. The show introduced “The Manson Trio,” a soon-to-be iconic trio of dance monsters, led by Ben Vereen and two armor plated broken dolls, performing a soft shoe through the dismembered bodies on a battlefield. The trio would be the stars of the very first TV commercial for a Broadway show.

Bob Fosse was always ahead of his time. Still using inspirations from the show business past ([Busby Berkeley](#) girls with fans surrounding a dying man on a hospital bed in *All That Jazz*, a war council depicted as a minstrel show in *Pippin*) he continually pushed the boundaries so that his work viewed today seems fresh. When the film *Cabaret* was initially released, critics harped on the fast editing and the cross-cutting between on-stage performances and real-life happenings of the characters, which would become the template for contemporary film musicals like Baz Luhrmann’s *Moulin Rouge* (2001) and *Chicago* (2002), directed by the one of the latest choreographers-turned-film directors, Rob Marshall. In 1979, *All That Jazz*

was derided as Fosse’s attempt to copy Federico Fellini’s autobiographical *8 ½*, while the opening audition sequence to “On Broadway” was likened to a “the frenzied filming and editing of a music video.” The eroticism in “Air-Otica” from *All That Jazz* brought on a frenzy of cries for censorship, while today comments on YouTube about the number call it: “The most beautiful dance ever created.” And the satirical stage musical *Chicago*, based on a play about two murderesses finding fame and celebrity, which had audience members walking out of the theater in disgust and newspaper editorials calling it “disgusting” and “immoral,” needed three decades before its vision of gruesome, reality-TV-style celebrity was embraced by the public.

Legacy

The Fosse brand has been codified, nurtured, and maintained by family (his widow, Gwen Verdon, and daughter, Nicole), former assistants (Chet Walker, Kathryn Doby and Graciela Danielle), and his final muse (Ann Reinking). Fosse’s work has been frequently written about in detail in issues of *Dance Magazine* and *Dance Spirit* for their readership of budding dancers.

Although Bob Fosse worked in a multitude of styles--tap, soft-shoe, ethnic, hoe-down, character, ballroom, adagio, and ballet--it would be the pared-down, sharply edged silhouettes of his white-gloved, derby-hatted, dressed-in-black compositions that would make his brand palpable. His work continues to be referenced and “sampled” in current music videos, films and commercials. On today’s reality TV shows such as “So You Think You Can Dance?” dances are choreographed and performed as “Fosse/Jazz” works, and classes in “Fosse Style” are taught around the globe by former Fosse dancers, assistants, and rabid fans. Fosse students know all of the terms: tea cup fingers, broken doll, elbow-wrist-hand, waterfall arms, paint brush, Fosse/jazz hands, and The Lola.

The brand continued with *Fosse*, a reconstructed montage of his choreography that ran for 1,093 performances on Broadway and nearly one year in London. In May, 1996, a revival of *Chicago: A Musical Vaudeville* was presented as part of City Center's Encore! Great American Musicals in Concert. With Ann Reinking choreographing the show "in the style of Bob Fosse," the economically feasible pared-down set and costumes focused attention on the score, the cast and the dances. The show was such a success that it immediately went into production on Broadway. Opening on November 14, 1996 and with 6,138th performances as of August 27, 2011, it is the fourth-longest-running Broadway show, beating *A Chorus Line*, the formidable show that swept the Tony Awards the year that *Chicago* was also nominated. A revival of his first all dance revue, *Dancin'* (retitled *Bob Fosse's Dancin'*) is in progress, with a U.S. postage stamp honoring Fosse issued on July 28, 2012. The Fosse brand management team will introduce him to the millennial generation. And beyond.

For full citations to works referenced in this essay, see [Selected Resources for Further Research](#).

APPENDIX: CHOREOGRAPHIC CREDITS

Stage: *The Pajama Game* (Bdwy '54, Tony award), *Damn Yankees* (Bdwy '55, Tony Award), *Bells Are Ringing* (Bdwy '56, with Jerome Robbins), *New Girl in Town* and *Copper and Brass* (Bdwy '57, with Anna Sokolow), *Redhead* (Bdwy '59, Tony Award), *Hail, The Conquering Hero* (Bdwy '61), *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* (Bdwy '61, with Hugh Lambert, "musical staging" credit), *Little Me* (Bdwy '62, also co-dir, Tony Award for choreo), *Pal Joey* (NY City Center '63 rev, also appeared), *Pleasures and Palaces* (OOT '65, also dir), *Sweet Charity* (Bdwy '66 & '86 rev, also dir, Tony Award for choreo), *Pippin* (Bdwy '72, also dir, book, 2 Tony Awards), *Chicago* (Bdwy '75, also dir, book, Tony nom), *Dancin'* (Bdwy '78, also dir, Tony Award for choreo), *Big Deal* (Bdwy '86, also dir, book, Tony Award for choreo)

TV: (Partial listing): "The Fifty-Fourth Street Revue" (1949), "The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show" (with Niles, 1950), "Toni Twin Time" (with Niles, 1950), "The Colgate Comedy Hour" (with Niles, 1951), "Your Hit Parade" (with Niles, 1950), "The Ed Sullivan Show" (choreo for Gwen Verdon's multiple appearances), "The Wonderful World of Entertainment" ('58); "Ford Startime" ('59), "The Seasons of Youth" ('61, also appeared), "Liza with a 'Z'" ('73, also co-pro and dir, assisted by Louise Quick, Emmy Award for direction)

Film: *Give a Girl a Break* (1953, with Gower Champion, Stanley Donen, Bill Foster, also appeared), *The Affairs of Dobie Gillis* (1953, with Alex Romero, also appeared), *Kiss Me Kate* (1953, with Hermes Pan, also appeared), *My Sister Eileen* (1955, assisted by Betty Scott, also appeared) *The Pajama Game* (1957, assisted by Patricia Ferrier), *Damn Yankees* (1958, assisted by Ferrier, also appeared performing "Who's Got the Pain?" with Gwen Verdon), *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* (1967, Dale Moreda recreating Fosse's original stage work), *Sweet Charity* (1969, also dir, assisted by Kathryn Doby, Ed Gaspar, Paul Gleason, Sonja Haney, John Sharpe, Gwen Verdon), *Cabaret* (1972, also dir, Academy Award winner for "Best Direction," assisted by Doby and Sharpe), *The Little Prince* (1974) (with Ronn Forella, also appeared as "The Snake"), *All That Jazz* (1979, also script and dir, assisted by Doby and Gene Foote), *Pippin: His Life and Times* (TV) (1981, original work recreated by Doby), *Star '80* (1983, also dir, assisted by Doby), *That's Dancing!* (1985, archival footage)

Larry Billman studied dance with Don Martin and James Truitte at the Lester Horton School and with Jack Cole and Eugene Loring in his hometown of Hollywood. After performing, he made the transition to writer/director and began a 35-year-long career with Disney live entertainment, creating hundreds of shows for their theme parks worldwide. His other credits

include directing *Ringling Bros. Barnum and Bailey Circus*, *Disney on Ice* and serving as Creative Director for 6 non-Disney theme parks in Japan. As an avocation, he began writing books about the performers who had inspired him (Fred Astaire and Betty Grable) which led to *Film Choreographers and Dance Directors*, the first encyclopedia on the subject. This led him to becoming a Dance on Film historian and lecturer at colleges and universities. He is currently writing a revised edition of the first encyclopedia and working on the companion book, *Film Dancers*.