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There have been times during the past couple of decades when one might have gained the mistaken impression that Lloyd-Webber invented the musical. His derivative pap has certainly given a bad name to a form which has a distinguished history and which, arguably, reached its apotheosis in 1957 with *West Side Story*. Based on a book by Arthur Laurents, with lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and a score by Leonard Bernstein, that musical was choreographed and directed by Jerome Robbins, and it was a musical like no other, one in which music and action were so closely woven as to seem inseparable.

Amanda Vaill, Robbins' authorised biographer, still marvels at “the symbiosis of the relationship” between choreographer and composer, a relationship that had begun in the early 1940s when Robbins conceived the idea for *On the Town*, which itself had grown out of his ballet *Fancy Free*. “They had such an interesting relationship, the longest and most faithful, in some ways, in either of their lives. It was extraordinary, incredible, this complementary thing they had going together,” she continues, speaking also of Betty Comden and Adolph Greene, who wrote the book and lyrics to the earlier musical. “They were

little star struck, gave him their blessing and, although he had “a horrible time” at first, by 25 he was the toast of the town with *Fancy Free*. The great Balanchine invited him to join the newly created New York City Ballet, with whom he would work, on and off, for the rest of his life.

What was stunning to Vaill was “the breadth of his talent. [Robbins] had visual talent – he was a very fine draughtsman and watercolorist. He could play the piano and violin and he had a real musical ear. Dancers can count, but he was really musical and his choreography was always underpinned by what the music was doing.” So, for example, he'd play through the scores Bernstein had mailed him and notice that a few more beats were needed here or there for the dance routine he'd envisioned to pan out.

Vaill's book was seven years in the writing and, as she wrote, she ran up against “very many strange coincidences”. Even as a child, she was aware that the celebrated Mr Robbins lived across the street but she hadn't known that her dance teacher had also taught Tanaquil le Clercq, the ballerina who was Balanchine's muse and Robbins' happiest inspiration. An English major at Radcliff, Vaill hoped to be an actress but realised how much she hated auditions. “So I went with my second love, which was literature.” She started at the *New*

Those dancing feet

In New York, Liz Thomson meets Amanda Vaill, former publisher and now the biographer of choreographer extraordinaire Jerome Robbins

Vaill: amazed at the breadth of Robbins' talent

all young geniuses together. That was what was so touching about [*On the Town*] – they were all so young and they just made it up. They just *did* it! It was their first success, for all of them.”

The confidence of youth probably had something to do with it. Neither Robbins nor Bernstein was yet 40 when Broadway again fell at their feet and *Tony and Maria*, in a modern-day *Romeo and Juliet*, sang their hearts out in numbers such as “Tonight” and “Somewhere”. Behind them, the *Jets* and the *Sharks* danced in a way that was “electric and completely different”. Originally, Robbins had toured the dance clubs of East Harlem, hoping to find diamonds in the rough but, in the end, young as they were, the cast of *West Side Story* were all professionals. “He never found anyone who could project theatrically and sing – this was pre-mike days, and the Winter Garden is a big theatre.” Hundreds of kids were auditioned by Robbins, “the man for whom many of the rules of Equity were put in place,” continues Vaill. “He would work you for 10 hours a day, six days a week – he would do it, and he expected everyone else to. He was obsessive, and he would find people who were as obsessive as he was and they'd dance until they were ready to drop. The intensity was partly what made these shows what they were. It was hugely difficult and gruelling.”

The man whom the world would know as Jerome Robbins was born Jerome Rabinowitz in New York in October 1918, like Bernstein and George Gershwin before him the child of Jewish immigrants who left Europe if not always tired and poor then certainly “yearning to breathe free”, as Emma Lazarus' poem puts it. One of two children, he showed early musical ability but it was dance that enthralled him. Spurning a role in the family corsetry business, he headed across the Hudson, from New Jersey to Manhattan, to try his luck professionally. His parents, perhaps a

Yorker, over which the legendary William Shawn still presided, and, after a spell at McGraw Hill, was hired by Viking. There she published William Golding, William Trevor, Iris Murdoch and T C Boyle; Jackie Onassis was a colleague.

Made redundant in the crisis that gripped much of Nineties publishing, she embarked on a biography of Gerald and Sara Murphy, whose lives intersected with those of Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Dorothy Parker, Picasso, Cole Porter and Stravinsky, among others – a project she'd long wanted to commission, if only she could find the right author. “They'd been in Paris in the Twenties, where all these exciting things were happening”. Casting round for another project as she was concluding that one, she thought of New York in the Forties and Fifties and, then, Robbins. *Vanity Fair* commissioned a feature by way of entrée so she wrote to Robbins. “He was rehearsing his New York City Ballet version of [Stravinsky's] *Les Noces*, which was complicated, and he wrote me a little note asking if I'd wait until he finished.” But then Vaill awoke to a *New York Times* front page announcing his death. Immediately, she set about tracking down his executor, knowing there was primary material she needed to see – not least that relating to the House Un-American Activities Committee – and that, without permission, there could be no book.

“It was easier for me to recreate him as a character not having actually known him,” she concludes. “I've come to know him in ways more intimate than you could know anyone. I've read his most private and personal thoughts... He was a man who used everything in his life as theatre. He'd look out the window and see someone walking down the street and to him it would be choreography. He had this vision of the world as a stage.”

Somewhere: A Life of Jerome Robbins is published by Weidenfeld on 9 November, price £20

