

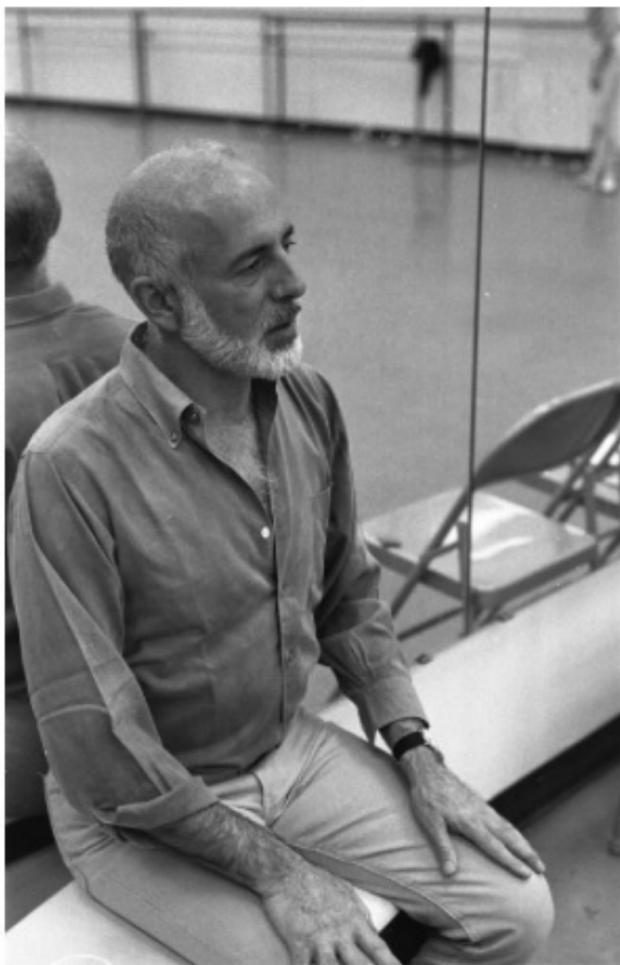


An Emotional Archive: Hiie Saumaa on Jerome Robbins

February 14, 2018

On January 26, 2018, six Jerome Robbins Dance Research Fellows presented at a symposium, focusing on Robbins' life and work and looking at his archival material in new and interesting ways. One of the fellows, Hiie Saumaa, Ph.D., presented her project called, *Jerome Robbins: Composer in Words*. Ms. Saumaa has a background in Comparative Literature and Somatics, and the following is a reflection on her research at the Library for the Performing Arts.

As I was sitting in the special collections reading room in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts in the summer and fall of 2017, perusing boxes of Jerome Robbins' personal papers, I noticed a physical sensation of stirring, softening, and aliveness in the middle of my chest. My somatic practices of dance and movement have taught me to attend to such sensations and contemplate their significance. "These writings connect me to my heart – they make me heartfelt," I realized.



Jerome Robbins at NYC Ballet rehearsal; NYPL Digital Collections, image ID: swope_1211602

I thought back to conversations with the archivists at the Jerome Robbins Dance Division over the past few months and recalled their words:

"Every time I read Robbins' archives, I want to hug and console him."

"I really fell in love with Robbins, not only with his works—though that too—but with him as an artist, especially through seeing him in rehearsals for his ballets. I felt connected to him on a very human level through the archive, that he's very alive and present in it."

"You don't even have to read through all of these journals but just see them, to feel how much he cared about them."

"He writes about how to be alive."

"Many archives are full of emotion because you see a person's life very intimately. But Robbins' is especially so."

Why do Robbins' archives elicit such responses?

From reading biographies on Robbins and from my interactions with people who had worked for him, I knew that he was considered a difficult man – demanding, quick to anger, and unpredictable. Yes, many of his unpublished writings are marked by anger, self-doubt, and mood swings. But Robbins' writings also show him in a very different light.

The care he took for his friends and the pain he felt over their passing echo throughout. In a piece titled "Piazza del Vercardo," Robbins recounted an unusual experience he had in Spoleto, Italy. He was having breakfast at a café in a little market square, surrounded by a constant flux of people. Suddenly a woman detached herself from others and moved toward him:

At first, as I craned my head around, it flashed on me, without a moment's rational thought, that it was Edit[sic], who could be there, very simply, alive again, in this town at this moment, passing thru. And that there was, on consideration, not a thing odd, wrong, or unreal about it. There, in Spoleto, I would easily be visited by all who had passed on, and there wouldn't be anything extraordinary about it. As I thought that, I could see Nora coming down that hill street, all glowing with humor & delight at bumping into me; I could see Tommy walk by & say Hi & talk a little & nothing would be forced or portentous. David Herton, Tudor, Ronnie Bates, Michael Bennet, Joe Dull[sic][...] – But it was all with a safe security, without fuss or dream or psychic phenomena that this very visitation to a heaven came about. I knew this moment would pass – but there, under a cage outdoor umbrella, sipping tea, watching the world pass by, came a special time which, like a current of different temperature water in a moving stream, woven into the current and out again, came this special and real visit from those who had died.

Speaking about this incident at the memorial for Nora Kaye at the New York City Center on January 5, 1988, he said, "I couldn't get thru it without tears flowing down my face. Jess said well you've lost so many people in recent years – I guess. It all came open & bottling out & for a few days I wouldn't stop having tears." For him, paradise was "the place one goes to see all one's loved ones again."

Reading his writings, I saw traces of others' feelings for him. Robbins inserted into his diaries handwritten notes of love and encouragement, such as "Good Luck, Love Twyla" or "BY [sic] MR ROBBINS TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF AND I WILL HELP TO TAKE CARE OF THE DOGS. Love Pam, smile." These words that Robbins saved introduce readers to the voices and feelings of people close to him: "Dear J, I don't want to leave; I love you. Bri" or "I think new things about you every day – this is having a good time – feelings running over and out of me to you tonight." One particularly memorable letter, addressed from "me" to "you," ends with the words: "remember, whenever you are outside & you feel the first drops of rain on your face, it's just me, using your photograph." This letter, suggesting that looking at Robbins' photo brings tears to the author's eyes, is a story of enchantment or love that the archives allude to but do not explain.

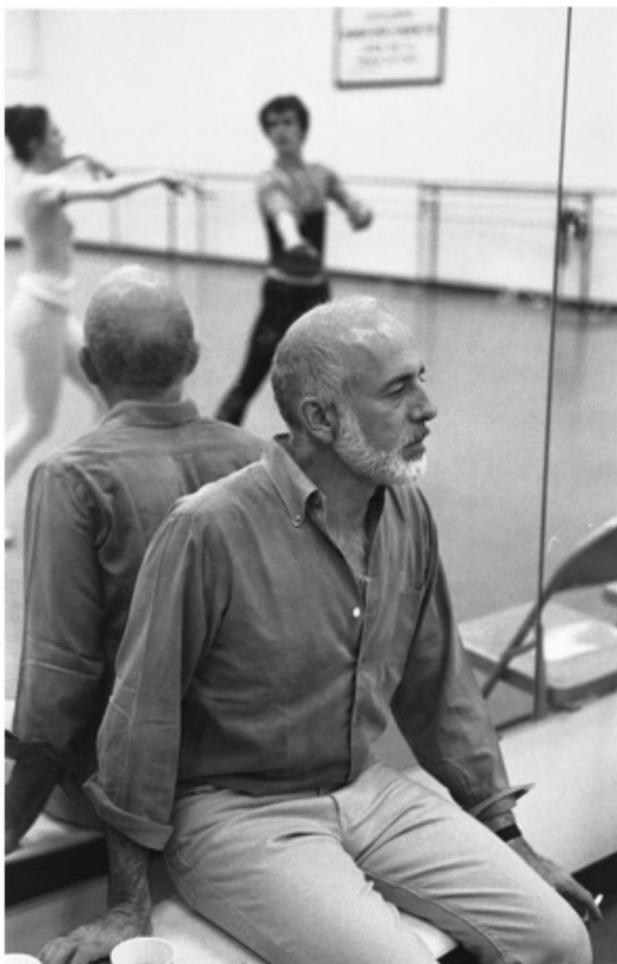
Robbins' writings expose his vulnerability. Feeling like he was "worthy of being loved" was "a deep shift & adjustment." "Can I keep it?" he asked. He feared dying before being able to connect the way his "insides longed to connect." In 1988, he noted,

"So I find myself lying on bed at night or in morning watching my days roll away from me & down the drain—with less & less of them left for me. There is an end in sight. I am heavy with that feeling [...]. My eyes, my ears, my cock, my fatigues, my desires & most of all, how I am being treated—how others react to me. The loneliness withers my bones. I work to not recognize it."

Robbins' archives move me because he wrote about relatable themes -- love, death, self-fulfillment, work, and creativity. These writings are alive to emotion: he wrote about and out of sadness, anger, self-pity, grief, confusion, exhilaration, joy, pleasure, satisfaction, and fear in his journals, travel notes, short stories, erotica, scenarios for ballets, poems, and autobiographical notes. He wrote about and out of love -- for other people, for beauty, for work, for nature, and for life. He expressed and explored these emotions by writing in the first person, as in his diaries, and in the third person, through a literary character's perspective, as in his short stories.

But Robbins also seduces me with his words. I respond to his language – the flow and rhythm of his sentences, his imagery, and the lyricism of his tone. His descriptions of nature feed my imagination and make me feel how deeply he must have connected to particular landscapes. In my mind, I see the sunset sky turning “orange and mauve as the firey ball turns orange, then red, then crimson, then swells as it drops behind the horizon.” In my body, I can almost sense the “clean, crisp, clear, and biting” air of the mid-winter beach on Long Island and feel the gusts of winds that “make your vision blurred by watering [your] eyes, your nose also running and the tips of your fingers and toes hurting so with the bitter cold.”

At times it feels like Robbins is talking to me directly. In his diaries, he turns to “you,” the reader, in what feels like an intimate encounter of two minds.



Jerome Robbins at NYC Ballet rehearsal; NYPL Digital Collections, image ID: swope_1211603

at the heights and lows of his creative work -- moments when he worked “openly, in tune & unafraid” and when he felt “severe depression & almost retiring.” I got a glimpse at whom he loved and who loved him. I encountered moments when “love, full & unspoken & unpossessive” was “sliding” into his feelings and witnessed his thoughts as he was preparing to exit life.

As I closed yet another folder of the yellow note pads full of his autobiographical writings, in the handwriting by now so familiar, I realized that Robbins’ writings enliven my relationship to my own emotions. His writings inspire me to pay attention to the range of my emotions, to treat them with greater honesty, and to express them more artfully and more courageously. His words send us an impulse to feel what and who stir our hearts.

“Now tell me—what time is it now as you are reading it?” he asks. Robbins reminds me that even though his words and my reading eyes meet at this particular moment in time, our experiences with these words’ point of origin is different. He notes, “As you read this, the page opposite, or the whole book might be filled up [...] Your mind & eyes are admitting to the fact that below these very words you are reading now is a page full of other words: while to the right and beneath my pen as I even now press it to the paper is utter blankness.”

Just like a choreographer who sets the mood and emotional tone for the dance and helps the audiences understand a character the performer is attempting to capture, Robbins as a writer knew how to verbally convey a particular locale, illuminate a character clearly, make readers feel personally engaged, and evoke feelings through his words.

Working in Robbins’ archives made me realize that archives teach us about life and death. We see the others whom we study at their most intimate and most vulnerable. Robbins’ vast archival collection, spanning a lifetime, includes x-rays of his knee, his last will, his poems and musical compositions as a little boy, his drawings and sketches, the flowers he collected in Spoleto and inserted into his diaries, his daily schedules, and his writings on his journey through sexuality and eroticism, the death of his dog, and his growing fear of physical frailty. I saw him