

**NEWS FROM
THE JEROME
ROBBINS
FOUNDATION**

VOL. 5, NO. 2 (2018)

Jerome Robbins

ST. INTAKES AND PRO



“Robbins’ Love Lessons” at NYPL by Hiie Saumaa

“Let’s do an event on Robbins’ writings—what do you think?” Evan Leslie, the artistic producer at New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, asked me at the Jerome Robbins Symposium in January 2018. My contact with Robbins’ materials began in the summer and fall of 2017, when I was selected as one of the Library’s Dance Fellows. Euphoric at the success of the symposium where I had given a talk on Robbins’ diaries, and excited about a new creative endeavor, I immediately said yes.

“Robbins’ Love Lessons,” a lyrical evening of words, music, images, and movement, took place in August 2018. The actors Amelia V. Anderson and Marc Castle, the dancer Harrison Coll, and Tanisha Jones, Kathleen Leary, Cassie Mey, and Arlene Yu, members of the Dance Division, read Robbins’ childhood poetry and excerpts from his diaries. Pianist Joanne Kang and cellist Madeline Fayette performed pieces by Frédéric Chopin and Johann Sebastian Bach, both of which Robbins used in his choreography. In projected images of his diaries, we saw Robbins’ handwriting and illustrations as a boy and as an adult. We heard the conviction in his tone as he announced having found his faith, the faith of dance. We saw excerpts from his home movies. The audience heard different shades of his voice as a writer; the voice of the 9-year-old boy composing poems, and of the famed choreographer, anguished but exalted, deep in the process of creating his next ballet. Words, visual images, and dance, from different parts of the archives came together. In one striking example, we heard an excerpt in which Robbins wrote about his time at the Long Island hamlet called Water Mill, followed by his home movie of his time there, followed by an excerpt from the ballet *Watermill*. We got a glimpse into the state of his mind as he was gazing at the sky, the beach, the shells, and the plants on the Long Island beach.

Evan and I were pleased: not only because the event was fully booked but also because many of the audience members were inspired—to live their lives more artfully, to pick up their writing again, to go back to painting, to listen to some more music. Robbins would have been pleased too, we hope.

The following is one of the pieces I presented at this event.

• • •

Bridgehampton

by Hiie Saumaa

In one of my writing classes at New York University this past spring, we read a chapter from Philip Gerard’s *The Art of Creative Research: A Field Guide for Writers*. I gave my students an assignment: find three words, sentences, or paragraphs that inspire you in this reading and write about them in your notebooks, or what I call “wisdom books.” Reflect more broadly: What does inspiration mean to you? What does it feel like to be inspired? Do you see your research for your writing project for this course as a creative act? I like doing these kinds of writing exercises with my students. I too began reflecting in my “wisdom book.” The author encourages writers to travel to places to gather evidence and stories, and to recharge their emotional batteries.

After my students had shared their ideas, they turned to what was more urgently on their minds: the spring break the following week. “What are your plans, professor?” they asked. “I want to do some creative research. I am writing about the choreographer Jerome Robbins. I am planning to go to Bridgehampton in Long Island where he had a summer house. I want to breathe in the air there. After all, the word ‘inspiration’ comes from the Old French ‘inspiracion’ – ‘inhaling, breathing in.’ From Latin, ‘in’ + ‘spirare,’ to breathe in.” The etymology of this word tells us that inspiration is a physical phenomenon.

In the 1960s and 70s, Robbins rented several houses in the Hamptons, and in the 1970s he bought an unassuming cottage house in Bridgehampton. There, he relaxed, wrote, drew in his journals, and walked on the beach, collecting stones, shells, pieces of wood, and feathers. He visited a nearby hamlet called Water Mill and created a ballet by the same name, which premiered at the New York State Theater in February 1972. This ballet is one of Robbins’ most experimental and puzzling pieces.

I stepped off the train from New York City on an early Saturday morning in March. “What direction is the town?” I asked a stranger. “That way.” I started walking, slowly, my senses alive. The air was crisp and fresh. Rays of sun were bouncing off of my cheeks. My eyes moved not just vertically, up, up, like they do among the skyscrapers in New York, but horizontally, into width, tracing the

landscape and its earthy hues of soft brown and green. I looked at and touched the branches and barks of the trees. My mind felt spacious, like the land around me. My pace was calm and steady.

I met up with a friend in Bridgehampton and we set out to find Jerry’s house. The night before I had texted another friend, a principal dancer with New York City Ballet, and asked him where the house was, as he had been there before. He said, “Darling – if you are heading out that way the house is on Dune Road in Bridgehampton. I believe the number is 31, but I really only know it by sight. It’s the smallest, oldest house on the beach side of Dune Road. Cedar shingles and a Japanese fish flag flying. Hope you find it!”

There was no house by that description at that address. But the friend I was with said, “Wait a second, I think I know the house you’re talking about. My friend and I often walk on the beach and there’s one house that stands out from the rest. It’s small and humble. Come, let’s go.”

We parked the car in front of a house that matched the description. Suddenly a handsome man in his thirties appeared on the doorstep. “Oh, hello, I’m sorry to be on your property. You see I’m here on a spirit quest of sorts. Is this the house of Jerome Robbins?” I asked. A brief pause. “Yes. Do you want to see what it looks like from the inside?” he said. Yes!

My friend and I climbed up the stairs leading to the deck, where we saw a bronze sculpture of the three sailors from *Fancy Free*, Robbins’ ballet that brought him to limelight in 1944 and led to the musical *On the Town*. The bronze sailors were in their iconic pose: their arms over each other’s shoulders, their bodies relaxed, their mood carefree.

Inside, an abundance of light greeted us. So many windows! The colors of brown, tan, white, blue—the beach, the ocean, the sky—right there in the living room. *These views from the windows feel so familiar. They’re just like the drawings of the sky and the sand and the dunes that I’ve seen in his diaries!* I thought. I stepped further into the room. “Oh is this the desk behind which he would write? There’s a beautiful picture of him writing behind this desk. Can I touch it?” “Yes go ahead,” the young man smiled. “This desk and this lamp were his. The rest of the furniture is not.” “Oh look at these photos! Of *West Side Story*. Look, there’s a photo of my NYCB dancer friend! Many portraits of Jerry smiling. Jerry among his friends.” We walked around some more and chatted with the host, who turned out to be a ballet dancer as well. “Thank you so much for letting me see the house! This feels so special. Unexpected,” I said as we departed.

My friend and I took a long walk on the beach. Once again I had a sensation that I’d seen these dunes, plants, colors, and the light of the air before, in Jerry’s diaries, in his delicate watercolor drawings in soft pastel colors. The wind was strong, it was cold, my step in my winter boots was heavy in the sand, but none of that bothered me. The wind and the sound of the waves flushed through me, as if cleansing me. I felt free. Like Jerry, I picked up some stones—in different colors and patterns of yellows, browns, whites, pinks, and blacks. I put them in my pocket. “I’ll put them on my writing desk when I get back to New York,” I whispered.

• • •

“How was your spring break, professor?” my writing students asked when we resumed our classes. “I did some creative research. I went to Jerome Robbins’ house,” I said and gave a shortened version of my trip. As I was telling the story, I felt how special the trip had been. I’d felt like Jerry opened the door of his house and welcomed me in. I felt how strongly this experience connects me to the writing and research.

Looking at my students’ slightly surprised faces, I added, “In writing classes, we’re not just learning about the skills of locating resources online and of crafting sentences. We also learn how places, people, and texts open up our imagination. How they impact us. We learn how to look for inspiration when we’re starting to run out of steam. Creating something long form—a research essay, a novel, a musical composition, a ballet, a movie—is a process of returning to the work daily, weekly, monthly: it is a matter of connecting to it, again and again. And sometimes that inspiration might come to us when we move—when we leave our habitual environments and breathe in the air in new places.”

Hiie Saumaa, PhD, is a Fellow at Columbia’s Institute for Ideas and Imagination in Paris, where she is working on a book manuscript on the unpublished writings of Jerome Robbins. Saumaa was a Dance Fellow at the New York

Public Library for the Performing Arts in 2017. Next to courses in writing and the humanities, she teaches classes in somatics, mind-body movement arts, physical awareness, and mindful strength training.