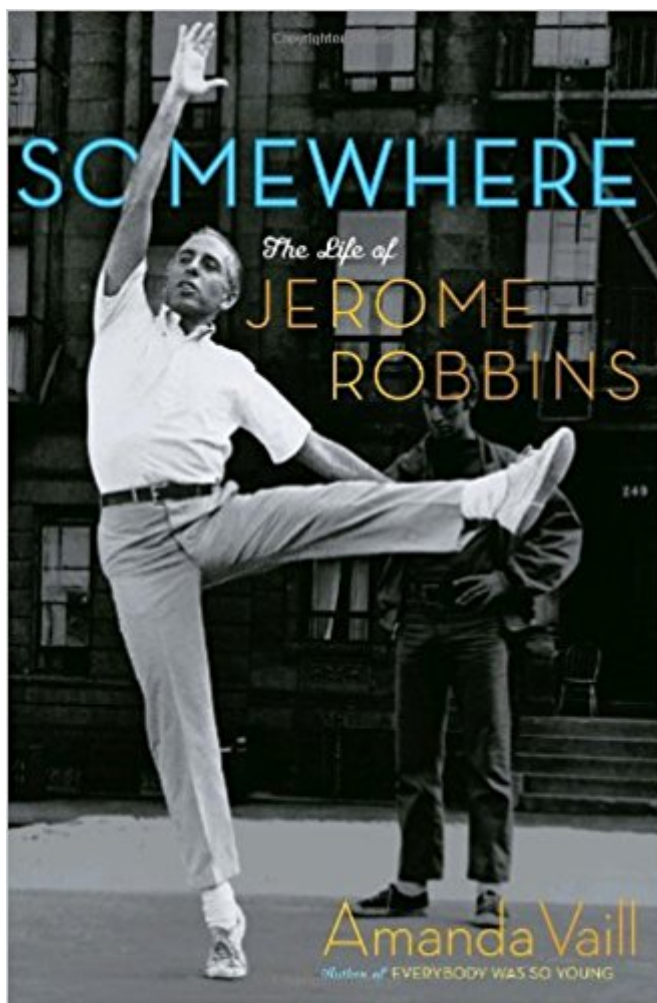


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# Somewhere: The Life Of Jerome Robbins



## Synopsis

From the author of the acclaimed *Everybody Was So Young*, the definitive and major biography of the great choreographer and Broadway legend Jerome Robbins. To some, Jerome Robbins was a demanding perfectionist, a driven taskmaster, a theatrical visionary; to others, he was a loyal friend, a supportive mentor, a generous and entertaining companion and colleague. Born Jerome Rabinowitz in New York City in 1918, Jerome Robbins repudiated his Jewish roots along with his name only to reclaim them with his triumphant staging of *Fiddler on the Roof*. A self-proclaimed homosexual, he had romances or relationships with both men and women, some famous—like Montgomery Clift and Natalie Wood—some less so. A resolutely unpolitical man, he was forced to testify before Congress at the height of anti-Communist hysteria. A consummate entertainer, he could be paralyzed by shyness; nearly infallible professionally, he was conflicted, vulnerable, and torn by self-doubt. Guarded and adamantly private, he was an inveterate and painfully honest journal writer who confided his innermost thoughts and aspirations to a remarkable series of diaries and memoirs. With ballets like *Dances at a Gathering*, *Afternoon of a Faun*, and *The Concert*, he humanized neoclassical dance; with musicals like *On the Town*, *Gypsy*, and *West Side Story*, he changed the face of theater in America. In the pages of this definitive biography, Amanda Vaill takes full measure of the complicated, contradictory genius who was Jerome Robbins. She re-creates his childhood as the only son of Russian Jewish immigrants; his apprenticeship as a dancer and Broadway chorus gypsy; his explosion into prominence at the age of twenty-five with the ballet *Fancy Free* and its Broadway incarnation, *On the Town*; and his years of creative dominance in both theater and dance. She brings to life his colleagues and friends—from Leonard Bernstein and George Balanchine to Robert Wilson and Robert Graves—and his loves and lovers. And she tells the full story behind some of Robbins's most difficult episodes, such as his testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee and his firing from the film version of *West Side Story*. Drawing on thousands of pages of documents from Robbins's personal and professional papers, to which she was granted unfettered access, as well as on other archives and hundreds of interviews, *Somewhere* is a riveting narrative of a life lived onstage, offstage, and backstage. It is also an accomplished work of criticism and social history that chronicles one man's phenomenal career and places it squarely in the cultural ferment of a time when New York City was truly "a helluva town."

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Robbins (1918–1998) was the choreographic genius behind the 1957 Broadway hit *West Side Story* and other musical classics, in addition to such great ballets as *Fancy Free* and *Dances at a Gathering*. Vaill (*Everybody Was So Young: Gerald and Sara Murphy: A Lost Generation Love Story*) was given unprecedented access to Robbins's personal papers after his death, and the result is a critically sophisticated biography that's as compulsively readable as a novel. As she traverses Robbins's growth as an artist, his ambivalence about his Jewish heritage, his bisexuality and his relationships with other artists from Balanchine, to Bernstein to Baryshnikov, she writes with both passion and compassion. More than Deborah Jowitt in her recent Robbins bio, Vaill delves into Robbins's personal life, quoting frequently from his diary and letters. But the result isn't salacious; rather, it allows a more vibrant and vital rendering of the man. Known for being very harsh on dancers, Robbins was called everything from "genius and difficult to tyrant and sadist," says Vaill, "yet the work... was marked by an ineffable sweetness and tenderness." In her balanced, sensitive portrait of an American theatrical genius, Vaill captures these contradictions elegantly. The book is essential reading for lovers of theater and dance. (Nov. 21) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Praise for *Somewhere*"Jerome Robbins is the great subject of American theatrical biography—self-contradictory, self-hating, arrogant and terrified and gifted almost beyond compare—and Amanda Vaill has done him justice. I can't think of a better full-length portrait of an American choreographer or director, and I can't imagine a better book about Robbins ever

being written." — Terry Teachout, drama critic, *The Wall Street Journal*"Amanda Vaill has written an epic biography-remarkable in scope and meticulous in detail. She explores the energizing worlds of Broadway, the ballet and Hollywood from the 1940s through 2000 and she paints a vivid picture of the mercurial Jerome Robbins, master choreographer and director of such legendary musicals as *West Side Story* and *Fiddler On the Roof*. Vaill is especially insightful about Robbins's frenetic private life — he loved both men and women with equal passion; how he juggled his dozens of relationships while creating masterpiece after masterpiece in theatre and ballet is just part of this amazing story." — Patricia Bosworth, author of *Montgomery Clift* and *Diane Arbus: A Biography*. "Exactly ten degrees north of terrific' was the verdict on Jerome Robbins's first ballet, and the description holds as well for this masterful, culturally astute biography. Amanda Vaill brings Robbins and the dance equally and irresistibly to life on the page. A sheer delight." — Stacy Schiff, author of *Vladimir Nabokov* and *A Great Improvisation*"As she did in her biography of Gerald and Sara Murphy (*Everybody Was So Young*, 1998), the author takes what seems like a shopworn subject and refreshes it with her discerning eye... All the Robbins biographies have their merits, but this empathetic and accessible take is the one most likely to appeal to general readers." — Kirkus Reviews (starred)"A critically sophisticated biography that's as compulsively readable as a novel." — Publishers Weekly (starred)

I'm just finishing this book and wanted to stay home from work just so I could continue to read it. I have loved Robbins' choreography since *WSS* (movie) came out when I was 8 years old. I was lucky to be living in NYC and got to see some of his ballets/dances. He lived an exciting life and yet lived under a cloud that he wasn't quite good enough, that someone would discover the truth (that he was just faking it) and call him out, feared being discovered that he was Jewish and, and at least for half of his life, feared he'd be labeled a homosexual. That's a lot of hiding and self-doubt. And yet, he created dances like no one else has. This book exposes all this, in a gentle, loving manner so you come to love this man, care about who he was behind the celebrity. It makes you wonder if all of his fears was the reason he drove himself (and everyone else) do relentlessly to excel. It makes you wonder if insecurity is what makes for a great dancer (many dancers seem to have a whole lot of self-doubt). It makes you wonder what he may have been like or may have achieved (or not achieved) had he grown up feeling loved and cherished by everyone, confident about his abilities, proud of his heritage, etc. It's sad to think that he went through life feeling that no one really loved and understood him. Many probably did but he couldn't see that. I am glad Robbins inhabited this world and gave us, for whatever reason, his heart and soul in his dances and directing and

everything else.

This is a brilliant book. You can feel the love and respect and awe of the author for Jerome Robbins. Although it is incredibly researched and factual it is never dull in spite of all the minute details. She knows everything about him, professionally and personally. It is never gossipy, only warm and humanistic. When you finish the book you actually miss Jerome Robbins and now that I indeed finished the book, and it was not a small book, I want to read it over again, just to be near this genius and incredible person. What a privilege those who worked with him had, to be near such a man, so dedicated to his art, so creative and so exciting. Yes, this was a great book. It's a real page turner. I couldn't put it down.

Jerome Robbins life is fascinating. He was an amazing dancer, choreographer, director, and producer, and his work was very important in the development of dance in America.

Good biography. Reading Leonard Bernstein next...

Excellent story of superb talent. All children should be allowed to practice innate arts they desire.

Wonderful book that I have been meaning to buy for a long time. Condition as promised.

My dance teacher raved about this book in class and so I had to buy it. I haven't read it all but it shows valuable insights into Mr. Robbins. Although he was a difficult person, he was a genius, as my dance teacher said, and so he was and he made dance so much bigger and better for us all.

The mercurial brilliance and personal shortcomings of choreographer extraordinaire Jerome Robbins are captured with equal amounts of compassion and objectivity in Amanda Vaill's comprehensive biography. His impressive resume represents some of the most arresting work in dance and theater - "On the Town", "High Button Shoes", "Call Me Madam", "Gypsy", "Wonderful Town", "Bells Are Ringing", "The King and I", "Peter Pan", "The Pajama Game", "Funny Girl", "Fiddler on the Roof", "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum". Robbins' most famous work is the stage and screen versions of "West Side Story", his legendary collaboration with composer Leonard Bernstein and then-prodigious lyricist Stephen Sondheim. Yet for all these accomplishments, he was reviled as much as he was revered. Stellar results notwithstanding, his

vaunted perfectionism and Method-style approach were taxing to many, and it would often come under the guise of brutality and verbal abuse. Although Vaill's book is the third Robbins biography to be released in the last five years, hers reflects access to the subject's personal diaries before his death at age eighty in 1998, which lends the book a voice that one could easily imagine approximates Robbins' own. The author dives deeply into Robbins' childhood to seek answers to his personal dichotomy, and she pieces together a vivid if somewhat pat portrait of self-loathing. Robbins' mother comes across as a vindictive woman who used her deep-rooted insecurity as a lightning rod for attention, while his father seems weak-willed and foolish. The combination of their personalities already reinforces Robbins' incurable sense of self-doubt due to his shame over being both Jewish and gay. His resulting bisexuality gave way to a string of lovers of both sexes, though his most intense and enduring relationships were with men including a two-year affair with a young Montgomery Clift. Ironically, he was able to translate these passions into some of the most beautiful male-female duets in musical theater. It is in Robbins' professional triumphs and failures where Vaill's book soars highest. She meticulously documents the process of creating his ballet works, in particular, 1944's "Fancy Free" (the basis for "On the Town") and 1969's "Dances at a Gathering", and how George Balanchine acted as both supportive mentor and demonic taskmaster. Obviously, Robbins applied Balanchine's split-personality approach to his own work when he drove performers, whether chorus dancers or ego-driven divas, to tears with his exacting demands. In spite of his self-assurance in staging and choreographing specific scenes, he would remain steadfast in experimenting with endless versions of the same moment no matter how long it took to satisfy his vision. Feeding into the already rampant insecurities of his cast, Robbins would often have two or more people learn the same part and urge one to shadow the other as he did his solo. In rehearsing the Broadway version of "West Side Story", he would instigate gossip in order to raise the ire of the dancers playing the gang members. Such alienating, frequently self-serving techniques came at a price, for instance, he was fired from the film version of "West Side Story" in mid-production due to his insensitivity to the resulting budget overruns. The darkest moments of his life are almost a carbon copy of filmmaker Elia Kazan's, as they revolve around his guilt over his 1953 testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee and the seven people he named who apparently recruited him for the Communist Party. Vaill is insightful enough not to judge Robbins for this infamous act, especially ironic given the value he placed on loyalty throughout his career. Her extensive portrait of Robbins should satisfy not only those fascinated by his legendary life and career but also those interested in knowing one of the most profound influences on musical theater and ballet in the second half of the 20th century.

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