

Choreographer Directors in the Realm of Musicals

Geta-Violeta HUNCANU (RĂVDAN)¹

Abstract: *The choreography of musicals is in constant relation with the unfolding story, being subordinate to text and music. Gestures, scenic movement and choreography have the purpose of completing the dramatic action, the power to underline essential aspects of the story and can offer new meanings to the spectator. Thus, by desire of achieving complete control upon the realization of musical productions, choreographers such as Gower Champion, Jerome Robbins, Michael Bennett or Bob Fosse have chosen to create their own model of a unitary show, by choosing their own text writers and composers. By avoiding ruptures caused by the inserting of choreographies and songs, they have brought a contribution to the shaping and evolution of the musical show.*

Key-words: *choreography; directing; dancers; Broadway; show; musical production; cinema version.*

„The time to sing is when your emotional level is too high to just speak anymore, and the time to dance is when your emotions are just too strong to only sing about how you 'feel.’”² Bob Fosse

1. Choreography in the musical performance

Musicals imply a formula where each of the elements of a show are harmoniously combined and emphasized: text, song and dance. It presumes a human performance built upon the combination between the emotion of dialogue, the power of music and the expressiveness of dance. A balance of sincerity, elegance, melodiousness, vitality, rhythm, voice and talent.

The production of a musical implies both an increased attention to the text as well as to the music and choreography from the part of the director. The talent and inspiration of the main creator consist of the following essential decisions which lead to success:

- how they will use the text which lies at the foundation of the creation of the show
- how they will choose (which) sheet music and how it will be integrated in the show
- which directorial line they will follow for dramatic scenes
- where and how they will insert choreographic scores

There is a constant relationship between dance and the theme of the show. The choreography of a musical follows the storyline of the show, in order to support it and possibly add new meaning to it or to highlight certain aspects of the story. Dance scores are dependent upon text and music, but they can complete the dramatic action, that is why rich imagination, inventivity and creative complexity are required of the choreographer and even the director.

Of the most frequently used formulas of choreography in musicals, we can mention:

¹ Cultural Center „Elena Roizen” from Ovidiu, ghuncanu@yahoo.com

² Michael Joosten, *Dance and Choreography*, The Rosen Publishing Group, New York, 2009, p.4.

- ✓ *the opening number* (which comes from musical comedy shows) – has nowadays become a moment in the opening of the show which tries to familiarize the spectator with the place of the action, the characters and the foundation of the subsequent flow of the show (who, where, when, how);
- ✓ *the solo* – performed by a single character, who has an idea to emphasize. Through the soloist dancer, the choreographer has the opportunity to achieve complex movement combinations;
- ✓ *the duet* – a score created for two characters, which most of the time refers to a love story
- ✓ *the ensemble moment* – a choreographic moment where an entire group of dancers moves, supporting the plot of the story;
- ✓ *specific show numbers* where the entire cast participate
- ✓ *passage numbers* – which are a means of hiding technical changes which inevitably occur in the show.

In order for these choreographic moments to comply with the structure of the show, a lot of tact, talent and creativity are required in order to appropriately integrate them. There are shows where certain scenes do not require the participation of professional dancers. That is why it is said that the artist of a musical must not only be competent in the art of acting, but also be a specialist of music and dance. Performance is required of the actor, which is the reason why the actor's training must touch all the necessary components of their artistic refinement. Choreographies destined to actors call on the talent and creativity of the latter, who can perform successful expressive moments. Choreographies meant for actors must be adapted to their abilities and talent in order to bring out the best in them and to support the trajectory of the characters in the storyline of the show.

In the early times of musicals, directors came from within groups of script writers, composers and even dancers and choreographers. Beginning with the 50s, great choreographers such as Jerome Robbins, Gower Champion, Michael Bennett or Bob Fosse come to personally manage their own shows by hiring script writers and composers. Through their courage and talent, they contributed to the shaping and the evolution of musicals. This creative momentum of choreographers was born of the need for total control, thus eliminating the interference of a director, which led not only to an increase in creative vision, but especially to the obtaining of a unitary production.

The following choreographers upon whom we will focus in this paper have differentiated themselves by receiving numerous nominations and distinctions for their contribution to the development of musicals. Their mentioned creations reflect the involvement of these choreographers in the directorial work, not taking into consideration their achievements as dancers, actors, script writers or simply choreographers.

1.1. Jerome Robbins

The first complex choreography included in a musical belongs to choreographer Jerome Robbins, in *On the Town* (1944) directed by George Abbott, on Leonard Bernstein's music. This is the Broadway debut of the choreographer, who will open a new era in musical theater.



On the Town, 1944

<https://www.pinterest.co>

After a fruitful collaboration of 15 years with Abbott, he conceives his first show as a director – *The Pajama Game*, having his more experienced role model (Abbott) and the choreographer Fosse on his team. The following year, he directs the Broadway *Peter Pan*, which became a classic of the genre, and in 1956, a well-received comedy, *Bells Are Ringing*.

But the show that will make him a recognized choreographer and director is *West Side Story* (1957), the modern version of Romeo and Juliet's story on Bernstein's music. Robbins will work very carefully, not allowing the performers of the two gangs (*Jets* and *Sharks*) to mingle during rehearsals, while also launching various rumors among the two groups, which led to real animosity between the dancers. The great realization of this show consists of the combination of realistic actions and dances, which do not create ruptures in the unfolding of the show, but on the contrary, blend harmoniously. Through this show, male dancers were given a new image in front of the public. This show will remain in the history of musicals as one of the most valuable productions to ever appear on Broadway.



Musical film West Side Story, 1961

<https://www.britannica.com>

In 1959, he directs *Gypsy*, a musical inspired from the life of a stripper, and in 1964 his show, *Fiddler on the Roof*, will bring him great success. The plot of this show based on the life of Russian Jews at the beginning of the 20th century will lead to no less than 3242 representations. In 1961, he directs the highly successful cinema version of *West Side Story* along with Robert Wise.

Robbins will become the savior of two compromised productions, which will become successful under his command: *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* in 1962 and *Funny Girl* in 1964, which will turn Barbra Streisand into a superstar. The same year, he launches the movie *Fiddler on the Roof*.

1.2. Bob Fosse (Robert Louis Fosse, 1927 - 1987)

Robbins' successors will be director Harold Prince and choreographer Bob Fosse. Fosse will direct ten successful musicals on Broadway. Initially sustained by the same director, Abbott, he has two creative directing periods: the period of musical comedies *Redhead* – 1959, *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* – 1961, *Little Me* – 1962, *Pleasures and Palaces* – 1965, *Sweet Charity* - 1966) and the progressist shows period (*Pippin* – 1972, *Chicago* - 1975, *Dancin* □ - 1978, *Big Deal* - 1986). He will direct and choreograph the musical feature films *Sweet Charity* (1969), *Cabaret* (1972) (the cinema version of the show, for which he received an Academy Award), and *All That Jazz* (1979).



Sweet Charity, 1969
<https://www.alamy.com>

Influenced by Robbins' style, he will be an eccentric choreographer who will be distinguished by a series of innovations. He will bring the esthetics and technique of jazz to Broadway. His dances are characterized by isolations and fragmentations, twisted knees and shoulders, jazz hands, step by step walking, a lowered center of gravity. He likes to use props: hats, canes, chairs, globes. He stated that the uniqueness of his choreographies was given by these elements which arose from his physical flaws (he did not like his hands, and the hat was

a very handy accessory to cover his baldness). He helps his dancers by giving subtext to his choreographies.

He uses light-design to emphasize certain aspects of the show. In producing his movies, he will become involved in their every aspect. In order to help the dancing, he will use fragmentation and isolation by close-ups and short jumps.

In *Redhead*, he introduces the first ballet moment in a show made of various choreographic styles: jazz, cancan, gypsy dances and a choreographic number performed on old English music.

Through his show, *Pippin*, he makes the first television commercial for a Broadway show in 1972.

1.3. Gower Champion (Gower Carlyle, 1919 - 1980)

The 60s were the years when musical hits were built around a single person. The dance avalanche forced the dancers to train and it inspired fans. The year 1964 marked the production of three of the greatest musicals:

- ✓ *Hello Dolly*, directed and choreographed by Gower Champion, with music by Jerry Herman.



Hello Dolly, 1964

<http://richardskipper.blogspot.ro>

- ✓ *Funny Girl*, initially choreographed by Carol Haney and redone by Robbins, which launched Barbra Streisand, as we previously mentioned.
- ✓ *Fiddler on the Roof*, directed by Robbins.

Champion also worked as a director and choreographer for *Bye Bye Birdie* (1960), *Carnival* (1961), and then *The Happy Time* (1968), *Prettybelle* (1971), *Sugar* (1972), *Mack & Mabel* (1974) and *42nd Street* (1980). But his greatest success will remain *Hello Dolly*, which will be a memorable show. Choreographically, it is distinguished by the use of a ramp over the pit up to the first row of seats which allowed male dancers to amaze the public by jumping back

and forth. This production reached the performance of 2844 representations within seven years. The show was subsequently produced with a full distribution of colored artists.

1.4. Michael Bennett (*Michael Bennett DiFiglia, 1943-1987*)

Michael Bennett is also seen as one of the most talented creators in the field of musical theater in the 20th century. Highly influenced by Jerome Robbins' creation, the choreographer Bennett will have Robert Avian (dancer, choreographer and director), his long-term associate, by his side, with whom he will once again place the dancer in the center of the stage and develop a choreographic style characterized by the mix of techniques from ballet, modern dance and jazz.

His first attempt at directing (as a co-director with Harold Prince) is the show *Follies* (1971). And in 1973, having Cy Coleman and Dorothy Fields by his side, he will direct and choreograph the *Seasaw* production.

In 1975, he will know great success after producing a show using Marvin Hamlisch's music, *A Chorus Line*. Starting from real interviews taken for a casting session, the storyline of this show is made of life stories of dancers who attended Broadway audition sessions and was a huge success. The premise used by the production team can be summarized as follows: „ ... a show has to offer an audience hope”.³ By merging elements of verbal confessions, music and dance, Bennet transforms artistic ambition into a universal metaphor of human effort and success.



A Chorus Line, 1980
<https://www.npr.org>

While this success will completely change his life (he will become a sought-after choreographer and a millionaire), he will influence the way musicals take place on Broadway. For over five years, he will be involved in national and international castings and rehearsals in order to create a new ensemble fit for a Broadway musical. *A Chorus Line* was considered to be the best production played on Broadway at the time, with no less than 6137

³ *International Encyclopedia of Dance*, vol. 1, Oxford University Press. New York, 2004, p.240

representations. In 1985, the cinema version of the show is made, for which Bennett initially received the position of creative consultant.

His success will continue with productions such as *Ballroom* (1978) and *Dreamgirls* (1981). His interest and attention for the development of the form of musicals are reflected by his choreographies, which smoothly stemmed from the storyline and from the characters' motivations. Although he did not have a particular choreographic style, he had an important contribution to musical theater by his directing-choreography achievements, by developing a method based on a workshop meant to develop material for Broadway scenes and the innovative musical-verité.

1.5. Răzvan Mazilu (born 1974)

Romania does not have a history of significant musical theater productions. In the past few years, there have only been occasional productions, which is why a lack of the culture of this genre continues to exist. In this context, successful dancer and choreographer Razvan Mazilu has become a promoter of musicals, by bravely undertaking the directing, choreography and even the costume making for his shows.

Through his energy, responsibility and originality, he supports the manifestation of the total actor, having already directed several landmark musicals: *The Full Monty* („Mihai Eminescu” National Theater, Timișoara – 2011), *Cabaret* (Herman State Theatre, Timișoara – 2014), *West Side Story* (UNITER, National Theater Festival, Odeon Theatre, Bucharest – 2014), *Mon Cabaret Noir* (CREART Teatrelli Bucharest – 2015), *Femei în pragul unei crize de nervi* (*Women on the Brink of a Nervous Breakdown*) (Național Târgu-Mureș Theater - 2016), *Fecioarele noastre grabnic ajutătoare* (*Our Promptly Helping Virgins*) (Excelsior Theater, București – 2017), *Cartea Junglei* (*The Jungle Book*) (German State Theater, Timișoara – 2017), *Zaraza* („Toma Caragiu” Theater, Ploiești – 2018).



Mon Cabaret Noir

<http://www.rri.ro>

With the exception of *The Jungle Book*, how shows have a feminist approach by projecting destinies of strong women. Time will show if this plastic dancer and innovative choreographer will win this bet against the Romanian public.

Bibliography

1. Dalu, Felicia. 2006. *Teatrul muzical contemporan*. București: UNATC.
2. Joosten, Michael. 2009. *Dance and Choreography*. New York: The Rosen Publishing Group.
3. Sbârcea, George. 1979. *O stradă cu cântec sau povestea musicalului*. București: Editura Muzicală.
4. Vișan, Sanda. 2017. *Razvan Mazilu De la dans la musical*. București: Editura Nemira.
5. *International Encyclopedia of Dance, vol. 1, 3, 5*. 2004. New York: Oxford University Press.

Web Sources

<https://www.pinterest.co>
<https://www.britannica.com>
<https://www.alamy.com>
<http://richardskipper.blogspot.ro>
<https://www.npr.org>
<http://www.rri.ro>