

Dance Librarians Discussion Group Virtual Meeting
January 3, 2011, 2:00-2:45 PM EST

In attendance:

Helice Koffler, University of Washington and DLDG Convener
Beth Kerr, University of Texas, Austin
Ellen Bar, Bar/Suozzi Productions and New York City Ballet
Jeff Katz, University of British Columbia
Birgit Hansen, Pacific Northwest Ballet
Zoe Waldron, New York Public Library
Kathleen Haefliger, Chicago State University
Sarah Naumann, San Jose State University
Libby Smigel, Dance Heritage Coalition

The Dance Librarians Discussion Group met virtually using the dimdim conferencing software for a text chat. Our special guest at this meeting was New York City Ballet dancer, Ellen Bar, who fielded questions about the film adaptation of Jerome Robbins' 1958 ballet, *N.Y. Export: Opus Jazz*, she and fellow Company member, Sean Suozzi, co-produced. This enthusiastically received dance film was shown on public television last spring as part of the *Great Performances* series and also has been screened at many festivals. It was released on DVD in late November. A lightly edited transcript of our discussion follows.

Helice Koffler: Hi, this is Helice Koffler from the University of Washington in sunny Seattle!

Beth Kerr: It is sunny there??

Helice Koffler: It's been sunny but cold the last several days.

Ellen Bar: Hi Helice and Beth, this is Ellen Bar in snowy New York.

Helice Koffler: Hi Ellen, thanks so much for joining us today!

Beth Kerr: Ditto.

Ellen Bar: It's my pleasure, thanks for setting this up.

Helice Koffler: Are you on a break now that *Nutcracker* is over or do you have rehearsals?

Ellen Bar: I'm actually still out with an injury, so I got to enjoy a normal holiday for a change! But the company does have 2 weeks of rehearsals now, with no performances.

Helice Koffler: Oh, I guess that's good and bad! When do you expect to be able to perform again?

Jeff: Hi Ellen and Everyone Online! This is Jeff and I have just signed on.

Ellen Bar: Hard to say really, but probably Spring season. Hi Jeff!

Birgit: Hi this is Birgit - I just joined.

Jeff: So great that you are able to do this!

Beth Kerr: I agree!

Birgit: I just watched *N.Y. Export: Opus Jazz* again - amazing!

Zoe Waldron: I have not seen the film, but looking forward to it.

Helice Koffler: OK, I see it's 11:00 on my clock. I'm expecting some others, but I guess we can officially begin.

Ellen Bar: Thanks so much! I'm happy to answer any of your questions.

Jeff: Ellen - I was just wondering if you happen to have come across any archival information specifically pertaining to Robert Prince in your research. It is not easy finding any recordings of his music and I wonder how much archival material is out there. Just curious!

Ellen Bar: That's a good question. It is very difficult to get information on him, even from his own relatives! I communicated with his son, who provided us with the photos that we use in the film. Other than that, I was only able to find a few letters in Robbins' personal. They were interesting, however, one of them was the "gentlemen's agreement" where Robbins and Prince decided to go forward without a contract. And the other was a letter where Prince was complaining about how poorly the score was conducted at a performance!

Helice Koffler: Once you got the green light for the project, how did you find and select the directors?

Ellen Bar: We knew one of the directors through friends - the only friends we had with any connection to film. The other director, Jody Lee Lipes, was brought on by these mutual friends who had worked with him before, and he quickly became our film mentor. We were extremely lucky to happen upon someone so talented, we could have easily been steered in the wrong direction because we were so new and naive about film!

Jeff: Re: Prince: That's great! Perhaps Prince and Jerome Robbins had a similar work ethic. By the way, is there any indication of how Prince became Robbins' choice? Did the score come first?

Ellen Bar: I think Robbins had an idea of what he wanted and thought Prince was the man to do it - they worked together on one other ballet but off the top of my head I don't know which came first. So the score was commissioned for the ballet, and I believe Prince was the first and only choice.

Jeff: Thanks! It is all quite fascinating!

Ellen Bar: Prince went on to do a lot of film scoring, and he also discovered Johnny Mathis according to his son.

Helice Koffler: That *is* interesting. I guess Robbins wasn't able to get together as good a group of musicians for Ballets: U.S.A. as the NYCB orchestra?

Ellen Bar: That's a tough question. I think in some cases, Robbins had MORE freedom with Ballets: U.S.A. He might have gotten musicians that were more jazz oriented than you would at a classical orchestra. I know that he was able to work with Ben Shahn for the original sets, which he couldn't do in the US because of the unions. There are articles about it in an old magazine called *Dance & Dancers*, where they discuss how the union stranglehold on sets prevented visual artists from working with choreographers. Not sure how accurate/fair the article was however.

Helice Koffler: Was it easy to get the rights for the music recording for the film? What were some of your biggest challenges in that regard?

Ellen Bar: Not easy at all! It was hard to establish who had what rights. The record companies had forgotten all about it and LOST THE MASTERS! We had to restore it from a vinyl, which was a nightmare. It's one of my biggest regrets. We used a vinyl that was in poorer condition than we realized, because it was expensive to obtain a recording from the Library of Performing Arts. And we had to deal with two record companies, WB and RCA, because RCA had the recording of the 3rd movement, but WB didn't, but WB had the superior recording. Our pro bono lawyer, John Knapp of Patterson Belknap Webb Tyler, did an incredible job negotiating that one.

Birgit: Where there any press releases? Or other contemporary "meta information"?

Ellen Bar: Birgit - do you mean press releases from 1958?

Birgit: Yes, I am also thinking of press in general from those days.

Ellen Bar: I read a ton of articles in magazines like *Dance & Dancers*. European magazines had more in-depth coverage, probably because the ballet premiered and toured in Europe first. *Dance & Dancers* was just a terrific magazine for in-depth reporting, I wish it was still around! Contemporary dance publications are so consumer oriented.

Birgit: At PNB Archives and Library we have numerous sources that I will look carefully at in the coming week to determine if there were any contemporary interviews that could shed light on some of the things surrounding the production.

Ellen Bar: Birgit - would love to see what you find.

Jeff: In terms of the music, did the *Ed Sullivan Show* recording prove to be helpful in guiding you as you searched for vinyl recordings?

Helice Koffler: Re: the movie soundtrack. That's terrible, but you don't notice it at all. The sound quality in the film is great. Did you ever consider commissioning a new recording -- or was the cost prohibitive?

Ellen Bar: The cost was prohibitive to do a new new recording, but we REALLY wanted one! We tried to talk to Jazz at Lincoln Center about it, but to no avail.

Ellen Bar: Jeff - the *Ed Sullivan Show* had its own orchestra, I believe.

Zoe Waldron: Ellen, to add to Jeff's question, did you happen to refer to any of the rehearsal videos in NYPL's Jerome Robbins collection as part of your research either on music or choreography?

Ellen Bar: Zoe - I watched everything I could find at NYPL. I only recall one bit of footage that was from a rehearsal and not a performance. It was on film, and it was of the 3rd movement, *Improvisations*. It was a trip to watch something on film at the NYPL, rather than on video! Of performance footage, there was Ed Sullivan, Alvin Ailey (in the 80s) and a broadcast for Granada Television (which Eddie Verso referred to while teaching us the ballet for stage in 2005 as well).

Zoe Waldron: That's cool that you watched film there. I believe there are videos of rehearsals from 1978.

Beth Kerr: I am wondering about the location issues- were there problems getting those permissions?

Ellen Bar: Yes, each location is a negotiation. The most difficult location was the High Line, though, because they could not be bought - they had said no to every shoot request ever received, whether it was for a fashion photo shoot, independent film or big budget Hollywood. But they fell in love with the project, and felt it was so similar to what they were doing - re-imagining something from 1950s New York for a new audience.

Beth Kerr: O heh cool.

Ellen Bar: Zoe - and everyone - if you find something (rehearsal footage, reviews) please send it along! Would love to see what I missed.

Zoe Waldron: Here's one link to a catalog record:

<http://catalog.nypl.org/record=b15850593~S1>.

Jeff: Wow-re: Jazz at Lincoln Center: That is very sad, indeed. Maybe they would be interested now, considering how much of a success the film has been and how much interest it has generated. And re: the High Line--that must have been a major moment of exhilaration!

Ellen Bar: Zoe - 1978 - was that for Ailey or Joffrey - it's ringing a bell now.

Zoe Waldron: If you click on this heading you will see, everything we have on the ballet. N.Y. export, opus jazz (Choreographic work : Robbins).

Ellen Bar: Great, thanks Zoe. I definitely searched this catalog so I'm pretty sure I did watch it. Jeff - yes, getting the High Line was huge. And when it was finished, we were the first film to screen up there (they have now started doing film screenings in collaboration with Rooftop Films). It felt like it all came full circle! (For those who don't know, the High Line section was the first part to be filmed, in 2007, and was used to raise money for the rest of the film).

Ellen Bar: One of the most helpful things for me at NYPL was getting to search Robbins' personal papers (that had to be brought in from offsite) and also Robbins' audio recording of a letter he had written to Bernard Perlin. In the letter, he discusses his process making the ballet, and he's very honest. Since it's his own voice, it feels very personal too! Also, an interview with Anna Kisselgoff (can't remember if it's audio only or video) where he gets quite testy, that one's fun and informative too.

Zoe Waldron: Cool, I cataloged the Jerome Robbins audio records, my colleague Thea [Constantine] did the papers. I will pass this on to her.

Ellen Bar: Wow, thank you to you, Zoe, and to Thea!

Zoe Waldron: You're welcome. I'm glad the Robbins' material is being applied to such a great purpose.

Ellen Bar: (Forgive me for being fuzzy on some things, the bulk of my research was done in 2006-2008, and then I passed my work on to our documentary directors).

Helice Koffler: I can't help pointing out I said Ellen would join us for half an hour or so. It's already 30 minutes! Does anyone out there who hasn't had a chance, have any questions for Ellen?

Beth Kerr: I haven't bought the DVD for my library yet I had been watching for it to be on sale and now I see it just went up for sale in late Nov...

Ellen Bar: Yes, it's for sale here: <http://www.factorytwentyfive.com/ny-export-opus-jazz/>.

Jeff: One completely off-topic final question for me: Ellen, do you have any favorite dance books?

Ellen Bar: Favorite dance books - that's a tough one! I love Rumer Godden's portrayal of ballet students wanting to turn professional in *Thursday's Children*. What a beautiful writer. That's fiction of course... I love Amanda Vaill's and Deborah Jowitt's biographies of Robbins... Those inspired me so much. I don't know if I'm ready for *Apollo's Angels* though... I think I may have to wait til I'm retired!

Kathleen H: It is being reviewed and touted as the first true comprehensive social history of dance. The author was interviewed on Charlie Rose last week.

Ellen Bar: Oh I need to watch that Charlie Rose (my boyfriend watches it religiously every day). It looks like it will be wonderful, but it's a little long for me to take on right now. Also, when one is injured, a little depressing! Whether it's the first true comprehensive social history of dance, I think you guys would know that better than anyone... what do you think?

Kathleen H: Perhaps we will have to postpone that response until more of us have gotten to acquire and read it.

Jeff: Sorry to hear that you are currently injured, Ellen! Will you be dancing again soon? And are you working on any writing projects while you heal?

Ellen Bar: Kathleen - agreed. I don't know my recovery time, Jeff. I'm definitely trying to use my off time to write, but being a half time student at Columbia and doing Physical Therapy is also really time consuming. But I will take that question as inspiration to try and do more!

Helice Koffler: On that note, maybe we should let you go! Does anyone have any more questions?

Beth Kerr: No, thanks HK, and EB, I can't wait to watch the DVD!

Zoe Waldron: I can't wait to see it myself.

Helice Koffler: I saw that it is being screened again in Portland on the 15th. Are there any other screenings in the works?

Jeff: No--thanks so much for your time and great answers, Ellen. And have a speedy recovery!

Kathleen H: Thank you for sharing all this in-depth and very interesting knowledge of how you got the film finished.

Ellen Bar: Thanks Beth and Zoe - hope you enjoy it. This has been a real pleasure, especially finding out what your contributions have been!

Zoe Waldron: Thank you Ellen.

Ellen Bar: Helice - After Portland, we have the Glasgow Film Festival, Hunter College, Hong Kong Arts Festival, and LOIKKA Dance Fest in Finland... All of them will come up on the Screenings page of our site, thanks for asking!

Beth Kerr: And - get well soon!

Ellen Bar: Nice to meet you all - good luck with the new year and thanks for your amazing work!

Kathleen H: Bye to all -- and Long Live Dance!

Libby: Thanks, this was terrific.

Helice Koffler: OK, thanks everyone, for attending! I hope we get as good a turnout in San Diego on Saturday! Thank you so much, Ellen!

Ellen Bar: Bye - (please tell your friends about the film too, we need all the help we can get) x Ellen.

Helice Koffler: Thanks for coming! I now officially close the meeting.