

DANCE KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER - BOB FOSSE

Early training and background

Robert Louis Fosse was born in 1927. He began dancing as a child and was a professional performer by the time he was 13 (Riff Brothers tap-dancing act touring burlesque halls and strip clubs). At 15 Fosse was working as the master of ceremonies at several nightspots. This is when he choreographed his first number in which four dancing girls manipulated strategically placed ostrich feathers to Cole Porter's 'That Old Black Magic.'

After a couple of years in the navy, Fosse spent two years in drama school before joining a tour of 'Call me Mister' as a chorus boy. In 1950 Fosse made his debut on Broadway in 'Dance Me a Song.' Then Hollywood beckoned – he secured parts in three small films 'I had fantasies of becoming the next Fred Astaire.' Fosse used to watch Fred Astaire performing whenever possible whilst he was in 'The Band Wagon' which was filmed in the same location.

In the third film that Fosse appeared in which was 'Kiss me Kate' he was able to exhibit a small but significant piece of his own choreography. This brought him to the attention of the legendary Broadway director, George Abbott and led to his break in New York. Abbott hired Fosse to choreograph 'The Pajama Game' in 1954. The show was an outstanding success (winning a Tony Award) and Fosse's revolutionary staging of 'Steam Heat' (a dance number within the musical) became the talk of New York and allowed Fosse to really find his style.

New Girl in Town (1957). The musical had so much drama and so little movement that Fosse started to embellish the walks of the performers – playing prostitutes – until he had developed a "Red Light Ballet." It was so shocking that the police padlocked the production until it was cleaned up. (after the show opened, the "Red Light" sequence was almost entirely restored.)

Collaborated with Abbott again on 'Damn Yankees' (1958) which starred Gwen Verdon. Verdon was the leading lady in almost all of Fosse's shows and became the definitive Fosse dancer.

In order to have complete creative freedom by 1960 Fosse was directing and choreographing. Actors as well as dancers loved taking direction from him. His name alone would sell out a show on Broadway throughout the 60's and 70's. 'Sweet Charity', 'Pippin', 'Chicago' and 'Dancin' almost 5000 performances between them.

Height of Fosse's success 1973 (two Tony awards for 'Pippin', an Oscar for his direction of the film version of **Cabaret** and three Emmy Awards for producing, directing and choreographing Liza Minnelli's television special, **Liza with a Z**). The next year Fosse was nominated for a second academy award for his direction of 'Lenny' (a film adaptation of the Broadway play about comedian Lenny Bruce).

In 1975 he suffered a heart attack. Fosse recovered to create the Broadway hits 'Chicago' and 'Dancin' and the autobiographical movie 'All That Jazz' that earned 9 Oscar nominations. 'All That Jazz' was Fosse's last big critical success.

Mirroring the plot of 'All That Jazz', Fosse died of a heart attack moments before the curtain went up on what was to become a triumphant revival of one of his greatest hits, **Sweet Charity**. He was 60 years old.

Influences

- Bob Fosse was the fifth of six children born to a Chicago vaudevillian. He was regarded as a child prodigy and given **tap dancing lessons**; he was on the professional **vaudeville stage** before reaching high school.
- He received formal training from the Frederick Weaver **Ballet School**. At dance school he was the only male. "I got a lot of jokes and got whistled at a lot. But I beat up a couple of the whistlers and the rest sort of tapered off after a while."
- Undoubtedly the **provocative gestures and poses of strippers** Fosse watched night after night had a direct bearing on his choreographic style.
- Influenced by the work of **Jack Cole, Fred Astaire, and Jerome Robbins**, Fosse was fluent in a dizzying **mix of styles**: in Redhead alone he incorporated elements of the ballet, jazz, march, cancan, gypsy dance, and the traditional English music-hall.
- Fosse had no reservations about drawing upon the facts of his own **personal life**: his 1979 film All That Jazz – written, directed, and choreographed by himself – laid it all out: his **compulsive chain-smoking, drinking, drug-taking, and womanizing**.

subject matter/Choreographic intention

Subtext beneath the movement 'You can't be a good dancer, unless you're a good actor. Otherwise it's all just so much animated wallpaper.' Bob Fosse

- Fosse performers must tell a story. "Bob never called us dancers. He called us actors, because everything he did came from an acting standpoint—from an idea or emotion. Every move you make is infused with character and story." It's crucial that you develop an ability to control your movement while still maintaining a strong sense of intention.
- Fosse dancers say that the biggest challenge is the detailed movements. For example, "the beginning of 'Rich Man's Frug' from Sweet Charity, Really, all they're doing is walking, but the way they're walking [with rigid posture and their noses toward the ceiling] is telling you everything you need to know about the characters. It relies on such tiny details. You have to get them all exactly right."
- Cabaret (1972)** set in 1930s Berlin during Adolf Hitler's rise to power, starred Liza Minnelli, as Sally Bowles, an ambitious nightclub performer who becomes involved with a British writer. **Cabaret** features imaginative showstopping numbers and, like most of Fosse's work, dealt with the seamier side of show business, presenting adult themes rather than the lighthearted romantic themes typically associated with musicals ("Mein Herr" and "The Money Song"). Fosse's expressive, sometimes exaggerated use of camera movement, editing, and garish colour and lighting visually accentuates the decay and ugliness of the story.

Choreographic approach

- Fosse was a man who loved life and lived it to excess this is reflected in his overtly sexual and decadent feel of his dances.
- A shy man, Pidgeon-toed, with receding hair (he almost always wore a hat). These personal elements are evident in his choreography.
- Fosse was a perfectionist, his constant mantra was 'Una Mas' Spanish for 'once more.'
- Characteristic of his style is a type of trio dance, with its forward thrust of hips, hunched shoulders, turned-in feet and sharp, jazzy movements enhanced by sound effects. Derbies and animated hands became trademarks of his work
- Fosse's show-stopping ability came from the knowledge of how to build a number to a climax, to give it a beginning, middle and end – and his ability to do it with sex and humour.
- Fosse dancers must be able to isolate everything, right down to their eyeballs, elbows and fingers. When a Fosse dancer learns to focus her energy in stillness, she can grab the audience with a simple flutter of her fingers. "It should look like you're not working at all—but you'll come off stage sweating,"
- The best way to develop your control is to keep training in modern, jazz, tap and especially ballet. Some of the best Fosse dancers were ballet dancers first. "I found that the same quality that was asked of me as a ballet dancer was asked of me as a Fosse dancer: That adherence and dedication to the line, and to making that line look good. You have to have the same clear, welltrained eye to perform Fosse's work."

Contribution to American Jazz

Fosse **changed Broadway forever in the 1950s, '60s and '70s** with his **ground-breaking choreography for musicals** such as **Sweet Charity (1969)** and **Cabaret (1972)**.

Although he died nearly 25 years ago, Fosse's influence is still reverberating through the dance world. A revival of Chicago has been selling tickets on Broadway for the past 15 years, and another Fosse revival, Dancin', is set to open on Broadway this spring.

Mastering Fosse's style is an integral part of any young dancer's education, because **Fosse's influence goes way beyond Broadway. Performers from Michael Jackson to Beyoncé have all been influenced by Fosse's work**, and classes in his style are regularly taught at studios and conventions around the world.

Bob Fosse's style, with **its pelvic thrust, razzle-dazzle hands, and slumped over set of shoulders**, is immediately recognizable. Fosse championed the vaudevillian delinquent. **He bucked the post-World War II musical theatre tradition of happy boys and girls and their dancing feet.**

Fosse has had an **unquestionable influence on musical theatre dance**, despite this, his **most important contribution may be his film work**. Fosse **rejected the tradition, best exemplified by the dance numbers in Fred Astaire films, of capturing the dancing figure from head to toe**. In contrast to Astaire, Fosse dispensed with the notion that a good dance sequence had to be continuously shot, that dancers had to project bodily ease, and that the viewer was ready for some light entertainment. **Example: In Sweet Charity (1969) Fosse's dancers appear as burlesque matrons. They barely move, and when they do, they look like zombies trying to be sexy. Through his directorial and choreographic choices in the film, Fosse makes the viewer complicit in the vulgarity of The Big Spender number. He shoots, in fast whiplash cuts, the dancers' bodies from the perspective of one male customer, sitting in the front row and smoking a cigarette. By shooting their body parts in isolated shots, Fosse aggressively tenders the idea that these gals are broken. No doubt, the Big Spender number is a brilliant use of film and dance.**

Fosse's mature dance-film style, seen in the Big Spender number. **His gestural-driven (and sleaze-riddled) dance numbers are completed by the camera's close-ups and the subsequent multiple edits, which give one the sense of a hungry eye, roving from one dancer to the next**. This pasting and cutting approach to filmed choreography became, after Fosse, the tradition for mass media dance film. It can be seen in Michael Jackson dance videos, the famous Maniac (1983) dance number from Flash Dance, and in Madonna's Vogue (1990). In each case, the choreography takes second place to the ingenious, energetic filming and editing. Jackson's music video Bad (1987) may be the pinnacle of the Fosse dance-film style. The performers are shot from below (as though one is begging the gang members for mercy—underneath their very chins).

Summary

American dancer, choreographer for the musical stage and screen, writer, and director Bob Fosse was perhaps the most influential figure in the field of jazz dance in the twentieth century.

Creative, inspired, driven, strong-willed, tireless, and ruthless, Fosse forged an uncompromising modern style – characterized by finger-snapping, tilted bowler hats, net stockings, splayed gloved fingers, turned-in knees and toes, and shoulder rolls

Forever changed the way audiences around the world viewed dance on the stage and in the film industry in the late 20th century. Through his films he revolutionized the presentation of dance on screen and paved the way for a whole generation of film and video directors, showing dance through the camera lens as no one had done before, foreshadowing the rise of the MTV-era of music video dance.

Visionary, intense, and unbelievably driven, Fosse was an artist whose work was always provocative, entertaining, and quite unlike anything ever before seen. His dances were sexual, physically demanding of even the most highly trained dancers, full of joyous humour as well as bleak cynicism — works that addressed the full range of human emotions.

Stylistic Features

Distinctive signature style which furthered the art of dance which features sultry hip rolls, smooth finger snaps, turned-in pigeon toes and specific, detailed movements.

Overview of key features:

- Sound effects (clapping hands, stamping feet, fsss sounds)
- Percussive rhythms
- Derbies and white gloves
- Angular posturing
- Shoulder rolling
- Finger stretching
- Dynamic use of lightening effects
- Percussive sounds which are a key feature of Jazz Genre.
- Undercurrent of sensuality
- Element of surprise e.g. if the music states a theme three times most choreographers repeat the step three times. But Fosse would do the same step only twice the third time he would do something totally unexpected.

Fosse Action Words and specific Examples

Bob Fosse used a variety of unique phrases to describe his signature movements, and many of these terms are still around today

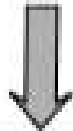
- **Slow burn:** An intense gaze that shifts slowly from one side of the stage to the other or from back to front. **Example: in Cabaret as Liza Minnelli faces upstage, then slowly turns in her chair to look at the audience before she sings "Mein Herr."**
- **Broken doll walk:** A pigeon-toed walk downstage. Your elbows are glued to your torso, jazz hands reach out to your sides and your hips swing slightly. **Example: in "Bye Bye Blackbird" in Fosse as the dancers sing "Here I go, swingin' low."**
- **Crescent jump:** A jump in place with one leg in parallel coupé and the other straight. Jazz hands extend high above your head as you reach far to one side, making a "C" with your body. **Example: in "Sing Sing Sing" in Fosse—the dancers do it over and over again during the climax of the music.**
- **Soft-boiled-egg hand:** A cupped-hand position. Imagine that you're holding an egg just tight enough to avoid dropping or crushing it. **Example: Rich man's Frug 'Sweet Charity' 1969 Female dancers plie in parallel whilst alternating their arms up and down, bent in at the elbow, hands in a cupped position the dancers nod their heads in time with the beat in the music.**

Fosse has a reputation as an inventive choreographer. His dance numbers, many of which were sensual in nature, frequently featured props—notably chairs, canes, and bowler hats—and his signature moves included turned-in knees, the sideways shuffle, rolled shoulders, and the splayed-finger shaking "jazz hand." **Fosse also utilized the spotlight to guide and manipulate audience attention.**

BOB FOSSE

Influences

DENISHAWN



JACK COLE

Moved into night-club/ commercial dance

Developed & pioneered theatrical jazz dance by fusing world dance learned at Denishawn with modern dance, social dance & American jazz music.

Powerful soloists, 'hip & cool', contrasting levels & directions, geometric formations, isolations, grounded and above all 'attitude'

INFLUENCE

his protege dancer assistant Gwen Verdon was Fosse's wife

Born 1927: Chicago. Grew up in 1930s/40s America

Parents were vaudeville performers. Comedy, 'Zany'. Dance as entertainment. **INFLUENCE**

Age 13: performing in burlesque, then The Riff Brothers, opening act for strip shows

Contemporaries: The Nicholas Brothers. **INFLUENCE**

Established artist at this time: Fred Astaire. Elegance. **INFLUENCE**

Conscripted into the Navy - performed for the entertainments team: early 1940s

Post war, studied American Theatre Wing [acting]. Hispanic migration to the US in this era.

1950: Performed on The Hit Parade [TV] and discovered by Jerry Lewis & Dean Martin

1950 The Colgate Comedy Hour TV Show: Dean Martin & Jerry Lewis: choreographer

1953: Signed with MGM Musicals. Arrived in Hollywood as Gene Kelly was enjoying stardom.

1955: The Pajama Game: directed by GEORGE ABBOTT & JEROME ROBBINS [BROADWAY] & STANLEY DONEN [MGM]- MENTORS & INFLUENCES

Commented on society around him, whether the strip clubs of Chicago, the heavily industrialised machinery and factories of Chicago in the 1940s, or just social gesture.

" a social satire of the US after World War II"

Early musical theatre - comedy

Dark sexuality, portrayal of the female

War time

Lewis urged him to choreograph

A Level Guide to American Jazz

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