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Fosse: The Man Underneath the Hat

Knowing more about the mercurial history of this major jazz innovator can help dancers grasp his style and enhance their performance quality

by Danielle Snyder

In the 1990 documentary “Bob Fosse: Steam Heat,” which was part of the *Great Performances: Dance in America* series, Fosse reveals that the frequent use of black hats in his choreography was due to the fact that he was self-conscious about his premature balding, so he himself often wore hats. He also mentions how thankful he was for his hunched over posture and his lack of turn-out, because these “limitations” are what guided him to develop such a unique and recognizable dance style. What does this unveil about Fosse? Though often associated with glorified fame - having earned Tony Awards, Emmy Awards, Academy Awards, and most recently having the FX network show *Fosse Verdon* put his life back in the spotlight - Fosse is a man of genuine character, with relatable flaws and insecurities.

Through interviews with Fosse himself, narration from Gwen Verdon, archival footage of live stage performances and movies, and commentary from several colleagues at his memorial at the Palace Theater in 1987 following his death, this documentary provides an understanding of who Fosse was as a person, and how his character shaped his choreography. As an undergraduate dance major, I was fortunate enough to perform Fosse’s choreography as part of a *Chicago Suite* reconstructed by Anne Reinking and Gary Chryst. Had I seen this documentary during the rehearsal process and performances of *Chicago Suite*, I think I would have been better able to execute the choreography, with a deeper knowledge of the contextual history from which the movements developed.

Having grown up with several brothers, Fosse was surrounded by an abundance of masculine and competitive energy, so he turned to dancing and entertainment in order to earn attention. His tap training and lessons in playing the drums provided him with a strong sense of rhythm. As Fosse speaks of his influences such as Fred Astaire, Jack Cole, George Balanchine, and vaudeville, various black and white clips from television shows between 1949-1953 show some of his early works, which typically consist of him dancing with a female partner. Fosse was strongly inspired by several of his female partners, some of whom became his wives and lovers. Gwen Verdon was one of Fosse’s wives, and she narrates much of the documentary with admiration, even though she and Fosse separated 8 years after the birth of their daughter. Towards the end of his life, Fosse took another one of his muses, Anne Reinking, to be his lover without ever officially ending his marriage with Verdon. Fosse and Verdon remained friendly though, as much of their professional work in the dance world was dependent upon keeping a civil relationship.

Following his death, Reinking said of Fosse: “He loved women, but he did have problems with them.”¹ The crossover between Fosse’s artistic muses and lovers might make one question his morals and ethics in the workplace. The dance “workplace” is driven by passion and inspiration - like many other art forms, in which the personal life and artistic career are welded together as one. What boundaries (if any) should be set between a choreographer and dancers? How have instances of overstepping boundaries between personal life and artistic career been either beneficial or detrimental to those involved?

Fosse battled with substance abuse, fought depression, and needed open-heart surgery in the middle of his choreographic process for *Chicago*. Some say his approach to life and work did not change much post-surgery, though he instructed the *Chicago* dancers to “feel like the living dead and to dare the audience to watch them.”² At this time, Fosse was also raising a daughter who, in the documentary, remembers that her father would rather that she “swallow burning swords than dance.” What does this reveal about what Fosse might have struggled with throughout his career?

As a dancer and choreographer, I - and many of my colleagues - have gone through periods of self-doubt, which lead me to question why I chose to pursue a career in dance. It is comforting to hear Fosse openly speak of his self-doubts and fears of not being able to properly execute his ideas and of his anxiety regarding how the audience might receive his work. In the midst of this, Fosse boldly co-wrote, choreographed, and directed the semi-autobiographical film *All That Jazz* (1979), which put him in an extremely vulnerable position to receive criticism from his aficionados, though he proceeded to win four Academy Awards for the film.

In contrast to the height of Fosse’s career in the early 1970’s, the documentary also reviews the decline in appraisal in his last decade. The footage of his stylish early works, including *Kiss Me Kate* (1953), *My Sister Eileen* (1955), *Damn Yankees* (1955), *The Pajama Game* (1957), *Sweet Charity* (1969), *Chicago* (1971) and *Cabaret* (1972), shows a recognizably different artistic direction than that of his darker works of the late 1970s and early 1980s. The later works display sexuality as a trademark of his style, consisting of women moving sensually in racy costumes, in stark contrast to his more conservative work from the 1950s. Could this later style have been influenced by the narrative of Fosse’s personal life? How might these more provocative works reflect both Fosse’s personal life at the time, as well as what was going on in society during the 1960s and early 1970s? How has the representation and exploitation of women been received by theater, dance, and film audiences over the past 70 years?

As Fosse responds to interview questions in the film, he speaks with humor and a kindness in his eyes, it is hard not to admire him as a relatable and genuine person, even knowing the details of his relationships with multiple women and drugs. Whether or not producer and director Judy

¹ David Benedict. "Interview: Adding dazzle to dark music: Ann Reinking". *The Independent (London)*, October 20, 1997. <https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3S7T-6BB0-008G-C2HB-00000-00&context=1516831>. Accessed May 11, 2019.

² Mrozowski, Cheryl. “Bob Fosse’s Jazz Revolution.” *Jazz Dance: A History of the Roots and Branches*. Ed. Lindsay Guarino. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014. 97-102. Print.

Kinberg intended to disclose intimate details about Fosse's personality and personal life, the film lends a stronger understanding of how and why Fosse's choreography is so unique. With many of Fosse's musicals consistently performed in regional theaters and collegiate programs around the globe, this insight is beneficial to any pre-professional or professional dancer who is pursuing a career in dance. Fosse's work reminds audiences that "no movement at all makes a stronger statement than great physical activity," which is an often-overlooked concept in theater and dance. While so many theatrical presentations "put on a show," Fosse's minimalistic choreography still speaks to audiences with great volume, and by approaching Bob Fosse as a relatable human being with characteristic flaws, he is further established as an integral artist in the history of theater, dance, and film.

Danielle Snyder is a second-year Dance MFA student at the University of California, Irvine.