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Letters

Published: August 22, 2004

Jerry and Mr. B

To the Editor:

Jerome Robbins was undoubtedly a complex and talented man, as Nicholas Fox Weber makes clear in his review of Deborah Jowitt's biography, "Jerome Robbins: His Life, His Theater, His Dance" (Aug. 1). I was a dancer in the New York City Ballet while both Balanchine and Robbins were in command. Robbins demonstrated two powerful lessons to me, both of which resulted from his understandable and yet somewhat curious choice (given his large and fragile ego) to place himself in the only theater on earth where he was inevitably in the shadow of an artist greater than himself. He would have been the first to say so.

Robbins was Salieri to Balanchine's Mozart, and we all knew it. On the Great White Way he was "Mr. Robbins," the King of Broadway, but in the elevators and studios backstage at the New York State Theater he was "Jerry," just "Jerry." Balanchine was the Man. And he was the Man to Jerry too. Perhaps Jerry found it a relief. No one understood Balanchine's depth better than Jerome Robbins. But unlike Peter Martins, who appears to have drowned in the wake of Balanchine's enormous spirit, Robbins had the intelligence and humility to embrace it and risk living under its moral reckoning. That took considerable courage.

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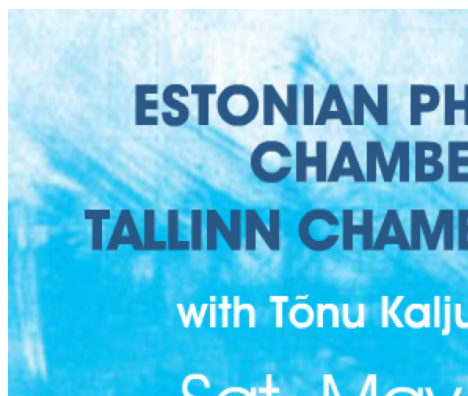
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There was Jerry before us, embodying -- unmistakably and famously -- the suffering and tortured artist. Even his hands were in a constant clench. Lincoln Kirstein once explained that Robbins's negative energy provided a necessary, and welcome, balance to Balanchine's positive. By placing himself in direct contact -- and thus contrast -- to Mr. B, Robbins gave us a powerful (though probably unintended) gift: the destruction of a cliché. Obvious suffering may well accompany the making of great art, but it is not a prerequisite. Balanchine made his ballets with kindness and an open hand, while Robbins wrested his from a fist of fury and turmoil. May he rest, now, in peace.

Toni Bentley

New York

The Other Empire

To the Editor:

As the author of "The New Chinese Empire," I found your discussion of empire stimulating (July 25), yet your reviewers treated it essentially as a Western phenomenon. In East Asia the supreme empire long was China. And Japan essayed the most raw-edged empire of the entire 20th century, directly ruling Korea and Taiwan for close to half a century.

John Lewis Gaddis says the United States is "the only empire left." But China stands as a massive, anachronistic multinational empire. The three largest provinces -- Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Tibet -- were all historically non-Chinese areas.

China is also the only country in the world that claims and expects to acquire enormous extra territories. Taiwan, of course, but also dozens of strategically placed and resource-rich islands east and south of China, plus slabs of Siberia and Kazakhstan.

Still more germane, Beijing possesses in abundance what Niall Ferguson calls "the imperial cast of mind." It sees itself as the guardian of a doctrine, like the Chinese dynastic empire. It is paternalistic toward its own people and peripheral folk alike. It rewrites the past for imperial purposes (for example, stunningly calling the early Korean state of Parhae a part of Chinese, not Korean, history).

Yet the only references to China in your reviews and dialogue on empire are to its economic success and its "far better" treatment of its people these days than in "living memory." Tens of millions of people in and near China, from Hong Kong to Xinjiang, Taiwan to Tibet, Vietnam to Korea, know of its imperial ways. But your favored historians, it seems, do not.

Ross Terrill

Cambridge, Mass.

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