

C. Kelly—Entries for the following directors:
Michael Bennett, Martha Clark, Jerome Robbins, Tadashi Suzuki.

Theatrical Directors

A BIOGRAPHICAL DICTIONARY

EDITED BY

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Preface

Theatrical Directors: A Biographical Dictionary is a reference book designed primarily for use by students and theatre generalists. *Theatrical Directors* contains biographical sketches, organized alphabetically, of nearly 300 individuals distinguished for their stage directing and includes not only contemporary directors, but those who are no longer working. Emphasis has been placed upon artists who have established international reputations, especially those whose work has significantly influenced American theatre. In addition, directors whose work may be little known outside of their home countries are included if their work has had a major impact upon the theatre of their homeland. Since this is a one-volume work, however, it is not intended to be exhaustive of the subject; rather, it concentrates upon those directors whose achievements, in the estimation of the editors and the Advisory Board, constitute a significant contribution to Western theatre, although in isolated cases, artists like Tadashi Suzuki have been included because of their extensive work in the United States.

In the selection of the artists included in *Theatrical Directors: A Biographical Dictionary*, the term "director" was interpreted liberally. Thus, this volume includes so-called traditionalists like Peter Hall and José Quintero; auteurs like Vsevolod Meyerhold and Lucian Pintilie; collaborators like Elia Kazan and Joseph Chaikin; experimentalists like Robert Wilson and Shuji Terayama; and extends to directors like Martha Clarke and Pina Bausch whose work borders upon dance, directors like László Moholy-Nagy whose principal contribution was theoretical, and producer-directors like Jed Harris, whose genius lay in mounting productions which achieved commercial success.

Each entry in *Theatrical Directors* is comprised of three separate sections.

Bennett, Michael (Michael Bennett DiFiglia) . [b. April 8, 1943 in Buffalo, New York - d. July 2, 1987 in Tucson, Arizona] . Knowing that dance and theater would be his life, Michael Bennett made a decision in 1960 to play the role of Baby John in the European tour of *West Side Story* rather than finish high school. This experience provided Bennett the opportunity to observe the process of director/choreographer Jerome Robbins--the man that Bennett would choose to emulate--and meet performer Robert Avian--the man who would become his life friend and collaborator. Between 1962 and 1966 Bennett performed, choreographed for musical theater and staged dances for television.

Michael Bennett won instant recognition when his first two choreographic efforts on Broadway earned him Tony Award nominations, even though *Joyful Noise* (1966) closed after only twelve performances and *Henry, Sweet Henry* (1967) closed after eighty. Because of his extraordinary talent for seeing the “whole picture” of a production, he was often called on to fix shows that were in trouble and soon earned the reputation of “show doctor”. He was a concept artist rather than the inventor of steps and his signature can be found in the integration of theatrical elements, the seamless tying together of scenes and the use of the individuality of the performers, especially chorus members. He began perfecting this process while staging *Promises, Promises* (1968), *Company* (1970) and *Follies* (1971), and soon redefined the formula for the American musical. Bennett had had no association with the out of town tryout production of *Seesaw* (1973) that was playing in Detroit, but after he was called in to help the troubled show the Broadway program read “Written, Directed and Choreographed by Michael Bennett”. Bennett was a perfectionist who relentlessly pursued the realization of his creative concepts. He began

seeking more and more artistic control over projects, resulting in many love/hate relationships with performers and collaborators.

Bennett's use of the ensemble brought the chorus gypsies a new public appreciation. They were challenged to be actors who, through singing and dancing, play an intricate role in the balance of the production and the progression of the plot. He often approached his staging through characterization, rather than choreography. He, himself, started as a Broadway gypsy and was not looked upon as a father figure in the chorus community. In 1974 several dancers asked to meet at Bennett's 890 rehearsal space to discuss the state of theater, their lives, dreams and frustrations. This evening, and a subsequent session (which were both taped), became the germinate idea for the book of *A Chorus Line*. Bennett was now beginning to project from the place he dreamed: conception, and he was dealing with a subject dear to his heart.

The *Chorus Line* project set a new precedent in the development of a musical. Rather than beginning with book and music, auditions, five week rehearsal, out of town tryout and Broadway opening; *A Chorus Line* (as it would later be named) was developed through a series of workshops held at the Public Theater and supported by Joseph Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival. Within this workshop environment, Bennett had no pressure from financial backers and the luxury of creative time with performers and collaborators. The show had its first public preview in April of 1975, moved to Broadway's Shubert Theater that same year where it played for several years, making it (at this writing) the longest running show in Broadway history. The universal appeal of

this backstage story can be found in the essence of each character's struggle as he places his talent and life "on the line." The professional world honored the show with the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, Tony Awards, the Pulitzer Prize, and an award to Bennett from *Dancemagazine* for outstanding contribution to the field.

Bennett's next two productions, *Ballroom* (1979) and *Dreamgirls* (1981) did not receive the notoriety of *A Chorus Line*, but were nonetheless vehicles for Bennett's genius.

Bennett liked to visually tie things together and often employed the same devices used in film to achieve his theatrical staging. Collaborating with the same production team as *A Chorus Line* (set designer Robin Wagner and lighting designer Tharon Musser), *Dreamgirls* evolved into a technical wonder. The sets and lights were choreographed as carefully as the dances and, consequently, became dramatic forces essential to the telling of the story.

Between 1983 and 1987, Bennett was involved with projects that he would choose to abandon. More and more of his time was needed to fight the AIDS virus which eventually took his life.

ABRIDGED PRODUCTION HISTORY: 1966, *Joyful Noise* (choreographer); 1967, *Henry, Sweet Henry* (choreographer); 1968, *Promises, Promises* (choreographer); 1969, *Coco* (choreographer); 1970, *Company* (choreographer); 1971, *Follies* (co-director with Harold Prince and choreographer); 1971, *Twigs*; 1973, *Seesaw*; 1971, *God's Favorite* 1975, *A Chorus Line*; 1979, *Ballroom*; 1981, *Dreamgirls*.

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Clarke, Martha [b. 1944 in Baltimore, Maryland]. Raised in a family environment that nurtured her creative and artistic endeavors, Martha Clarke began a career in dance at the Juilliard School (studying with Antony Tudor) and later joining Anna Sokolow's dance company. At the age of twenty she married sculptor Philip Grausman, had a son, and retired from performing. This early retirement, however, was short-lived and Martha's creative drive soon found an outlet in 1972 when she joined Pilobolus Dance Theater. Receiving encouragement and support from professionals such as Charles Reinhart, of the American Dance Festival; Joseph Papp of the New York Shakespeare Festival; and Lyn Austin of the Music-Theater Group, she formed her own company, Crowsnest, and began developing pieces that integrated dance, theater, and music--pieces that embodied powerful, visceral images that are now the signature of her work.

It was Lyn Austin, producer of the Musical-Theater Group that invited Clarke to direct and who provided financial support for the development of works such as: *A Metamorphosis in Miniature*, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, *Vienna: Lusthaus*, and *The HungerArtist*. The aesthetic of Clarke's theater form finds shape through the collective efforts of the performers and the director and finds its performance life through collaboration with the design team. Its structure is not a traditional through-line, but rather dramatic fragments which blend and overlap; its content, abstract images of the human condition which are sometimes lyrical and often volatile. This unconventional rehearsal process can certainly be frustrating for performers and designers, as Clarke will continue to define and change the work through opening. With both truth and humor, it

has been said that those who work with her “swear by her when they are not swearing at her.”

Metamorphosis, with actress Linda Hunt, brought Clarke her first Obie in 1982, but it was *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, a sixty minute, four part progression based on the triptych by Renaissance painter Hieronymous Bosch, that earned Clarke a Drama Desk Award and the attention of colleagues, critics, and the general public. The journey: *Eden*, *The Garden*, *The Seven Sins*, and *Hell* was a stylized fantasy that covered innocent love to demonic torture. Performed to a score by Richard Peaslee, the actors explored the boundaries of human existence—earthbound one moment and airborne the next.

Clarke’s explicit delving into eroticism and decadence drew a variety of responses from critics and audiences. In productions such as *Vienna: Lusthaus* (off-Broadway Obie award) and *Miracolo d’Amore*, nude performers represented both beauty and beast.

Audiences often found themselves engaged, confused and offended—but certainly, as Clarke intended, they had a strong response. Although she does not claim to be political, she does create theater that will hopefully alter the sensibility of the viewer. Her 1990 production of *Endangered Species* was as much about our own endangerment as it was about the animals she employed. It was during rehearsal for this piece that Martha Clarke received a Genius Grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

ABRIDGED PRODUCTION HISTORY: 1982, *A Metamorphosis in Miniature*;

1984 (and 1987), *The Garden of Earthly Delights*; 1986, *Vienna*:

Lusthaus; 1987, *The Hunger Artist*; 1988, *Miracolo d’Amore*; 1990, *Endangered Species*.

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Tallmer, Jerry. "All Clarke's Creatures" in *New York Post*, October 3, 1990.

Robbins, Jerome (Jerome Rabinowitz) [b. Oct. 11, 1918 in New York City] Although interested in dance while growing up, Robbins did not seriously pursue a career until 1937 when he left New York University and began studying at the Sandor-Sorel School. He spent his summers performing and choreographing at a Poconos resort and eventually found his way into Broadway chorus jobs. It was after working on *Keep off the Grass* with choreographer George Balanchine that Robbins abandoned Broadway and began performing classical works with Ballet Theater (now American Ballet Theater) . Robbins had a clear, disciplined style with a flair for “character” that drew the attention of choreographers such as Balanchine, Agnes de Mille, and Michel Fokine. Although Robbins was often a featured performer, he was uncomfortable with the Ballet Russe style that was dominating the company. Robbins’ first choreographic piece for American Ballet broke away from this artistic vein and set a new precedent for American classical dance. Performed to a score by Leonard Bernstein, *Fancy Free* (1944) was a timely ballet about three U.S. sailors on leave in New York City. It was so well received that within a few months the half hour ballet had opened on Broadway as the full length musical *On the Town* (book by Comden and Green) . The dance element of the show remained the focus and, for the first time, a program read: “Conceived and Choreographed by.”

Robbins remained active and respected in both the Broadway and classical dance communities. Between 1947 and 1949 he was invited by Balanchine to serve as Associate Artistic Director of the New York City Ballet, joined George Abbott as co-director of *Look Ma, I’m Dancin’*, and won a Tony Award for the choreography of *High Button Shoes* (which included the legendary Mack Sennett/Keystone Kop number “On a Sunday

by the Sea”). He was truly a protégé of two worlds and, as such, was often given free reign on projects. His manner was harsh, he insisted on perfection (even at the expense of whole companies being brought to tears) , but certainly his genius was never questioned. The artistic quality of musical theater dance, thanks to the pioneer work of Agnes de Mille, was now being viewed with a new credibility. Under Robbins’ influence, dance numbers were more closely tied to the book, often becoming scenes of their own and serving to introduce characters and reveal plot. “The March of the Siamese Children” and “The Small House of Uncle Thomas” played significantly in the dramatic development of *The King and I* (1951). Robbins insisted that dance numbers tell a story. He required composers to create original themes for the dances, rather than arranging variations on song melodies. Robbins usually had artistic freedom on his projects, but beginning with *Peter Pan* in 1954 he would have artistic control. For the first time a Broadway program read: “Directed and Choreographed by”—and in 1957 it read “Conceived, Directed and Choreographed by” and the show was *West Side Story*.

West Side Story is considered the progenitor of the concept musical and style was its through line. Choreography tied the show together. The physical characterizations present in the non-musical scenes were emotionally heightened during the dances. Transitions from one scene to another were staged as part of the dramatic action. The program did not list a chorus of singers or dancers, but rather identified each cast member through a character name. *West Side Story* is hailed as Robbins’ greatest contribution to musical theater. It was certainly, in many ways, a daring project. The story was based on *Romeo and Juliet* and drew attention to the current unrest in Puerto Rican/white American

communities. To the average theater-goer, a musical theater “tragedy” was an oxymoron and a newspaper headline was not entertainment. Robbins won a Tony Award for choreography, but *The Music Man*, not *West Side Story*, was chosen the best show of the season.

Between 1965 and 1968 Robbins worked on a project called the American Theater Laboratory that was supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. Robbins continued working in theater (*Gypsy* and *Fiddler on the Roof*) as well as dance, having his own company for a short period called Ballets: USA. In 1980 *Jerome Robbins' Broadway* opened at the Imperial Theater in New York. The show was a presentation of selected reconstructed pieces from his Broadway shows. This, alone, would seem tribute enough to his legacy, but a year later the New York City Ballet staged a two week festival featuring thirty of his ballets.

ABRIDGED PRODUCTION HISTORY: 1944, *On the Town* (choreographer); 1945, *Billion Dollar Baby* (choreographer); 1947, *High Button Shoes* (choreographer); 1950, *Call Me Madam* (choreographer); 1951, *The King and I* (choreographer); 1954, *Peter Pan*; 1956, *Bells are Ringing*; 1957, *West Side Story*; 1959, *Gypsy*; 1964, *Fiddler on the Roof*; 1989, *Jerome Robbins' Broadway*.

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Suzuki, Tadashi [b. 1939 in Japan]. While studying political and economic sciences at Waseda University during the 1960's, Tadashi Suzuki belonged to a student theater group called the Waseda Free Stage. The plays produced were in the contemporary Japanese tradition (Shingeki) and employed realistic (Stanislavsky based) Western performance style. Along with a group of other artists, Suzuki moved the theater company off the university campus (calling themselves the Free Stage and later, the Waseda Little Theater) and began exploring post-shingeki/avant-garde theater. Suzuki came to the realization that it is futile for the Japanese actor to perform within a style that was not consonant with his own communication process. The physiological nature of the Japanese language, is violated by the imposition of foreign gesture. Suzuki states his mission is to “restore the wholeness of the human body in the theatrical context.” He has employed the ideas of the traditional Japanese theater forms of Kubuki and Noh to realize this. Between 1966 and 1970, the Waseda Little Theater produced *On the Dramatic Passions I, II and III*. This collage of scenes drew from both Japanese and Western drama and laid the foundation for the company to bridge the gap between traditional and modern theater. Suzuki was able to observe the power of this synthesis when the company was invited by Jean-Louis Barrault to perform at the 1972 Theatres des Nations Festival in Paris. This highly successful trip abroad (performances in Nancy, Paris and Amsterdam) not only motivated Suzuki to continue work in this direction but, further, gave him the inspiration to create a spiritual and physical home for his company. Upon returning to Japan, he moved the group to the remote village of Toga-Mura, some 400 miles from Tokyo, and with the help of architect Isozaki Arata, renovated farmhouses into what is now the

training and performance center of the Suzuki Company of Toga (SCOT) and the sight of the International Toga Festival.

The ideology that informs Suzuki's training system is the same ideology present in his productions. He encourages actors to reclaim their tradition of mystical power--the tradition of the shaman and spiritual possession. In an attempt to restore the modern actor to a place of spiritual power and physical strength, Suzuki trains his actors in a series of disciplines (known as the Suzuki Method) that address the voice and body of holistic unit. The relationship between the actor and the ground--the feet with the earth--is essential to the disciplines. The performance area is respectfully viewed as a meeting place where ensemble and audience enter communal conversation. Little scenery and few properties are used, allowing the performance of the text to have focus. Suzuki's aim is to communicate the essence of the drama. He has taken liberties with texts, creating his own adaptations of classics. The power of these performances has gained Suzuki world recognition as director and acting teacher. Suzuki and his company have participated in many cross-cultural projects, especially with American acting companies and training programs.

ABRIDGED PRODUCTION HISTORY: 1974, *The Trojan Women*; 1978, *Bacchae*; 1981, *The Bacchae* (a bilingual production with American students from the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee and Japanese students); 1984, *Tale of Lear* (an English language production with American actors from Arena Stage, Berkeley Rep, Milwaukee Rep, StageWest); 1984, *Clytemnestra* 1984; *The Three Sisters* (Suzuki Company directed

by Jonas Jurasas); 1990, Toga Festival (14th year), Mito Festival and Mitsui Festival (three international performance festivals all organized by Suzuki).

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