

**New York Times**

**THEATER REVIEW;**

**An Album Of Fosse**

Jan. 15, 1999

THEATER REVIEW

BY BEN BRANTLEY

The ghost of the man being celebrated -- blurred and fleeting but definitely there -- first shows up when the girl bursts onstage with a scream. That's the signal for a sequence lasting just 45 seconds, and it occurs halfway through the first act of "Fosse," the hard-working but oddly affectless evening of dance by the choreographer Bob Fosse that opened last night at the Broadhurst Theater.

At the sound of that scream, which echoes not with terror but with irrepressible energy, a slender, elfin-faced fellow with a goatee shoots into view, sliding on his side like a runaway roller skate. The orchestra is playing Cole Porter's "From This Moment On," as the couple perform an acrobatic, exuberant and exasperated mating dance, an ode to percolating hormones. You've just received, in darkest January, a quick infusion of springtime, and it's impossible not to grin.

Those 45 seconds are famous. They had much to do with propelling Bob Fosse's career as a show-business-shaking choreographer and director of musical comedy. The vignette,

here vibrantly performed by Andy Blankenbuehler and Lainie Sakakura, is a re-creation of the first sequence Fosse choreographed for film, a scene from the 1953 movie of "Kiss Me, Kate," danced by Fosse and Carol Haney. It was a calling card, of sorts, announcing that an audacious new choreographic talent had arrived, and when you watch the film today, Fosse's pas de deux still seems to tear through the celluloid.

That was what Fosse, at his best, continued to deliver throughout the 30-some succeeding years of his career: a sassy, confrontational and insistently sexual style that both baited and winked at his audiences. Even at his most ironic, the man behind "Sweet Charity," "Chicago" and the film of "Cabaret" infused his work with impudent glee, a show-off's satisfaction in performing well. That sensibility is abundantly evident in the long-running revival of "Chicago" next door to the Broadhurst. Why, then, does it seem to be hidden for so much of "Fosse"?

Fosse may have been cynical, but he wasn't cold. And the show that bears his name has a zero-at-the-bone quality that fends off emotional engagement even as you marvel at the contortions of the talented and industrious corps of close to 30 performers onstage. It's all technique and very little soul. This is especially confounding when you consider the pedigree of the team behind "Fosse," a production of the American division of the now notorious Livent Inc.

There are, to start off, the two dancers whose association with Fosse is fabled: Gwen Verdon, his wife, collaborator and the star of his most memorable Broadway shows, from

"Damn Yankees" to "Sweet Charity" and "Chicago," who is the artistic adviser on this production; and Ann Reinking, the evening's co-director and co-choreographer, who was Fosse's muse and companion during the 1970's and the woman responsible for the lovingly reconceived Fosse choreography in the current "Chicago."

The choreographer of "Fosse," Chet Walker, who was the dance captain on the 1986 revival of "Sweet Charity," discussed the sort of project that this production would become with Fosse not long before his death in 1987. The show's director, Richard Maltby Jr., had shown a flair for personalizing and vivifying the commemorative revue with his staging of "Ain't Misbehavin,' " the popular Fats Waller musical. On hand as the nominal stars of "Fosse" are Valarie Pettiford and Jane Lanier, both of whom danced for the choreographer.

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There was thus every reason to hope that "Fosse" would be steeped in intimacy and insights that could make converts even of determined non-fans. And heaven knows, at a moment in which the most kinetic presence in Broadway musicals tends to be the scenery, audiences are ravenous for the kind of distinctive, personality-filled dance style that Fosse, like Michael Bennett and Jerome Robbins, specialized in.

Yet the overall feeling of "Fosse" is both clinical and reverential: part uber master class, part shrine. The

worshipful aspect is summoned in the evening's first image, a large projected photograph of Fosse, while seance-esque, astral music fills the air. The sets by Santo Loquasto (also the designer of the elegant, form-framing costumes) seem to have been assembled out of stardust and tinsel, suggesting a heaven in which eternity is one long curtain call.

The production's most emphatic priority, however, appears to be to make a case for Fosse as choreographer qua choreographer, to stand with the Robbinses and Martha Grahams of the world. This bookless three-act show, which has no identifying narrative or standard chronology, devotes much of its early segments to introducing the piquant, particular physical vocabulary that was Fosse's.

You know those elements even if you think you don't: the pigeon-toed stance, the cocked wrists, the twitching bums, the inwardly turned knees, accessorized with the essential white gloves and black bowlers. Here, caught in Andrew Bridge's funnels of light, dancers materialize from sepulchral darkness as pulsing incarnations of the letters of the Fosse alphabet. What follows is a study in how that alphabet can be reconfigured.

Fosse often said that he basically knew only six steps. Although he worked for years on creating a ballet for the Joffrey, it was never completed, and he said he doubted he could sustain a dance work of any length. His field, he said, in 1973, was the musical.

"Fosse," which includes several of the more celebrated centerpieces from "Dancin'," ultimately confirms these

observations. He was by far at his best when working off or chafing against the conventions of the established musical form and using his own specific style to bring out the sui generis magic of stars like Ms. Verdon, Ms. Reinking and Ben Vereen. Numbers that, in the context of their original shows, gleamed with wit and vitality often register as repetitive examples of virtuosic proficiency, from the sardonic dance hall hostess come-on of "Big Spender" (from "Sweet Charity") to the baseball strut of "Shoeless Joe From Hannibal Mo" ("Damn Yankees").

Some of these numbers do indeed feel timeless (the fancy-free trio "Steam Heat," from "Pajama Game"); others are hopelessly time-warped (the antiwar sequences from "Pippin") and still others, while definitely period pieces, remain absolutely delicious ("The Rich Man's Frug" from "Sweet Charity"). Segments from Fosse films, including "Cabaret" and "All That Jazz," remind you that Fosse was a genius in choreographing for the fragmenting camera in ways that don't necessarily translate back to the stage.

The singing and dancing of the ensemble can't be technically faulted. Yet there's a weirdly mechanical quality abroad. As in "Smokey Joe's Cafe," the Broadway jukebox musical of the songs of Lieber and Stoller, the hits just keep on comin', but without the animating spark that made them hits in the first place or any sense of their place in history.

There are a couple of dazzling big numbers, synchronized full-strength ensemble pieces from Fosse's all-dance show "Dancin'" (1978), including, the evening's climax, "Sing, Sing, Sing," the Benny Goodman piece in which dancers

become the physical embodiments of the individual instruments in the band. (That band, for the record, is terrific, as are the orchestrations of Ralph Burns and Douglas Besterman throughout the show.)

What's almost always lacking, however, is a sense of character, and in a Fosse show you were always aware of every person onstage as an individual. The singing dancers in "Fosse" have been instructed to gaze out into the audience with that familiar Fosse stare that says both "Please love me" and "Go to hell." But it's just a surface sheen on the eyes. There are only a few instances in which an infectious rush in the joy of performing gets past the footlights.

You feel it in the athletic pride generated by Desmond Richardson's gymnastic "Percussion 4" solo in the first act; in Scott Wise's satisfaction in turning tap steps into a personal stairway to heaven in "Sing, Sing, Sing," and in, of all things, the salacious, watch-me delight that a young woman named Shannon Lewis draws from a 1970's artifact called "I Gotcha," choreographed for Liza Minnelli's 1973 television special.

Fosse's wry personal philosophy is suggested, at the show's beginning and near its end, through Ms. Pettiford's smooth-voiced interpretation of the Lew Brown and Ray Henderson standard "Life Is Just a Bowl of Cherries." Every phase of Fosse's career is evoked, including his early days as a nightclub dancer. You may not know this, however, unless you pay close attention to your program. There is no narrative, no time-and-place signaling supertitles. As for the poetic biographical references, like the illuminated arched

doorway that evokes Fosse's days as a boy dancer in burlesque houses, you have to bring your own knowledge to appreciate them.

Watching "Fosse" is something like looking at an album of glossy, uncaptioned photographs. The pictures are arresting and beautifully composed. But it takes your own memories of what they represent to animate those scenes with the sorcery they once possessed; otherwise, they're just pictures.

## FOSSE

Choreography by Bob Fosse; conceived by Richard Maltby Jr., Chet Walker and Ann Reinking; choreography recreated by Mr. Walker; production directed by Mr. Maltby; co-director and co-choreographer, Ms. Reinking; artistic adviser, Gwen Verdon; orchestrations by Ralph Burns and Douglas Besterman; sets and costumes by Santo Loquasto; lighting by Andrew Bridge; sound by Jonathan Deans. Presented by Livent (U.S.) Inc. At the Broadhurst Theater, 235 West 44th Street, Manhattan.

WITH: Andy Blankenbuehler, Lainie Sakakura, Valarie Pettiford, Jane Lanier, Eugene Fleming, Desmond Richardson, Sergio Trujillo, Kim Morgan Greene, Mary Ann Lamb, Dana Moore, Elizabeth Parkinson, Scott Wise and Shannon Lewis.