

The Sour Smell of Success

Self-doubt and fear of death haunted the sensational career of Bob Fosse

BY MICHAEL BLOOM

FOSSE

By Sam Wasson, Eamon Dolan Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston, New York, 2013. 723 pp., \$32 hardcover.



T BEGINS WITH THE END—A LAVISH PARTY thrown by the deceased for his friends at Tavern on the Green. Chapters are titled in years that count down to the fatal stroke. And the epigraph is the subject’s, “How much time do I have left?”

For a biography of Bob Fosse, a man who thought about his mortality every day, it seems entirely appropriate that death haunts nearly every page of *Fosse*. It’s all the more surprising, then, that Sam Wasson’s capacious book is a compulsively readable anatomy of a singular artist and his artistic pathology. Twenty-five-percent heavier than Martin Gottfried’s groundbreaking 1998 *All His Jazz*—to which it owes a sizable and acknowledged debt—*Fosse* is free to amplify the deadly battle between outsize talent and self-destructive excess. Gottfried had the advantage of interviewing colleagues and friends now no longer living, such as George Abbott, Sid Caesar, Stanley Donen, Buddy Hackett, Jerome Robbins and Robert Whitehead. But, like Gottfried’s book, Wasson’s *Fosse* is meticulously researched, especially on the subject’s Hollywood years and personal life.

“Bob Fosse was the best thing to come out of burlesque, and he would pay for it forever,” writes Wasson, zeroing in on the grimy primal scene of the artist’s aesthetic and psychological impulses. In a situation out of Dickens, Fosse’s father siphoned off some of the boy’s earnings to pay for dance classes, while his mother was too ill to keep her son from playing the back-alley clubs. Scared and alone at 15, the young dancer became the strippers’ toy and their den mothers. From time to time he would return to the dime-a-dance clubs “like a shell-shocked veteran,” because they were his first professional and personal nests, complete with feathers, G-strings and ready sex. “It was schizophrenic,” admitted Fosse, who was both drawn to the girls and hurt by them. Years later his psychiatrist connected the dots between the burlesque years and his need to prove that every woman was a whore. In the clubs he also acquired a taste for drugs that would infect the rest of his life.

In quick-step prose, *Fosse* diagrams the development of a dance vocabulary, starting with Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor by way of burlesque. Taught to keep his palms down and fingers together, Fosse built a style out of the opposite—splayed fingers and palms open, along with slouched shoulders, bent

knees, slithery hips, canes, gloves (he hated his hands) and bowlers (baldness made him insecure). Hands shooting up and then back in like tentacles anticipated the lightning moves of Michael Jackson, who more than once tried to get Fosse to direct his music videos.

If the evolution of his dance style would continue at least through *Chicago*, the Fosse sensibility began to emerge in the “The Red Light” ballet, a warehouse number in *New Girl in Town* (eventually sanitized against his wishes) and the cynical unmasking of patriotism in *The Conquering Hero*. His wounded soul would next find congenial material in *Sweet Charity*. Later, with suicide front and center in *Pippin* and seedy cabaret life intertwined with Nazism, Fosse’s aesthetic had become a full-blown nihilism in perfect synch with the era of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers. Just as sleaze corrupted him as a boy, corruption became a lifelong artistic obsession.

IT WOULD BE HARD TO ARGUE WITH WASSON’S assessment that *Cabaret* reinvented the movie musical. Less clearly established, despite the book’s length, is Fosse’s theatrical legacy, other than his dance style. He may have “raised the bar on blackness impossibly high,” but *West Side Story* and the stage version of *Cabaret* had already made claims on the seriousness of the art form. It doesn’t help Fosse’s case that Harold Prince is quoted as saying Fosse “unabashedly stole *Cabaret*” to create *Chicago*. Stephen Sondheim is no less accusatory: “He saw the last 20 of minutes of *Follies*, and thought, *Ob boy*...and made a career out of it.”

Fosse did make a significant contribution to fellow artists, a fact omitted by *All His Jazz* but emphasized by Wasson. By withholding his services on *Little Me*, for example, he forced Broadway producers to recognize the nascent Society of Stage Directors and Choreographers.

In 1973, Fosse was the first director ever to win the three top directing awards in a single year—Tony (*Pippin*), Emmy (*Liza with a Z*) and Oscar (*Cabaret*). He never recovered. Success was harder for Fosse than failure. It ignited his greatest fear, other than death: that he’d be exposed as a fraud. “He thought he was the best, and he thought he was terrible,” said Ann Reinking, his muse and lover. Eventually the pain of the work became his subject. A dissection of the

movie musical, the trail-blazing *All That Jazz* was, for Reinking, about how “show business can kill you...Bob felt betrayed by his work, which he loved.” His last girlfriend described him as a victim of PTSD: post-traumatic-show-business-stress-disorder.

Fosse doesn't shy away from the dissipation that held together his life and sent it careening to an early end. The new biography uses current psychological understanding to paint an unvarnished picture of the artist as narcissist and addict: Dexedrine for the work, Seconal at night, a lit cigarette hanging from his mouth at all times (from six to seven packs a day), alcohol, work, stress, sex instead of sleep, the unquenchable need for struggle—and the daily dread of death. Sex was not just Fosse's power move and his salve for pain; it was, Wasson argues, “a medium... as much a physical act as it was an opportunity to learn about and merge with his female collaborators, a way of giving to them so they could give back more and better.”

Fosse hit on every dancer who looked like Gwen Verdon (his third wife) or Reinking, but couldn't love a single one. Women were his greatest muses, but men were his true friends, notably writers such as Paddy Chayefsky, Herb Gardner, Neil Simon and Budd Schulberg. He revered writers, longed to be one, and yearned for the total control writing would give him. When he did achieve that goal, the results were among his least successful—the film *Star 80* and the musical *Big Deal*.

FEW ARTISTS WORKED OTHERS harder than Fosse, and yet inspired devotion. He drove dancers beyond the breaking point to give them a taste of perfection—“the only medicine for agony.” For Donna McKechnie, “It was his belief in you that kept you going.” His open calls were legendary not just for their length; he used auditions to make dancers better and rooted for them to get the part. His collaborations with Verdon and Reinking were among the greatest in musical theatre history, as well as the DNA for one of the most complex threesomes in show business. But as with all things Fosse, there was a dark, destructive side. He would sometimes diminish his returns by rehearsing (in a Dexedrine mania) even the tiniest twitch, beyond anyone's patience.

A film historian, Wasson is at his lengthiest and best appreciating Fosse's movies and giving them full social and psychological context. Cutting-room conversations on

Cabaret and *All That Jazz* reveal how remarkably Fosse made the transition from theatre to film. Wasson is especially perceptive in framing *Cabaret* in autobiographical terms, as an indictment of the “flash” Fosse feared had trademarked him. And counter to Gottfried's oddly sanguine portrait of *Star 80*, Wasson depicts the tortured director as “a bottomless wound of insatiability.” So closely did Fosse relate to Dorothy Stratten's psychopathic killer that he directed Eric Roberts to play the character as “me, if I wasn't successful.”

To the very end, as much as it cost him, Bob Fosse hammered his torment into art. “He made performing,” said his good friend E.L. Doctorow, “a metaphor for existence.” The terrible irony of his life was that he couldn't help but think of himself as a second-rate song-and-dance man who could only razzle-dazzle 'em. Dustin Hoffman described it best: “He wanted so desperately to be an artist—that was his tragedy—because he already was.”

Michael Bloom is a director and writer whose latest project is an adaptation of David Rakoff's essay *Christmas Freud*.

RATTLESTICKPLAYWRIGHTSTHEATER
presents

ODE TO JOY

Written and Directed by Craig Lucas

February 12 - March 30

From the Pulitzer Prize finalist and Tony nominated playwright of *Prelude to a Kiss* and *The Light in the Piazza* comes a story of love, heartbreak, addiction, and illness.

featuring:



Kathryn Erbe (Law & Order, Grapes of Wrath) **Roxanna Hope** (Frost/Nixon) **Arliss Howard** (Jurassic Park, Moneyball)

Special Discount for American Theatre readers!
\$30 tickets for the month of February with code

ATFEBJOY

for tickets visit www.rattlestick.org or call 866-811-4111 playing at **Cherry Lane Mainstage** 38 Commerce St.




www.kdstudio.com

Where **Professionals** Train

KD COLLEGE
A Subsidiary of KD Studio, Inc.

CONSERVATORY OF FILM AND DRAMATIC ARTS

Accredited by the National Association of Schools of Theatre (NAST)

Associate of Applied Arts Degree
offered in:

Motion Picture Production Acting Performance Musical Theatre Performance

1.877.278.2283
2600 Stemmons Frwy, Ste 117, Dallas, TX 75207

Financial Aid Available to Eligible Students

Faculty of Industry Professionals

Photographed by Lloyd S. Jones