

BOOKFILTER'S OCTOBER BOOK OF THE MONTH

MICHAEL GILTZ | OCTOBER 21, 2019

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Every month, BookFilter picks the best new theater book, exclusively for Broadway Direct readers.

Jerome Robbins: By Himself

Edited and with commentary by Amanda Vail

\$40, Knopf

Published October 1

Here's a little secret: Magisterial biographies and engrossing feature stories about an artist are wonderful, but if you're a fan of that artist, it's a special thrill to dive into the research that was pulled together to create that biography or article. Sure, it's fun to read about A.A. Milne.; does that compare to seeing the real Winnie the Pooh doll or reading Milne's handwritten drafts of a story or poem? Not even close.

Choreographer and director Jerome Robbins is a signal figure in musical theater and dance. *On the Town*, *The King and I*, *West Side Story*, and *Fiddler on the Roof* are just the tip of the iceberg. That's why he's been celebrated in books and TV specials for years. If you're a fan, maybe you read Amanda Vail's acclaimed 2006 biography, *Somewhere*.

More than a decade later, Vail has delivered a new gift for musical-theater buffs, pulling from a wide array of primary sources and offering them up in a new book. Letters, journal entries, sketches, photographs, and an unfinished memoir all contribute to this kaleidoscopic portrait of Robbins — and all of it delivered by Robbins himself.

Vail offers commentary and context as Robbins's own voice details the work he did in revolutionizing American ballet, confesses his shame over naming names to the House Un-American Activities Committee during the McCarthy era, and brings to life his friendships both personal and professional, from the likes of Robert Graves to Stephen Sondheim.

It's personal, revealing, and just plain fun, especially for those already familiar with Robbins and his career. Consider this a deep dive for those who want more, or for anyone with a taste for a grab-bag of musical-theater nuggets.

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