
Fosse’s approach to movement was unconventional and highly original, as he would include the same movement in a number only twice and would add unorthodox steps throughout to maintain surprise and spontaneity. These elements often gave his choreography a humorous orientation, which was reflected in his rehearsal process. His work with Gwen Verdon (his lifelong partner and third wife) in “Whatever Lola Wants” from *Damn Yankees* illustrates this characteristic. During a rehearsal, Verdon had difficulty maintaining her balance in a stalking step and explained to Fosse that it was due to the high heels she was wearing. Fosse arrived at rehearsal the following day and donned a pair of oversized high heels himself, showing her exactly how the step should be done.¹

Fosse imparted images to his dancers that gave clarity to their movements and mesmerized audiences. In “Rich Man’s Frug” from *Sweet Charity* (1966), Fosse instructed the female dancers to be seductive by keeping their chins
down and teasing with their eyes. This made the dancers’ intentions unmistakable for audiences. It often took performers the entire rehearsal process to acclimate to Fosse’s expectations, as his style gave an exciting edge to movement that appeared easy to execute despite its highly technical requirements. His choreography “called on jumps and lifts from classical ballet, ballroom and character dance, and knee slides, tumbling, and acrobatics from popular entertainment—big full-bodied actions—as well as tap and soft shoe.” Fosse’s style, which was dynamic yet reminiscent of everyday movement, depended on the isolation of joints and appendages moving compactly through a restricted space.

During the 1930s and 1940s, dance sequences in a Broadway musical were mostly supplemental to the story’s dramatic action and narrative, and they provided a break from the central plot. In 1943 Agnes de Mille revolutionized the Broadway musical with Oklahoma, where choreographic numbers were seamlessly integrated into the plot. Fosse, Jack Cole, and Jerome Robbins utilized this type of hybrid performance, which combined dance and traditionally theatrical story lines. Not only did this allow dance to become an integral component of the plot, but it also helped advance the story line. Fosse’s brilliance was apparent in his ability to move smoothly from a scene’s end to a dance number; he heightened the emotions at the end so the dancing and singing would not clash. He accomplished this by first allowing the underscore of the music to introduce the dance as the players finished their dialogue, and then by raising the key in the music and changing tempo to dynamically build the number.

Fosse was formally trained as a tap dancer. He had some background in ballet, but possessed a limited facility. He adjusted each dancer’s movements so they reflected his own dance strengths and limitations rather than those of the individual dancer. His refusal to choreograph beyond his own physicality allowed him to develop a style based on personal preferences—a bent knee, splayed fingers, percussive isolations, and sharp, jazzy movement were hallmarks of his style. His clever use of props—particularly hats and canes—camouflaged his technical limitations. These habits were widely imitated by other dancers and choreographers, and they made his choreography instantly recognizable.

Fosse wrote the first draft of Sweet Charity in 1965 and launched the musical number “Big Spender.” This ensemble piece is set to a burlesque beat and consists of a series of seductive moves, poses, and stances. Sensual and erotic in nature with a pulsating beat, “Big Spender” is one of Fosse’s most visually exciting pieces; it is embedded with stop action, visual accents, and musical percussion that direct the audience’s eye. While most audiences would call “Big Spender” a dance, it includes no traditional dance steps.

Another well-known musical number from Sweet Charity is “Rich Man’s Frug,” which explores the popularity of social dance in the 1960s. In this number, bodies lean and tilt in contrast to arching arms and angular legs that symbolize a bleak world. A representative step in this piece appears easy but is extremely difficult to perform. The “cranking at the hip” begins with each hand flush against the matching hip bone, parallel arms, and bent wrists. The hands move in a circle and the wrists move upward, bringing the knuckles in line with the wrists. At this point, the still-bent elbows are far away from the back. The heels of the hands push back behind the dancer, but the insides of the fists remain next to the hip bones. The entire motion is done repeatedly, with a slight hesitation as the heels of the hands push back. As veteran
dancer and actor Ben Vereen relates, "this minute detail took one entire day of rehearsal for 'Rich Man's Frug' to perfect prior to the Broadway opening."

Fosse's artistic relevancy emerged from his realistic treatment of his material, as he chose projects that appealed to his unsentimental attitude toward life. The release of the film *Cabaret* (1972) marked both a radical departure from his earlier works and the first time in cinematic history that choreography and musical staging furthered the dramatic action of a mainstream film (to the point that Martin Gottfried considers it "hardly a movie version of the show"). In *Cabaret*, a routine kick line suddenly transforms into the marching goose steps of the Third Reich, and the film cuts from an Austrian slap dance to a group of "brownshirts" beating the proprietor of the Kit Kat Club. Fosse wanted the dances to authentically reflect the period. He explored his choreography's dramatic potential by having a scene follow a related musical number or by shooting a dance segment and editing a relevant stretch of the following story line. Fosse employed far more musical staging than choreography, and he used a nightclub-standard stage set that measured 10' × 14'.

That same year, Fosse directed the television special *Liza with a Z* for Liza Minnelli. He embedded the show with the same inventiveness that characterized *Cabaret*; his work in physicalizing Minnelli's singing and gestures helped sharpen her dancing. Fosse shot with film instead of videotape because he could control film more easily and the images were of superior quality. The show was performed in a Broadway theater with an invited audience and eight cameras running simultaneously. Martin Gottfried characterizes this work as a reaffirmation in Fosse's confidence: "There was the same boldness to his work on the television show that had been evident in *Cabaret*, the same strong stroke. His artistic muscle was now flexed in spareness and certitude." The capture of eight Academy Awards for *Cabaret* in 1973 cemented Fosse's place in the National Museum of Dance's C. V. Whitney Hall of Fame.

Although artistically successful, Fosse and Verdon had followed the Broadway tradition of living from show to show, and by the mid-1970s they had exhausted their savings and needed to provide for their daughter, Nicole. After the success of *Cabaret* and *Liza with a Z*, Fosse wanted to pursue film or television projects instead of stage work. His intensity on stage and set was partially fueled by drug use, and he entered the Payne Whitney Psychiatric Institute for depression in 1973. Though mentally and artistically fatigued, Fosse reluctantly agreed to direct and choreograph *Chicago* (1974) for Verdon. Guilty of marital infidelity, he owed her this starring vehicle to secure her financial future and ease his conscience. Soon after beginning rehearsal, the hard-living Fosse was rushed to the hospital after he suffered his first heart attack.

After successful open-heart surgery, Fosse returned to work on *Chicago* and challenged the performers to "feel like the living dead and to dare the audience to watch them." He instructed them to focus their eyes over the tops of audience members' heads as if they were boring holes through the back wall. As Debra McWaters describes, "The 'bullet eyes' look [is one that] generated a sense of mystery, yet the individual dancers remained subtle and intriguing." This physical mood created unambiguous intentions and organic characters that enabled Fosse to deeply engage the audience at the beginning of a show. This work—coupled with the overlapping of different themes, amplified music volume, and changing tempo—allowed Fosse to bring the opening number, "All That Jazz," to a memorable finish.

Three years after *Cabaret*, Fosse's dance revue show *Dancin'* (1978) arrived as a plotless musical theater extravaganza. He contrived stunning jazz dance numbers that featured fifteen of Broadway's most outstanding dancers who were selected from an audition pool of 2,000. Ann Reinking, a ballet dancer from San Francisco who replaced Verdon as Fosse's dance muse, was included in this elite group. Choreographer Agnes de Mille describes *Dancin'* as "a dazzling display of show stoppers, pitched at breakneck speed and heartbreak intensity" and as "something new, a dance evening for the general public." *Dancin'* was emblematic of Fosse's transformation of American musical theater dance; as he told the *New York Times* in 1978, "This show is about the sheer joy of dancing" (although, paradoxically, the roster of injured dancers seemed to make it about anything except "joy").

Another pivotal moment in Fosse's career is marked by *All That Jazz* (1979), an autobiographical film that evolves episodically from past theater experiences and from personal encounters. Having been nominated for nine Academy Awards, it is considered his most groundbreaking work by critics and audiences alike, and it provided the stardom that Fosse had always craved. Ultimately, Fosse's imprint on Broadway, film, and television stood as a beacon for what was hip and most current in its time. Although his work was controversial for some critics due to its risqué choreography and unwholesome subject matter, Fosse created a highly individualized jazz dance technique that reflected a culture in support of its incubation. Fosse permanently altered the course of American musical theater by introducing an entirely new avenue in dance. The birth of the director-choreographer paradigm on Broadway enabled Fosse's development, and his trademarks are seen today in music videos, nightclub shows, and dance films. His legacy is present in the fast cuts in *Flashdance* (1983) and the isolated body parts in
Fame (1980). Although his artistic impact seemed to dwindle rapidly during the last decade of his life, Fosse's unique artistic vision and style has stood the test of time; his material continues to thrive today, appearing as fresh and new as the day it was conceived.

Notes
8. Ibid., 229.

The Legacy of Gus Giordano

Michael McStraw

Pioneers, inventors, visionaries: more often than not, these agents of change make their contributions from afar, secure inside laboratories, warehouses, or offices and removed from the world they intend to alter. In stark contrast, Gus Giordano—the twentieth-century jazz dance innovator, master educator, and choreographer—positioned himself firmly in the heart of the discipline, grappling with rhythm, sinew, gravity, and form. His was a process of creating alongside dancers whose lives he transformed. Earthy, masculine, and a charismatic everyman who possessed an exceptional work ethic, Giordano built his dance legacy one turned-in leg at a time.

His contributions to jazz dance are vast, and his role in transforming it into a credible American art form cannot be overemphasized. Gus created the powerful and joyous Giordano Technique, established the Giordano Dance School (1953), formed Giordano Dance Chicago (1963), the first dance company devoted to jazz dance, wrote the highly acclaimed *Anthology of American Jazz Dance* (1976), and launched Jazz Dance World Congress (1990), an internationally recognized forum for teaching, performance, and choreography.

But what was at the core of Gus Giordano? What was that essential something that made these innovations possible? Marked as special from the moment of birth, August Thomas Giordano III was born to an immigrant Italian family in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1923. Gus was the fourth son born, but only the second to survive infancy; the non-surviving brothers before him were also August Thomas, thus his entry into the family as “the Third.” His was a life shaped by a proud and supportive family; early and