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'Fosse/Verdon' and the Question of the Genius Pass

Bob Fosse is legendary — both for his celebrated work and for his less-celebrated offstage behavior. Can we praise one without permitting the other?

By Madeleine Deliee APR 24, 2019



FX

If you've taken a Zumba class, learned to box step as a kid, or were dragged onto the dance floor for *Hot, Hot, Hot*, you probably know at least one of Bob Fosse's hallmarks: jazz hands. It's just one example of Fosse's impact on movement as we know it — think of Michael Jackson's *Smooth Criminal* music video and you're envisioning Fosse; turn on *Dancing with the Stars* or *So You Think You Can Dance* and there he is again. He's widely recognized as one of the most influential American choreographers — and he's also widely known as a man who used his influence to seduce and coerce his dancers. And now, with the current drama series *Fosse/Verdon*

in full swing on FX, we're forced to confront a question that has arisen all too frequently in recent years: Does the creation exist separately from its creator's mistakes, or must they be judged as one?

One point of view is we should separate the art from the artist — a division that's been used to preserve Pablo Picasso (often characterized as a misogynistic bully), John Lennon, Miles Davis, and Sid Vicious (among others who've admitted to beating women). Roman Polanski still won the 2003 Best Director Oscar for *The Pianist*, 35 years after he fled the country to avoid criminal charges for sex with a minor. He, along with Bill Cosby, was only expelled from the Academy of Motion Pictures and Sciences last year.

> **There's no longer a pass on abuse of power.**

The last two years' headlines have featured a near-continuous expulsion of creative titans. Harvey Weinstein, also expelled from AMPAS, may have lit the fuse, but there's plenty of dynamite to go around for R. Kelly, Ryan Adams, and, yes, Michael Jackson. We saw Bryan Singer's dismissal from *Bohemian Rhapsody* (and subsequent release from his next project) and Kevin Spacey's dismissal from *House of Cards* and literal erasure from the movie he'd nearly finished. More quietly, Peter Martins, longtime director of the New York City Ballet, retired in 2018 amid charges of sexual harassment and both verbal and physical abuse. Now Russell Simmons is making news again, amid charges that he is avoiding legal obligations relating to rape charges by hiding in Indonesia. There's no longer a pass on abuse of power and Time's Up is more than the name of a movement — it's a warning that bad behavior won't be accepted.

But what do we do about the past — and what happens when we hold the iconic creatives of yesterday, upon whose legacy and foundation an entire culture of art has blossomed, accountable to today's standards? The answer could be that living or dead, it doesn't matter — we need to hold accountable those artists whose actions

have wronged others. Or, if the approach is to pick and choose, case-by-case, what's the criteria for drawing a line in the sand? Abusive behavior that happened since the year 2000 is off limits, but the 20th century gets a pass? Lines in the sand are notoriously hard to maintain.

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Which brings us back to Fosse's legacy. Sam Wasson's 2013 biography, *Fosse*, mentions at least a dozen occasions when Fosse used his position as a segue to sex or used sex or abusive behavior to coerce his employees into the performance he wanted. Fosse's strategy of scapegoating one member of the company, particularly attractive women, made people wonder, Wasson wrote, "Was Fosse hardest on the girls he slept with? Or was he hardest on the ones he wanted to sleep with?"

Sam Rockwell as Bob Fosse in FX's *Fosse/Verdon*
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Leslie Kendall Dye, an actress, dancer, and writer, grew up hearing about her mother's experience working with Fosse on *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. The memory was far from glowing. Her mother, actress Ellie Sommers, described him as abusive; she recalled his daily greeting to the company: "Same lousy cast." Additionally, when even her father rebuffed Fosse's advance — rumors of his fluid sexuality are not rampant, but they exist — her mother became the scapegoat Fosse sought. It was Gwen Verdon, Fosse's wife, long-time collaborator, and the other subject of the FX drama, who interceded. "Mom said [Gwen] was her saving grace, her protector," Dye says. "She shielded her from the abuse." As a memento, she recalls, her mom kept and treasured Verdon's recipe for spaghetti and clam sauce for years.

Michelle Williams, who's playing Verdon on-screen, acknowledged the challenge in her interview with *Entertainment Weekly*. It's difficult to decide "how do you tell the story of this man whose behavior, now that we are having this conversation, is really problematic?" she said. The ostensible answer is to include the warts and all, letting the audience form its opinions with full insight. In the same interview, Sam Rockwell (Fosse) stated, "We show it all… He did abuse his power […] He misbehaved quite a bit. He's a complex guy."

Michelle Williams as Gwen Verdon in FX's *Fosse/Verdon*
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The adjective "complex" is often used to get around abusive behavior. It tidily acknowledges the problem yet remains largely forgiving: the bad boy whose misdeeds are but a small part of his genius. *Fosse/Verdon* includes a scene in which a dancer pays for refusing Fosse's advances (spoiler: she racks him). As in Ellie Sommers's experience with *How to Succeed in Business*, the dancer is iced out and ultimately replaced. Based on Wasson's exhaustive (600 page) account of Fosse's life and career, this kind of retribution wasn't uncommon, yet it's the sole representation of coercion or misuse of power we see despite five episodes deep into the series.

Author Claire Dederer wrote in her 2017 essay, *What Do We Do with the Art of Monstrous Men*? that artists who "did or said something awful and made something great [are compromised]. The awful thing disrupts the great work; we can't watch or listen to or read the great work without remembering the awful thing. Flooded with knowledge of the maker's monstrousness, we turn away, overcome by disgust." But, often, we don't. Instead, we attempt to divide, trying to preserve the contribution and overlook its maker's flaws. Following the recent documentary *Leaving Neverland*, social media was overrun with Michael Jackson fans trying to sit comfortably with both the evidence of abuse and their love of the music. Many found it was impossible; those who remained often said it was because the work and the man were separate.

In *Fosse/Verdon*, though, looking away comes with a collateral cost. Rejecting Fosse's legacy means simultaneously rejecting Gwen Verdon's creative influence. Despite Fosse's behavior and its impact on her, as well as on others, Verdon shaped a work,

style, and attitude of dance that made a deep and lasting imprint on our culture. We see it in the sensuality of music videos, the precision of the choreography of modern musicals like *Hamilton* (interesting to note: Lin-Manuel Miranda is a producer on the series), and the shorthand of the jauntily-tilted derby in every jazz dance recital.

So while we may still find ourselves asking the questions — do we revere the influence, regardless of what we think of its source? Can we remove the influence even if we wanted to do so? Does art retain its meaning when divorced from its creator? — *Fosse/Verdon*, I think, asks us to recognize that turning away from the Flawed Genius may come at the price of a woman's equally valuable legacy. Verdon's story is not one of victimhood; rather, she is a creator and genius in her own right whose work and life deserve to be seen and acknowledged.

Pivoting our gaze from the Flawed Genius is not easy, but we need to recognize both when it's warranted and what the potential fallout is for their — often female — collaborators. We're still reeling from the shock of this shift, but we will have to answer the questions of accountability and cost as a society. Until we do, we'll have to answer them for ourselves.

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