

LEONARD BERNSTEIN

Born 25 August 1918 in Lawrence, Massachusetts; died 14 October 1990 in New York City.

Fancy Free (1944)

PREMIERE OF BALLET: New York, 18 April 1944; Metropolitan Opera House; Leonard Bernstein, conductor

PREMIERE OF SUITE: Pittsburgh, 14 January 1945; Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra; Leonard Bernstein, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 26 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, piano and strings.

Leonard Bernstein was 25 years old when he came to national prominence. On his birthday, August 25, 1943, he was named assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic; on November 14th he substituted at short notice for the ailing Bruno Walter in a nationally broadcast concert that made him an overnight sensation. At that same time, he received a commission from New York's Ballet Theatre to compose the score for his first ballet, *Fancy Free*, a production that would also mark the début of Jerome Robbins as a choreographer. Oliver Smith created the decor and Kermit Love designed the costumes. *Fancy Free*, conducted by the composer, premiered at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York on April 18, 1944. It was a smash. The ballet played 99 times in New York that year, and Bernstein, Adolf Green and Betty Comden made its story (though not its music) into the musical *On the Town*, which opened on Broadway on December 28, 1944. Bernstein derived an orchestral suite from the complete score of the ballet and conducted its first performance with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra on January 14, 1945.

Fancy Free is set in a deserted street in lower Manhattan in 1944. It is night. Three sailors on shore leave burst onto the scene, joking and joshing, ready for fun. They enter a bar and order three beers, but soon return to the street, where a pretty brunette passing by captures their attention. They tease her, she seems interested, and two of the boys strut away on her arms, leaving the third sailor on his own. Just as he heads back into the bar, another girl, an alluring redhead, appears and accepts his invitation to join him for a drink. They dance a *Pas de Deux* of mounting intensity that signals their mutual attraction. Their reverie is broken by the return of the other sailors with the brunette. The boys learn, without much surprise, that the two girls are old friends. They all stroll into the bar together, where they settle on a dance competition, judged by the girls, to decide which two of the three sailors will have companions for the evening. The first sailor does a boisterous *Galop*, the second a lyrical *Waltz*, and the third a sinuous Latin *Danzon*. The contest settles nothing, however, and the sailors resort to a brawl to decide the matter. The girls stalk out of the bar, and disappear into the night by the time the boys have finished their fight. The trio is suddenly struck by the humor of their situation — they have beaten each other up in vain — and they share a friendly drink before strolling back into the deserted street. A tempting blonde saunters by. The boys hesitate for only a moment before following her off into the city lights.