

SWEET CHARITY - BOB FOSSE - 1969

Sweet Charity, full title of which is *Sweet Charity: The Adventures of a Girl Who Wanted to Be Loved*, is a 1969 American musical film directed and choreographed by Bob Fosse, written by Neil Simon, and with music by Cy Coleman and Dorothy Fields.

The film is notable for its costumes by Edith Head and its dance sequences, notably "Rich Man's Frug"

Charity Hope Valentine ([Shirley MaLaine](#)) works as a [taxi dancer](#) along with her friends, Nickie ([Chita Rivera](#)) and Helene ([Paula Kelly](#)). She longs for love, but has bad luck with men, being robbed and pushed off a bridge in Central Park by one ex-boyfriend. She has another humiliating encounter with Vittorio Vitale ([Ricardo Montalban](#)), a movie star.

After failing to find a new job through an employment agency, Charity meets shy Oscar Lindquist ([John McMartin](#)) in a stuck elevator. They strike up a relationship, but Charity does not reveal what she does for a living. When she finally does tell Oscar, he initially seems to accept it, but finally tells Charity that he cannot marry her.

The optimistic Charity faces her future, alone for the time being, living *hopefully* ever after.

Master of the "Frug" - Choreographer Bob Fosse's Unique Style

Legendary choreographer and director Bob Fosse once stated, "the time to sing is when your emotional level is too high to just speak anymore, and the time to dance is when your emotions are just too strong to only sing about how you feel." Bob Fosse's unique style and provocative dances have inspired artists for over 50 years. The mere mention of Fosse brings to mind black garbed dancers with bowler hats on heads, white gloves on hands, and bodies that are arranged in a highly specific, sensual yet unusual manner.

Born Robert Louis Fosse in 1927, Bob Fosse was the youngest of six children and used dancing early on to attract the attention he desired from his family. He began performing in burlesque night clubs as a young boy, which left a strong impression on him, leading later to dark sexual tones within his choreography. With the dream of becoming the next Fred Astaire, Fosse moved to Hollywood as a teenager, but premature balding limited the roles he could take in films. Only reluctantly did he agree to enter the world of live theater, his first of many choreographic undertakings being award-winning musical, *The Pajama Game*.

Unique Style

Fighting scoliosis and painful arthritis throughout most of his life, Fosse never let his limitations impede his artistic ambition. Molding his own imperfections into a distinct sinuous style, Fosse developed a jazz dance style that is now immediately recognizable and brought an innovative dimension of sophistication and sensual energy to the Broadway stage. Some notable distinctions of his unique style include the use of inward knees, rounded shoulders, and body isolations, which he used to emphasize the smallest of body movements.

Success and *Sweet Charity*

After his initial success with *Pajama Game*, Fosse went on to choreograph and direct many more ground-breaking and award-winning musicals including *Damn Yankees*, *Sweet Charity*, *Chicago*, and *Cabaret*. Musical theater researchers and admirers agree that Fosse has claimed some of the most original and sustained achievements, especially with the movie *Sweet Charity*, where his dance style was introduced on film.

Sweet Charity is based on the 1966 Neil Simon Broadway musical, which used the Federico Fellini screenplay *Nights of Cabiria*, as source material. With music by Cy Coleman and lyrics by Dorothy Fields, Simon's musical was directed by Bob Fosse and starred Fosse's then-wife, Gwen Verdon. The story focuses on the experiences of eternal romantic optimist, Charity Hope Valentine.

In the film, triple threat Shirley MacLaine sings, dances, and with a hint of melodrama, acts up a storm as the taxi dancer Charity. As defined by dictionary.com, the term "taxi dancer" has been used since the '20s, and describes a professional dance partner, typically a young woman hired by male patrons to dance on a dance-by-dance basis. Like a cab driver, the dancer's pay was proportional to the time she spends with her partner – but the taxi dancer was not a prostitute as many critics have speculated.

Sweet Charity not only marked Bob Fosse's directorial debut, it was also the first film roles for MacLaine's co-stars, Chita Rivera and Paula Kelly, playing Nickie and Helene respectively

The film marked the first time the world at large got a glimpse of Fosse's dance genius on film. Watching one number in particular speaks volumes. "The Rich Man's Frug" is arguably Fosse choreography at its finest. From the subtle signature hand movements to the elongated walks and innovative poses, Fosse used his version of the "Rich Man's Frug" to introduce his style of dance to film lovers everywhere. Fosse split the dance into three distinctive parts: "The Aloof," "The Heavyweight," and "The Big Finish" to convey the aristocratic and self-important glamour of a world Charity was not a part of, all without saying a word.

In 1973, Fosse became the first director in history to win an Oscar (for movie version of *Cabaret*), a Tony (for *Pippin*), and an Emmy (for the television special *Liza with a Z*) in a single season. More than any other choreographer, Bob Fosse became responsible for making it seem that the Broadway musical served mainly as a vehicle for choreographic expressions and conceptions. His need to focus on the imperfections of a dancer's body to create new movements separated him from his peers and led to his accreditation as one of the greatest innovator's in musical theatre history.

MOVEMENT VOCABULARY

The Frug, which you pronounce *FROOG*, is not a made up name. It was an actual dance in the 1960s and was sometimes called the Surf, Big Bea or Thunderbird. When the Twist lost favour a new social dance emerged – teenagers flailed their arms and legs in way of the Twist but toned down the

swiveling hips into a fast or sometimes slow sway. These gyrations morphed the basic dance into such standards as the Watusi, the Mashed Potato and the Jerk.

Rich man's Frug is performed in 3 sections –

The Aloof

The first of the three dances in the *Rich Man's Frug* showcases Bob Fosse's ability to combine social commentary, humor and innovative movement. Rich snobs, incapable of expressing any true emotion in their faces, reveal their boredom with highly controlled and stylized leg and arm movements that boil down even further to a thumb dance. The swiveling of open palms and fists around the wrists is very Bob Fosse.

The Heavyweight

The second dance is the funniest in the collection. Perhaps this number reveals the struggles and competitiveness inherent in the lifestyles of the super-rich and between the sexes. Or maybe it's just supposed to be fun. In any case, it's not to be taken as a serious commentary on boxing.

The final crouching line dance that leads to a knockout is a marvellous display of coordination, strength and endurance.

The Big Finish

The aptly titled finale allows the swells to suddenly let loose all their pent-up under the camouflage of the dark and dim light, but only between bouts of self-controlled group expression.

Eventually, the freak out dissipates and order is restored as the dancers straighten their mussed-up coifs to return to their normal lives.

Notable distinctions of Fosse's style included the use of turned-in knees, sideways shuffling, rolled shoulders, and [jazz hands](#). With Astaire as an influence, he used props such as bowler hats, canes and chairs. His trademark use of hats was influenced by his own self-consciousness. According to Martin Gottfried in his biography of Fosse, "*His baldness was the reason that he wore hats, and was doubtless why he put hats on his dancers*. He used gloves in his performances because he did not like his hands. The Rich Man's Frug" scene in *Sweet Charity* is a great example of his signature style.

Bob Fosse's typical choreographic strategies are to repeat small, rhythmic, & highly defined minimalist movements, rehearsed to such a point of perfection that they create their own excitement.

Fosse rehearsed his dancers for hours. They were expected to perform flat out and were not permitted to 'mark' their work, nor complain about going over the steps again & again. This rehearsal process ensured his dancers worked together like a well-oiled machine and that his movement vocabulary was conditioned on their bodies – they weren't just remembering steps.

There are many combinations of locomotion, while the repeats of minimalist body isolations are mainly used to create the movement vocab adding fosse's signature style and flavour.

LINKING PHRASES

Phrases are linked through the strong jazz style, maintained throughout the piece, with one movement leading onto the next. Other links are repeated shoulder and pelvis isolations, strong accents, pirouettes, high use of energy, extended fingers and arm lines. The accurate sense of timing to the music is another key link in most phrases.