

**Let me play among the stars:
Michael Smuin on *Fly Me to the Moon***

Celia Fushille, who was at the time both Company Artist and Associate Director, interviewed Michael in the lead up to the premiere of Fly Me to the Moon in October 2004.



Photo by Scott Goodman

Celia: You've worked with popular music before. Why Sinatra and why now?

Michael: When Sinatra sings, you naturally want to dance. I was reminded of this recently as I began working on my memoirs and going through my records. So many memories have come flooding back. When my mom and dad would have the radio on while they were fixing dinner and a Sinatra song came on, my dad would sweep my mom up in his arms and they would dance in the kitchen. It was so romantic! They were excellent ballroom dancers and I loved to watch them dance. When they danced together, they were the essence of joy. I feel at this point in my life that this is the right music with the right dancers at the right time. Who doesn't like Sinatra?

You're drawn to Sinatra, but do you have concerns about attracting a younger audience with Sinatra? Will your younger audience know this music?

Good question! The truth is, many young people know and love Sinatra because it's almost like folk art. It has been passed down from generation to generation. Our younger audience might already be familiar with these ballads which have been recorded by many other artists singing today.

How is it different choreographing to popular music as opposed to a classical score?

There is no difference. As Martha Graham once said, "There are two kinds of dancing: good, and bad."

Do you have a preference in musical choice?

No, I love it all!

Did you ever have the opportunity to see Sinatra perform live?

Yes. I saw him perform live at the Eden Rock Hotel in Miami in 1963. It came as a revelation to me at that time, that even when he was singing it was like he was talking directly to you. And I felt that every member of the audience had the same feeling. Remember that first there was Sinatra, then there was Elvis, and then there were the Beatles. But Sinatra was the first.

I know you worked on several projects with Gene Kelly over the years and became close friends. Did he ever mention Frank Sinatra?

Yes, he certainly did. I remember one night we were having dinner together after a performance of San Francisco Ballet's 50th Anniversary Gala, which he hosted with Janet Reed. At one point I asked him about *On the Town* and his relationship with Sinatra. "Well," he said, "I taught Frank Sinatra how to dance. He was the best pupil I ever had. He learned lightning fast and didn't have to work particularly hard at it. He was just a natural with perfect phrasing and timing." Gene also remembered Frank was always very gracious in acknowledging that not only was Gene his choreographer, but his teacher as well. This reminds me of a conversation that Bob Fosse and I were having one day. He said that Frank Sinatra had called him and asked him to put a show together for him. Bob said he was very thrilled and surprised but had to decline because Sinatra was known to not like rehearsing. Of course, Bob was known as the rehearsal monster. He would rehearse over and over and over again.

Getting back to your ballet, from all the wonderful songs that Sinatra made famous, how did you choose the songs that you're using?

Painfully. Really, that was one of the hardest parts. I had scores of albums and spent literally a year and a half picking out my favorites. But one has to think of a balance. They can't be all ballads and they can't all be "up" tunes. Over that period of time, whittling it down was part of the process. I also kept in mind the dancers and what songs I felt were particularly suited to each of them. In other words, each song took on a particular face and body or bodies.

How did you settle on the title of your Sinatra ballet?

Fly Me to the Moon—it seemed to me from the nine songs I had chosen, certainly this was the most visual. You know, the cow jumped over the moon, Sinatra's hat went sailing around the moon, dancers try to leap to the moon . . . it just seemed like the right title for the ballet.

Can you tell me something about the dedication of your ballet?

I've dedicated this ballet to the memory of my dear and close friend, Nancy Stephens. It better be damn good or she'll come back to haunt me! As it was, when I read her the last list of songs for the ballet, she insisted that I drop one of the songs that she didn't like and add "The Way You Look Tonight." Obediently I made the change. Luckily, I liked that song myself.



Photo by Scott Goodman