ON THE LINE

The Creation of
A CHORUS LINE

ROBERT VIAGAS
BAAYORK LEE
THOMMIE WALSH
with the entire original cast

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There were many slips twixt cup and lip on this project. Without the following people, readers would not have this chance to sip:

Mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, friends, lovers—those still at our sides and those passed away.

Our agent Mitch Douglas, our lawyer Chandler Warren, our financial adviser Edward Greenberg, our friends the Original Company . . . and Michael Bennett.
With thanks

—BAAYORK LEE and THOMMIE WALSH

For Catherine Ryan who is a daily inspiration; the cornucopias Anthony and Lillian Viagas; Mitch Douglas who godfathered this book; David Spencer who arranged the ticket; and Murray.

—ROBERT VIAGAS

IN MEMORIAM

For Michael Bennett, Ed Kleban, Nicholas Dante, James Kirkwood, Joseph Papp, and three members of the original cast whose stories are told in this book: Cameron (Rick) Mason, Clive (Clerk) Wilson, and Michel Stuart. We dedicate the second edition of this book to their memory.

AUTHORS' NOTE

Aside from critics, only the nineteen dancers whose stories form the primary action of *A Chorus Line* are quoted in this book. This is their memoir exclusively.

Tennessee Williams wrote that in memory everything seems to happen to music. That's particularly so for the nineteen original cast members, for whom the familiar music of rehearsal and the new music being written to accompany their life stories formed a daily matrix for their memories. Those who read this book while listening to the original cast recording will come closest to sharing that experience.

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THE ORIGINAL PRODUCTION OF *A CHORUS LINE*

Presented by the New York Shakespeare Festival in association with Plum Productions
Conceived, choreographed and directed by Michael Bennett
Book by Nicholas Dante and James Kirkwood
Music by Marvin Hamlisch
Lyrics by Edward Kleban
Co-choreographer Bob Avian

Members of "The Line"

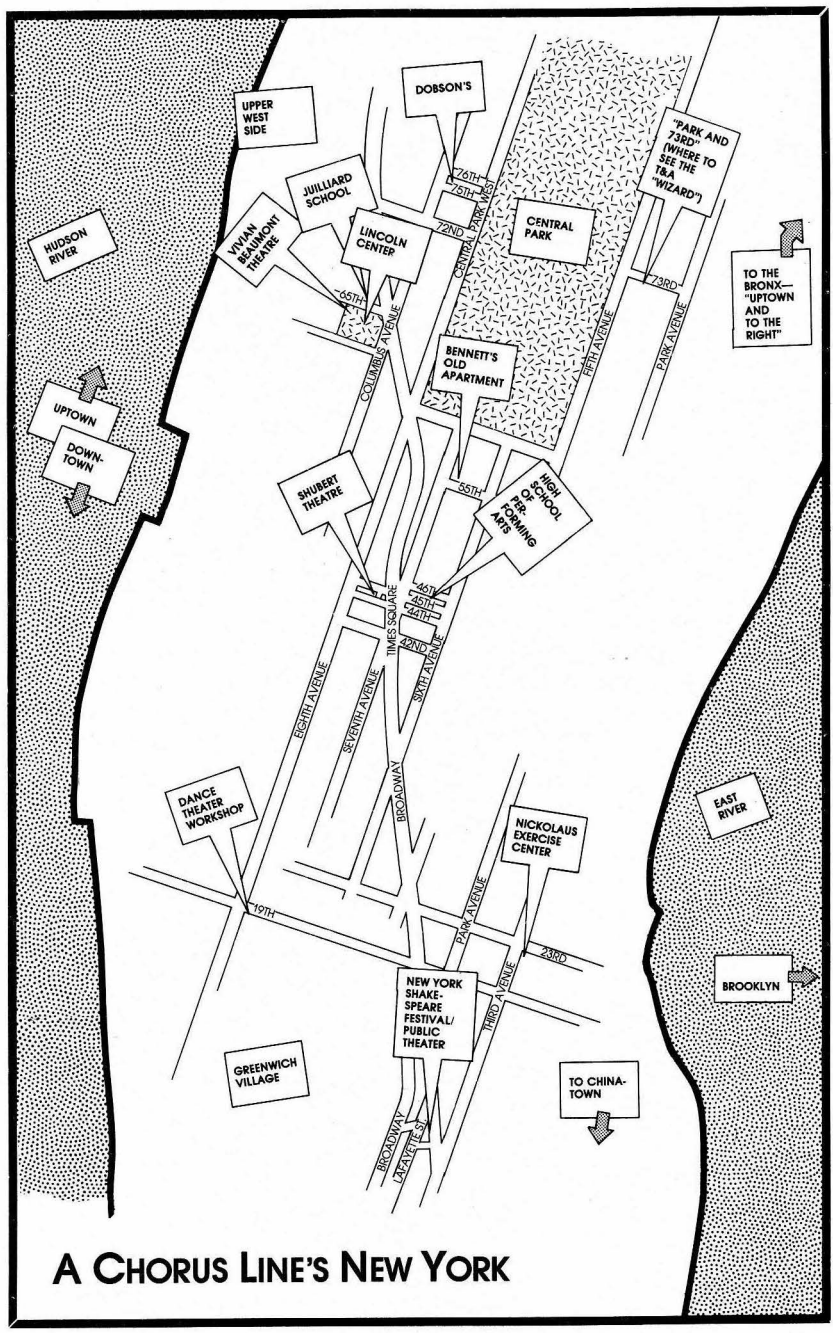
Renee Baughman as Kristine DeLuca
Carole (Kelly) Bishop as Sheila Bryant
Pamela Blair as Valerie Clark
Wayne Cilento as Mike Costa
Clive Clerk (Wilson) as Larry
Kay Cole as Maggie Winslow
Ronald Dennis as Richie Walters
Patricia Garland as Judy Turner
Ron Kuhlman as Don Kerr
Nancy Lane as Bebe Benzenheimer
Baayork Lee as Connie Wong
Priscilla Lopez as Diana Morales
Robert LuPone as Zach
Cameron (Rick) Mason as Mark Tabori
Donna McKechnie as Cassie Ferguson
Don Percassi as Alan DeLuca
Michel Stuart as Gregory Gardner

Thomas J. (Thommie) Walsh as Robert Charles Joseph Henry Mills III
Sammy Williams as Paul San Marco

*Understudies**

Scott Allen as Roy
Chuck Cissel as Butch Burton
Donna Drake as Tricia
Brandt Edwards as Tom
Carolyn Kirsch as Lois
Carole Schweid as Barbara
Michael Serrecchia as Frank D'Leo
Crissy Wilzak as Vicki
*also appearing in the opening number

Settings by Robin Wagner
Costumes by Theoni V. Aldredge
Lighting by Tharon Musser
Orchestrations by Bill Byers, Hershy Kay, and Jonathan Tunick
Music coordinator Robert Thomas
Music direction and vocal arrangements by Don Pippin
Associate producer Bernard Gersten
Rehearsal pianist Fran Liebergall



A CHORUS LINE'S NEW YORK

Perched in the balcony of Broadway's Shubert Theatre and surveying the stage, you'll see a white line painted from wing to wing. The edge of the stage is numbered, indicating dance positions.

The rest is black.

PREFACE
2006

The 2006 Broadway revival of *A Chorus Line* opens in something of a boom time for Broadway. More shows are waiting in the pipeline than there are theaters to house them. Things were very different in 1974, the year before *A Chorus Line* opened. Broadway wasn't just sick; the "Fabulous Invalid" had never looked so terminal.

Broadway's production pace had hit a high back in the 1926–27 season, when 264 shows opened. The number had been declining ever since. In the 1973–74 season there had been just fifty-four shows, the same number as the year before, which had been a new low. Just seven seasons earlier the number had been eighty-four. All too many of those fifty-four shows closed in less than two months.

But Broadway's problems in those days went beyond mere numbers. Look at the offerings that year. New musicals included *Molly*, *Rainbow Jones*, *Sextet*, and *Ride the Winds*. Are these ringing any bells with anyone? Thought not. There *were* hits: *Over Here!* showcased the two surviving Andrews Sisters. *The Magic Show* showcased magician Doug Henning. The Tony winner that year was *Raisin*, a musical based on *Raisin in the Sun*. There was some good work there. But the era of *My Fair Lady*, *South Pacific*, and *Annie Get Your Gun* seemed far away indeed.

It had been only a decade since Broadway show tunes showed up regularly in the Top 40, and only two decades since the Top 40 was mostly show tunes or songs by theatrical composers. But it seemed like an age. Rock had taken show music's place in the popular culture; movies and TV had taken over drama and comedy. The consensus was that Broadway musicals were going to meet the same fate as vaudeville and burlesque.

Attendance was down; receipts were down; and more and more theater marquees were sporting the See a Broadway Show for the Fun of It! sign that the theater owners used to keep the billboards from looking completely empty. Remember those? In the booming Broadway of the early 2000s, younger theater fans may have never seen those signs. Nowadays, shows must wait a season, and sometimes two, for the right-size theater.

Every one of the ten longest-running Broadway shows opened since that grim season of 1973–74. I remember this because I saw my first show in 1971 when I was fifteen years old. By the following year I was allowed to go to New York by myself, and I vividly recall at age sixteen standing in front of the well-lit Brooks Atkinson Theatre on Forty-seventh Street at a quarter to eight and being propositioned by a hooker. The vultures were circling Broadway.

So what happened in between? What brought Broadway back to life?

A Chorus Line was born in that period and proved instrumental in ending it. A group of dancers led by Tony Stevens and Michon Peacock—not Michael Bennett, at least not yet—had gotten sick of watching the employment pool dry up. They got together in January 1974 with a group of their friends and colleagues—professional Broadway dancers like themselves—to try to initiate their own project and get work for themselves. That urge—"Oh God, I need a job"—became the engine of the musical *A Chorus Line*. But the idea wasn't always a musical. The original plan was to create a dance company of some kind. Or a dance repertory company that would put on minimusicals.

A lot of people think *A Chorus Line* is about young dancers trying to break into the business, but of course it's not. It's about experienced pros looking for work. Experienced pros don't have a lot of time to waste, so in order to attract the kind of people who might make the embryonic Dancer Project a success, Stevens and Peacock needed a recognized name to act as bait and to give their highly nebulous concept an air of legitimacy.

They turned to their old friend Michael Bennett, already a wunderkind choreographer, already the center of a kind of cult that only great director/choreographers like Jerome Robbins and Bob Fosse seem to generate. Bennett agreed to let them use his name. He

also called some of his longtime dancer friends and disciples, and they got together late on a Saturday night, January 26, 1974, at the Nickolaus Exercise Center on Third Avenue in the East Thirties.

The agenda was simply to brainstorm ideas for the unspecified Dancer Project. Bennett, fatefully, brought a reel-to-reel tape recorder to record the conversation and decided to start things off by going around the room asking each person to give their stage name, their real name if it was different, and to tell a little about themselves.

Well, they never really got past that part of the evening. They told their life stories to one another and were fascinated. Before it was over, they realized these stories were truly dramatic, that they just might contain some of the stuff that musicals are made of.

The details are now the stuff of Broadway legend. *A Chorus Line* opened at the New York Shakespeare Festival in April 1975 and transferred to Broadway's most desirable theater, the Shubert on Shubert Alley, in July 1975, won the next year's Tony and Pulitzer, and ran sixteen years, becoming, for a time, Broadway's longest-running show.

We don't claim that *A Chorus Line* single-handedly kicked the hookers off Forty-seventh Street. But its success did start people in power thinking that maybe it was *worthwhile* to chase the hookers off Forty-seventh Street, that there was something on Broadway with a spirit, with a life, that was going to survive and prevail and possibly even at some point prosper.

There were a lot of reasons. First of all, it was a really good show, with a compelling dramatic engine, attention-grabbing characters, a completely original story, and a grand sense of size.

It was a comparatively young show. The central characters of the two biggest hits of the preceding decade were Dolly Gallagher Levi and Tevye the Milkman, both middle-aged. There's nothing wrong with that, but the Baby Boom was in its twenties at that point, and here was a show that was sexy, dramatic, and plainspoken to the point of being R-rated.

These were also contemporary characters, not set in Edwardian London or Bangkok or Anatevka. As the original *Playbill* said: "Time: Now. Place: Here."

The age thing is important because, as much as many of us would like to forget, *A Chorus Line* opened at the dawn of the disco age. The

costumes were really nothing more than rehearsal clothes . . . *but* they were also great, body-hugging outfits. They displayed young bodies. *Fiddler* had nothing like this.

The audience came away thinking, I want to look like that. I want to get in shape. I want to go out and dance the night away. You were cool if you had a *Chorus Line* T-shirt in a way you wouldn't have been with a *Hello, Dolly!* or *Irene* T-shirt.

The subliminal messages: Broadway was still alive; it was still about youth. It was *Babes in Arms* for a new generation. It was *Baby Boomers in Arms.* This was literally a bunch of kids who got together and put on a show. In retrospect, "What I Did for Love" serves as a much better Boomer anthem than "My Generation" or even "Age of Aquarius."

A Chorus Line used rock music, but not in the way *Hair* did. Up until then, there was Broadway music over here, derived mainly from miscegenation between operetta and jazz. And then over *here*, and separate, were rock musicals. *A Chorus Line* ended that musical segregation. At the time Marvin Hamlisch's music was revolutionary because he used rock as just another color on his musical palette. When a scene or character needed a backbeat, as in "Gimme the Ball," he got a backbeat. But the score includes traditional Broadway music, ballads, waltzes, one-steps, even a little chantey: "Mother, oh Mother . . ." *A Chorus Line* integrated rock.

The integration came at a human level as well. *A Chorus Line* had a credible black character, a credible Asian character, and a major gay character. The latter seems very matter-of-fact, even pro forma in the post–*Will and Grace* age. At the time, the idea of a character coming out and acknowledging he was gay—"admitting" is the way they termed it then—was astonishing.

Michael Bennett's staging drew from the new worlds of film and TV, which had previously been terra incognita for stage folk. Taking shows on out-of-town tryouts had become prohibitively expensive. *A Chorus Line* pioneered the cost-effective workshop method of developing new musicals, which, I have to say, proved the least successful of the show's innovations. Most shows now use a combination of workshop and tryout.

But the success of *A Chorus Line* lent legitimacy to the BMI Musical Theatre workshop, of which lyricist Ed Kleban was a member. That experience itself became a musical in *A Class Act*,

but his success encouraged his fellows, like Alan Menken, Howard Ashman, Maury Yeston, Carol Hall, Lynn Ahrens, Steve Flaherty, and many others who have served for a generation as the heart of Broadway songwriting.

Not only were all these innovations revolutionary in their own way. They also, each of them, opened a new door on something new that could work and succeed on Broadway. You could have musicals that sounded like Broadway, but also sounded contemporary. You didn't have to wear petticoats: you could wear tights or leotards, as they called them then. You could be sexy or profane in new ways. You could stage things in interesting new ways. Most important, you could use a whole range of new people, which meant a whole world of new stories. New music. New blood.

They said money is the blood of showbiz, and *A Chorus Line* proved to be a giant heart pumping it throughout the industry. Directly and immediately it pumped cash into one of the most innovative theater groups in the country, the New York Shakespeare Festival, which used it to create many new plays and musicals in the coming years. It also pumped money into the landlord Shubert Organization, which itself invested in many new projects.

By selling out for years, it even helped the rest of Broadway. Many people coming to New York wanted to see *A Chorus Line*. When they couldn't get a ticket, they asked the magic question: "What else have you got?"

Producers who otherwise might have gone into film or TV took a look at the weekly grosses in *Variety* and thought, if Joe Papp can do it, so can I. They took a look at those weekly grosses and for the first time in years thought, I could do a Broadway show and get RICH! Don't underestimate that urge.

People like Andrew Lloyd Webber, who had his own formula for mixing pop and classical, found a ready and eager audience. There were producers willing to take a chance on him.

People outside New York read about *A Chorus Line* on the cover of *Newsweek* and decided they wanted to see it. Several road companies eventually went out simultaneously, providing work for hundreds and eventually thousands of actors—not to mention entertainment for not just adults, but adults and their teens.

Raised on vicarious entertainment like TV and movies, where the actors weren't really there, just shadows and echoes, young audiences

found that Broadway could be like a live concert, dude! It was live and in person! A significant number of them fell in love with the aliveness of theater, which is its essence.

Broadway had a goal again, had a drive again; it could feel itself coming alive again. And all of us might not be here today if it weren't for that One Singular Sensation.

A Chorus Line finally closed on April 28, 1990, after 6,137 performances, just a month after the first edition of this book was published. For a time, *A Chorus Line* was the longest-running show in all of Broadway history.

Here is the story of how it came about, as told by nineteen members of the original cast, many of whom saw their life stories immortalized in the script.

—Robert Viagas

1.

REMEMBERING

If you glance at the logo of *A Chorus Line* you see a uniform line of faceless dancers.

But wait, no they're not.

Each one holds himself or herself a little differently. It's there if you look. The slim, strawberry-blond Trish Garland stands pony-ish and shy with one knocked knee. There's a very personal flair about Thommie Walsh's scarf, and a proud challenge in Ron Dennis's black chest. Statuesque Kelly Bishop stands with the sensuality of a fallen Miss America. Sammy Williams, the one with the moustache, seems to be asking for something. It's in the way he holds his head.

Before they speak, before they move, before they even appear on the stage, the dancers on that logo are telling who they are. They may be just another chorus line, but each is special.

Most reunions stir mixed feelings, but the ones taking place in apartments in Manhattan and Los Angeles among the original cast members of *A Chorus Line* had a special claim on ambivalence. They were getting together to try to piece together the story behind the making of their musical. Their memories became this book.

As of June 1989, *A Chorus Line* had been running for more than fourteen years, the longest run in Broadway history. It has played more than fifty-eight hundred performances, and grossed more than a quarter-billion dollars. It won the Pulitzer Prize and Drama Desk Award for best musical, and earned a total of nine Tony Awards.

None of those statistical riches begin to touch the spiritual payout to the more than five million people who have seen the show on Broadway, plus the millions more across the United States

and in fourteen foreign countries who have seen one of the many touring companies or stock productions.

In telling the backstage story of a choreographer and his assistant who are auditioning seventeen dancers for eight roles in an unnamed Broadway musical, *A Chorus Line* "has a common thread for people," said Garland, who created the role of Judy. "Even though we're different in appearance, shapes, sizes, we all need and want the same things. *Chorus Line* allowed you to feel human lives, all different lives, in a situation where they all had the same need. Everybody can put themselves on the line. Everybody in life has to audition, no matter what it's for."

The musical's great strength is the way it gets inside the private and emotion-fraught world of professional dancers, and makes their lives universal.

"The core was a very personal expression," said Donna McKechnie, who originated "Cassie," "and the more personal your communication is, whether it's the written word or an actor's interpretation, the more clearly it will be communicated. Emotions understand emotions. That was the heart of *A Chorus Line:* It's a brilliantly constructed show, very theatrical and very precise. But it's also very personal. It's about anyone who every grew up."

Dancers are particularly good subjects for this treatment. Perhaps because dancers make their art with nothing but their bodies and souls—with no canvas, marble, strings, or reeds to serve as intermediary—they tend to be even more intensely directed inward to their spirits and outward to the audience than painters, sculptors, or musicians.

Priscilla Lopez, the show's "Morales," said, "People talk about how powerful the childhood stories are, but what registers with me is how it *looks*. You're in blackness, in a black hole standing on a very narrow white line talking into nothingness, to this anonymous voice. There's nothing to hold on to. How much more vulnerable can one be? The show hits the vulnerability in everyone."

Backstage musicals are perennially popular because they are an environment where passions ignite easily. The reasons for that are no secret: collaboration and pressure. Perhaps more than any other art form, theater depends on collaboration. The greatest choreographer in the world is nothing without a dancer. With collabora-

tion comes inspiration, conflict, compromise, and synthesis—along with broken hearts and bruised egos. There's pain even at the birth of a success.

A Chorus Line was even more collaborative than most, owing to its unique genesis. Two dancers, Michon Peacock and Tony Stevens, had the idea for a project that would create work for some of New York City's top dancers. Choreographer Michael Bennett came aboard as the "muscle," and eventually attracted writers Nicholas Dante and James Kirkwood, composer Marvin Hamlisch, lyricist Ed Kleban, cochoreographer Bob Avian, and producer Joseph Papp of the New York Shakespeare Festival.

But the heart of the project was the dancers, the unbilled and almost completely unacknowledged collaborators in the writing of a Pulitzer Prize-winning drama. Their life stories are the basis of all songs and monologues. All dance steps were created for the way they moved, or created by them. From the first tape session in January 1974 until the morning of the first off-Broadway preview, April 16, 1975, the dancers worked with the writers to shape the hours of tapes into a workable stage show. *A Chorus Line* was forged in two workshops, one five weeks long in the autumn, the other fifteen weeks in late winter and early spring.

When it became apparent that the resulting show was a phenomenon, the original cast members began talking about making a permanent record of their collaboration. They wanted to tell their story in their own words. *A Chorus Line* shows a day in the creation of an unspecified musical. The *Chorus Line* dancers wanted to take that idea and expand on it, showing the months of hurly-burly it took to assemble and polish their show. They wanted to leave an oral history of what life was like backstage at the backstage musical.

Burgeoning careers postponed the project, but the spark was provided eight years later on September 29, 1983, by the massive celebration marking *A Chorus Line*'s 3,389th performance, surpassing *Grease* to become "Broadway's Longest Running Musical. Ever.," as it has been promoted by the New York Shakespeare Festival. Everyone who had ever appeared in the show professionally was invited to appear onstage at the Shubert Theatre in a special expanded version of the show. Among the approximately

350 dancers who appeared were the original cast members, some of whom had their first chance to see one another since the original run. Talk of the book was revived, and meeting dates set.

As they had in the beginning, the dancers were asked to talk on tape about their experiences. Out came a lot of happy memories, but also stories of rivalries, power plays, politics, anger over money and artistic differences, the press, and preferential treatment by one or another of the show's credited creators.

One thing that emerged intact was the dancers' feelings of cohesion, of having pulled together in a mighty endeavor. Rick Mason said, "When we were downtown there would be our bickering and our complaining and tempers would flare because we were in this vacuum for so long. But one day Trish Garland said to me one of the most beautiful things ever said about the company: 'We're like a family. We may bicker and fight in this company, but if anyone ever said anything about any of you, I'll fight to the nth degree to come to your defense.' We hated each other at times and we adored each other. It was so true, it was a very tight unit. What we went through bound us tight and no one could ever take that away."

A lot of myth grows up around a flop. Even more around a hit. Possibly because they are so appealing, such myths are almost impossible to uproot.

Thommie Walsh said, "I think this book will give the original people of *A Chorus Line* the last say—not even the last say, *their voice* of how they saw it unfold. I think we're all going to be totally different in the way we saw it. Because everybody went through different things. I saw everybody go through changes, divorces left and right, things with Michael, things with one another, things with friends. A lot of changing happened here."

Like any adventure, any journey, there are certain goals, but the sojourners never can be certain what they'll find along the way, whether they'll get to their destination, or whether they really wanted to go there at all. Each of the nineteen Originals started out looking for a job, and wound up meeting that fascinating stranger who turned out to be themselves. In making *On the Line* they hoped to meet that stranger again.

But there was more. A static of unresolved emotion needed to be organized, clarified, and amplified into a clear signal. Those

who felt slighted wanted to stake out a larger piece of the property. By playing it all out one more time, they hoped to exorcise some of the scarier ghosts, clear out the cobwebs, and to share the actual experience with the audiences who had poured out so much love to them.

Baayork Lee said, "It's important they realize that those people onstage are portraying *real lives*—that most of the original people were speaking about themselves. Most people think they're just seeing a play, and don't get it. They just see pure entertainment, and of course there's nothing wrong with that. But we gave so much of ourselves that we are a part of that show, and that show is a part of us. I'd love for people to see that. I would love for people to say, 'Oh my God, that person was talking about their father. This stuff isn't made up.' So that's why I'm here today. I want to let people know through this book that those stories are true, that all those ingredients were put in by *all of us:* the choreography, the lyrics, costumes, everything. As for a title for this book—'Nineteen Rashomon.' "

Lee and the others said those things into the microphone of a tape recorder. They were comfortable with that method. It had worked once before.

2.

THE FIRST TAPING SESSION (JANUARY 1974)

A lot of people think *A Chorus Line* is about "kids" trying to break into show business. That's misconception number one. *A Chorus Line* is about veterans of the limelight. Call them hoofers, call them gypsies—or just dancers, which they prefer. *A Chorus Line* is about Broadway dancers who have *been there,* and want more than anything to be there again and again, as long as they can. That is the way the musical that has won the Tony, Drama Critics Circle, Obie, and Drama Desk awards, and the Pulitzer Prize, was born.

A great number of people also think *A Chorus Line* is fiction. Misconception number two. Everything in the show is either adapted from or based on the details of someone's life story. In most cases, the details are taken directly from someone's life story.

Lastly, there is a general impression that *A Chorus Line* sprung fully formed from the forehead of director-choreographer Michael Bennett. Misconception number three. Though Donna McKechnie and Baayork Lee recall discussing the idea of a "dancers' musical" some years before *A Chorus Line,* the actual project was born in the minds of two dancers whose names rarely are brought up in connection with *A Chorus Line:* Tony Stevens and Michon Peacock, hardworking vets you might have seen tapping, strutting, and pirouetting in shows throughout the 1960s and early 1970s.

Their idea was not the result of divine inspiration. It was very

practical. Stevens and Peacock wanted to drum up some work for themselves and for their friends. It started out as simply as that. Ed Kleban's lyric in *A Chorus Line*'s opening number "I Hope I Get It" is very careful not to say, "I want this job"; it says, "Oh God, I *need* this job. I've got to *get* this job." Kleban and everyone else involved with *A Chorus Line* heard the plaint often. It provides the dramatic engine that drives the show, and it was the brass-tacks motivation for Peacock and Stevens when they invited their colleagues to a special meeting on January 26, 1974.

Statistics had them spooked. Broadway production pace had hit a high in the 1926–27 season when there were 264 new shows. The number had been declining gently ever since. In the 1973–74 season that had just ended the previous year (theater seasons traditionally run June 1 to May 31) there had been just 54 shows, the same number as the year before, which had been a new low. Just seven seasons earlier the number had been 84.

With less dancing work, the dancers also wanted to create a means for themselves to branch out. So-called triple-threat performers—those who can sing, dance, and act—are almost standard on Broadway today, partly owing to economics that discourage separate singing and dancing choruses. But triple-threats were unusual or overlooked in 1974. Peacock and Stevens invited dancers who wanted to show off or develop their other two threats. The desire to evolve into acting or singing is endemic among dancers, who know they really are athletes whose careers are unmercifully brief.

Trish Garland had worked with Peacock and Stevens before, and had chewed over the problem again and again, as had the previous two generations of Broadway dancers. Garland, who created the role of the bubbly Judy Turner in *A Chorus Line,* had appeared in a short-lived 1973 musical, *Smith,* with Nicholas Dante, a dancer who had a desire to write. She wasn't surprised when Peacock called and invited her to the taping. "We had been talking for a long time about how many dancers are multitalented. Like Nicholas they could write, or they could act or be costumers and set designers. We discussed the feasibility of getting them all together in a company."

Kelly Bishop (then using the first name Carole), who created the role of the sultry Sheila, said that the original idea, as Stevens

explained it to her, "was trying to get professional dancer-actor people together to be able to do productions as a resident company. That was very appealing to me, as an actress: getting a wonderful little group of people together who were really professionals who'd been around for a long time, to put on minimusicals or miniplays."

There it is, the original idea. Its building blocks were practical needs, but its foundation was sunk in old magic. Resident repertory companies of that sort are a recurring dream for theater people. In such companies everyone shares in the myriad tasks of putting on a play. Though appealing, the process rarely has worked in America, where star quality is quickly developed and encouraged, and where the gravitational draw of movies and TV tend to pull talented actors out of the orbit of a repertory company.

Still, Peacock and Stevens weren't naive. They knew their idea not only had value. It had a chance. The theater community in New York City is almost impossibly demanding, but it recognizes and appreciates professionalism. As in any closely knit village, its rivalries are intense, but it protects its own. Like the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, the Martha Graham Dance Company, Maurice Bejart's Ballet of the Twentieth Century, George Balanchine's New York City Ballet, American Dance Machine, and others, this new resident company consisting of the cream of Broadway dancers could find an audience—but only if its programs offered some specialty, were of impeccably high quality and stood on sound financial ground.

In this case, the new troupe's specialty would be its ability to capture the essence of the show dancer. How it would do that, Stevens and Peacock weren't sure, but they figured that the best way to decide would be to get everyone together to relate their common experiences and to decide how the project would proceed and what form it would take. But also like those other dance companies, it needed one crucial ingredient to lure dancers and financing of the correct caliber. It needed a star—a dancer, a choreographer, or a financial "angel."

Less than a year earlier Peacock and Stevens had appeared in the original cast of the Cy Coleman musical *Seesaw,* and knew that the director of that musical, Michael Bennett, was an unusually gifted choreographer with a bankable track record. More impor-

tant, he was one of those gurus to whom dancers seem irresistably drawn.

From Bennett's point of view, the call from Stevens and Peacock couldn't have been more perfectly timed. Long ago a dancer in the London production of *West Side Story,* a show regarded as something like nirvana by dancers, he had dreamed for some years of topping it. However, instead of doing another dancing show about teen gang members, he wanted to do a dancing show about dancers. Bennett had a tentative title and a vague concept; but he lacked a story, characters, and a reason for them to dance.

Without those things there wasn't much chance of a show coming about. Musicals were getting more expensive all the time. *Seesaw* in 1973 had cost a then unimaginable $1.25 million. By comparison, 1988's *Phantom of the Opera* reportedly cost $10 million. Nevertheless, there had been a time not too long before when a musical could come to Broadway for less than $100,000, and a single entrepreneur with a vision could produce one. In January 1974, that was a thing of the past. The dancers knew it and so did Bennett, so that even Bennett came to Peacock and Stevens's meeting unsure of what would come out of it. He hoped to encounter an idea. And he was in a position to exert an unusual degree of control over its outcome.

Though *Seesaw* had not been a great success, dancers loved it because of its stylish and flamboyant dance numbers. Among other *Seesaw* alumni invited to the first meeting were Wayne Cilento, Mitzi Hamilton, Crissy Wilzak, Thomas J. (later "Thommie") Walsh, Steve Anthony, and Baayork Lee.

A childhood friend and former dance partner of Bennett's who had launched her career as Yul Brynner's youngest princess in the original *The King and I,* Lee had helped stage the national company of *Seesaw* at the end of 1973 and was about to start work on the more modest bus-and-truck company. But she remembers Bennett telling her to wait.

"I didn't understand because I'd done all the auditions," recalled the woman who would create the role of the feisty Asian dancer, Connie Wong. "But he said, 'Don't worry, we're going to be doing something else, Baayork.'

"I remember getting a phone call from Michon Peacock say-

ing, 'We're going to have this session, a marathon all night.' I can't remember the phrasing of it."

The phone in Thommie Walsh's apartment rang, too.

"Tony called and said, 'We're doing this workshop next week and we're going to talk about being dancers. Michael Bennett is going to be there and we're going to dance. It's going to be a marathon. We're going to try to stay up all night, talk about life, and what it's like to be a dancer.' "

Walsh, memorable as the exuberantly extroverted Bobby, who breaks into people's houses not to steal anything—just to rearrange their furniture—remembers how, in that career-altering phone call, "I asked him a thousand questions because it sounded so fascinating. It was the kind of thing I felt I would be a fool to turn down. I might not have been thinking it would turn into a job, but I felt I was being invited to something I knew would be special, something very select."

Sammy Williams remembers that call well, because he was with Walsh when it came. Williams's first step on the road to his Tony Award for playing the conflict-filled gay dancer Paul was a casual one. "Thommie mentioned that I was in town and Tony said to ask me if I wanted to come along, too. I agreed and that's how I got invited. Talk about being in the right place at the right time!"

By various accounts, fifteen to twenty-two dancers were there the night *A Chorus Line* was born. Aside from hosts Tony Stevens and Michon Peacock there were eight of the nineteen dancers who eventually wound up in the show: Renee Baughman, Kelly Bishop, Wayne Cilento, Patricia Garland, Priscilla Lopez, Donna McKechnie, Thommie Walsh, and Sammy Williams. That number includes all three who later were to win the show's three Tony Awards for acting: McKechnie (Best Actress in a Musical), Williams (Best Featured Actor in a Musical), and Bishop (Best Featured Actress in a Musical).

One of those invited, Crissy Wilzak, would understudy the original cast. Another, Nicholas Dante, would cowrite the libretto with James Kirkwood.

Those whose voices appear on that tape and subsequent tapes include Mitzi Hamilton, Jane Robertson, Candy Brown, Jacki Garland, Steve Anthony, Steve Boockvor, Denise Pence (a.k.a. Denise

Boockvor), Andy Bew, Christopher Chadman—names that recur in Playbills of the period.

Most of them had either worked together before, or knew of one another. Like *Seesaw,* several shows of the late 1960s and early 1970s were prime sources for people at the tape session: *Promises, Promises* (Bennett, McKechnie, Lee, Bishop), *Rachael Lily Rosenbloom and Don't You Ever Forget It* (Bishop, Cilento, Robertson, Peacock, Walsh, Stevens), *Smith* (Garland, Baughman, Dante) plus *Sugar, Irene, Music! Music!,* and others.

One person who didn't make it to that first meeting was Baayork Lee. She was upset that Bennett hadn't invited her himself. "One night," she recalls, after a performance of *Henry, Sweet Henry* in Philadelphia, "Michael and I were sitting on the stairs talking about our future and what we wanted out of life. He turned to me and said, 'Baayork, do you want me to make you a star?' And I looked him square in the eye and said, 'No Michael, I just want to work.' And he said, 'You'll never have to worry about anything. I'll always take care of you, Baayork.' He always signed his cards to me, 'For life.' Michael always dealt with me on a one-to-one level. I had a misconception: I thought Michael had organized this meeting and asked Michon to make his phone calls for him. Also, I didn't want to talk about my private self to people I still considered strangers even though I had worked with many of them."

Her attitude would change, but in the meantime the rest were coming to quite different decisions.

"All I knew is that we'd dance and we'd talk and that Michael Bennett would be there," Garland said. "I went because my sister Jacki was going." The two Garland girls had helped and encouraged each other since they had come to New York to be dancers. "I trusted Michon, I respected Michael Bennett's work, and I knew it was a sure thing. I knew everyone who was going and I respected all these dancers who were being asked. It also piqued my interest."

The chosen time was midnight Saturday night, to give the folks working in shows a chance to shower and change. The chosen place was the Nickolaus Exercise Center on Third Avenue in the East Thirties that would be empty for the rest of the weekend. The idea was a combination group encounter session and pajama

party. Participants were told no specifics beforehand, the idea being that they could make up the rules as they went along. However, the unstructured nature of the meeting made everyone as nervous as anything else. No one knew what they were getting into.

"Thommie and I had major phone conversations but we didn't want to go," said Cilento, whose character, Mike Costa, would introduce the song "I Can Do That." "We decided that if one went, the other would. There was nothing certain that it was going to turn into anything. We held hands and we all went. I was scared to death."

"I wasn't working," said Renee Baughman, whose character, Kristine, would protest "I could never really sing." That January night, her protest was, "I was what I considered fat. I had not met Michael Bennett before, or rather I had not worked for him. I had auditioned for him. I was very much in awe of his work and I certainly didn't want to go to that rap session fat. Nicholas actually had to come to my apartment and take me by the hand."

Williams recalled, "I went over to Thommie's house beforehand and we all got stoned. It was Thommie and, I believe, Kelly and Priscilla. There were more but I don't remember who they were. It was snowing that night. I remember all of us huddling together in the cab, we were all so scared. You could feel the tension in the cab."

Bishop remembers the entrance to the dance studio, "up a steep and very narrow staircase."

"Every step was like going to your doom," Williams said. "I think being stoned helped make it even more scary."

At the top of the stairs was a door that opened on a rehearsal room with a barre. As cohost, Stevens was leading an exercise session. There were four lines of some of Broadway's firmest, healthiest, most graceful bodies. They worked out for twenty to forty minutes, allowing for stragglers.

"We were having fun," Williams recalled, "it was about midnight by then. Then, in the middle of this class, in walked Mr. Bennett in a hooded fur coat. Here was a man I could have died for."

Bennett was accompanied by Donna McKechnie, for whom he had created featured dances in *Promises, Promises* and *Company.* McKechnie, who would create the role of Cassie in *A Chorus Line,*

said she came as an encouragement to Bennett, who was trying to sort out his plans for the dancers' show. Though she speaks of how excited and hopeful Bennett was that night, she also remembers how he clutched her hand in the taxi on the way over. She was wrestling with other demons as well. "I was facing my own personal crossroads," she said. "I'd had a taste of what success can be like and it's too good not to go for it."

She had been in therapy following the breakup of her first marriage, and she hoped that this new project would help her "to put the fragments back, to be a whole person. Even when I had problems with low self-esteen, I always respected the work and music and dancing."

McKechnie was attracted by the prospect of plunging into the unknown. "It was something very different and I was ready for something to stir me up, to get me going again."

After Bennett's arrival, Walsh said, the mood of the meeting changed. "All of a sudden it became a dance *audition,* and we were all showing off in a fierce competition to be teacher's pet. It wasn't a party anymore. People who were friends suddenly were at each others' throats."

Priscilla Lopez was appearing in the Bob Fosse musical *Pippin* at the time. As Diana Morales, she would introduce "Nothing" and *A Chorus Line*'s hit song, "What I Did for Love." But on that snowy midnight, all she remembers was "Michael walked in and I got terrified. I didn't know what was going to happen. I just wanted to be good and I wanted him to like me."

Bishop's relationship with Bennett extended back to *Promises, Promises* in 1968. She recalls, "There was always a tremendous attraction between us. And a tremendous battle of wills, very much what 'Zach' [the director] and 'Sheila' have in the show. He was used to telling people what to do, and most people would do exactly what he said. I wouldn't. It was more my stubbornness than anything else, because very often he was right. Some part of me knew that, but I didn't want him to get away with just telling me what to do like I had no mind of my own."

Bennett and Bishop had often confided in one another. Their friendship had had its ups and downs, and was in a downswing on the night of the first tape session.

Looking around at the group Peacock and Stevens had assem-

bled, Bishop saw that they had picked consummate professional Broadway dancers with respectable resumes. There was no one there who'd never had a job before. "I think maybe the youngest, newest one was Steve Anthony," she said. "But he was an incredibly talented dancer, a wonderful dancer. There certainly were a good number of people in the dance community who were excluded who were excellent dancers, but they were people who were maybe not terribly special or interesting."

When Bennett arrived, he took a place next to Bishop "and sort of started stretching with me and made some comment about 'Oh God, I'm so stiff and so sore.' And I thought, 'This is interesting, he's making an effort to relate to me.' We then continued to dance for maybe twenty to twenty-five minutes, maybe not that long, and I was more than ready to quit. A few of the other people were out of shape. That's when Michael said, 'Now we're going to talk.' "

Adjoining the rehearsal hall was a dressing room or office from which the desks and tables had been removed. There were pillows, however, and Bennett sat on one, inviting the dancers to gather in a circle.

"There was a rush to Michael's side," Bishop recalled. "I picked the opposite end and I was surrounded by my small entourage, my buddies: Thommie, Sammy, Wayne, and Steve Anthony."

"I was shaking but it was exciting, thrilling," Williams said. "The anticipation of what was about to happen was so incredible. For the first time in my whole career I felt part of a group."

There was some thin carpeting, but even with the pillows it was uncomfortable. Yet no one left. Bennett brought out a big old reel-to-reel tape recorder and asked whether anyone objected if he taped the proceedings.

Clearly having taken over as chairman, Bennett turned on the tape and told everyone to relax. Walsh heard Bennett say "something like, 'Look, I don't know what this is, if this is a movie or a book or a musical, but I know that dancers have a lot to say. I've always wanted to do something about dancers.' "

Williams recalled, "He said we might have an idea for a book or a movie or a musical or a play—or nothing. He would ask us a series of questions and all he asked was that we answer honestly. We weren't being forced to answer anything we didn't want to. If

we didn't answer we shouldn't feel that we weren't going to get a job or that anyone was going to hate us."

According to Bishop, "Then Michael went through basically what Zach says. He wanted to start with your name, your real name if it's different, where you were born and when. He went through a speech about being very honest and very open and then he said something to the effect of, 'Oh, the women don't have to give their age.'

"I said, 'Wait a minute, you just went through a speech about being honest and being open, and if we're being honest and open, I don't see why the women can't give their age, too.' That made a couple of the women squirm.

"So he said, 'Okay, then it will be everybody's age.' And I said, 'And astrological sign,' because I always want to know. So he said, 'Okay, and your sign.' "

"Michael was real smart," Cilento said. "He said to us, 'Okay, I'll start with my life.' He broke the ice by talking about himself and then we all started talking, too. I thought Michael was great that night. I didn't really know him so there was nothing pretentious, nothing evil, nothing superficial. If he was acting or not, who knows? It was good that he put himself in the beginning of it, set it up.

"Basically he told a lot of heartbreaks and a lot of situations that he was in that were not perfect and ideal. . . . He talked about having relationships with men and not knowing if he was straight. He said he had had a relationship with a girl in *West Side Story* and she got pregnant by him. I think he set the precedent for us all to be very honest and very open."

Lopez agreed, "When I saw that he was being honest and open I figured I could do it."

Many of the first things said in the tape session made their way into the final text of *A Chorus Line*.

"When it came to my turn I said, 'My name is Kelly Bishop, my real name is Carole Jane Bishop, which I really hate. I was born February twenty-eighth, 1944, in Colorado Springs, Colorado. And I'm going to be thirty real soon. And I'm real glad.' Which is exactly what Sheila says, except that the name is different. We changed the date of Sheila's birth in order to make her a Leo."

Not everyone had Bishop's bravado.

"I was dreadfully scared at the tape sessions," Williams said. "They said all we want you to do is talk about yourself. I realized I couldn't talk about myself. I'm embarrassed about myself, how could I talk? I made Walsh promise to sit next to me the whole time, which he did, I think. It was painful, difficult, scary. I didn't even know how to talk to people in those days, I couldn't even carry on a decent conversation with anyone."

But right away something happened that opened the dancers' hearts. People started hearing their own stories coming from other people's mouths.

"We just started talking about dancing school and it seemed that so many people said things I could relate to," Baughman said. "I told my story very early on. I felt so free that night, I don't know why. People really listened and they didn't interrupt a lot."

"Oh my God, I'm not as special as I think I am," is Thommie Walsh's memory of his reaction to hearing the other stories. "I thought I was the only person who had a father who drank, a mother who thought she was Auntie Mame, and a sister who beat me up—all that stuff. I thought these were great problems, but I was hearing things even more staggering in that room."

Bishop said, "It was odd that in the first few minutes as we started around with our names, ages and such, I realized how little I knew about these people that I had worked with over and over and over again. I knew their current problems with a specific show, maybe, but I didn't know how old they were and I didn't know where they came from or whether they had brothers and sisters or their parents were dead. I was ready to talk. Once I decided I was going to go there I was fearless."

Natural performers in front of an audience of peers, they loosened up very quickly. "Kelly made us laugh," Baughman said. "It was so easy talking. I had never experienced so many of my emotions as I did that night. I was so fascinated by everybody's story. And the time went so quickly. I had never heard all of Nicholas's [Dante] story before, even though I had known him since I was fifteen. I had even met his parents. I knew Trish but I was always intimidated by her. She was so beautiful and talented. Who needed that in a girlfriend? I had worked with Steve Boockvor on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. He scared me to death, he was such a macho guy."

As the only married couple in the room, Boockvor and Pence talked about what it was like auditioning together and how they managed when one got a job and the other didn't. The other dancers were struck by the way Boockvor's assertive personality dovetailed with Pence's delicate one.

Priscilla Lopez recounted her horror stories about being humiliated by two teachers at the High School of the Performing Arts. Kelly Bishop described how she escaped from an unhappy childhood into a ballet world where everything was beautiful. McKechnie told what it was like to grow up with a father away in the military, and how she would fantasize that he was like an Indian chief, and he would invite her to dance.

Knowing what she knew about Bennett's own agenda—"he wanted to get behind what their lives were like, their experiences," McKechnie said—the session was paying off in gold. "Everybody realized how similar their lives were; growing up is growing up," she said. "If there was a theme to the session, it would have to be 'growing up.' That prevailed more than talking about dancing. It was the relationships you had as you grew up and went to dance school. Wayne [Cilento] had hilarious recollections of when he and Cathy got married. Those stories were just wildly funny and very moving."

The questions seemed to have the power to unlock all kinds of memories and feelings.

"My sister Jacki and I were the only ones there who had a childhood together," Garland said. "Not knowing where these questions were going or what it meant to anyone, I was worried that some were going to be detrimental to my relationship with my sister. She had no idea about how I felt about a lot of things or the hurts. I wasn't the kind of person who spewed them out. A lot of the questions were very personal so I didn't express myself openly for fear that I would hurt her. She had no idea of the pains that I felt and how deep the resentment I had for her went. And yet I loved her so much and she was older and she was talented. I always thought she was much more talented than I was and much prettier and all of those things.

"Jacki was much more open than I was. She didn't have that problem. She couldn't have hurt me in these sessions because when

we talked about our childhoods she was the special one, the one who always went first. Ultimately I guess I really did want to get rid of some of this stuff, and here I was being given the opportunity. But I couldn't do it. Some of the people were so open, going on and on, that I wanted to scream.

"Otherwise," Garland continued, "the tape sessions were very warm for me, It was womblike in some ways. I never feel comfortable talking about private things in front of a large group of people. I can razzle-dazzle you with a superficial answer, but when you come down to the basics . . . and we were talking about very raw emotions."

The questions and replies went around the room, more or less the way they do in the show, but not telescoped or intercut for pacing.

"When we finished that round," Walsh recalls, "then he [Bennett] said, 'We've gotten through the beginnings. Let's talk about ever since you remember dancing and why you wanted to dance up to the first time you kissed a guy or a girl.'

"I found it real hard to express myself," Walsh said, "because I had heard a lot of heavy stuff. Part of my sense of humor said, 'We need to change the mood of this room. Make it light, Thommie.' Another part of me also worried whether I should reveal myself like this in front of some people I barely knew. 'In my house I remember dishes flying'—stuff like that. But other people were saying things like that. I saw two sisters, Trish Garland and Jacki Garland, experiencing things for the first time in front of a lot of people. Well, that totally blew me away. I didn't have that kind of freedom. A few people had been in therapy, so maybe that was one reason some of them were so fluid and so free. Mine was relatively documentary. I did get into the twisted kid that I was, that I was this little demented villager."

But soon the intimate mood infected Walsh as well. "I remember getting up and just hugging Renee Baughman. She was my first dance partner in New York. We had done *The Ed Sullivan Show*. I think I did the same thing with Candy Brown because of all the people there, Candy was weeping. She had been class president and her shoes were always polished and her father made a good living and her mother always went to church and made her dresses and she was on the honor roll. . . . Her life was so perfect

that she started crying when it got to her because everyone else had such painful childhoods and she was raised like Ozzie and Harriet raised Ricky and David. Candy was the exception. Otherwise there was a common denominator of pain in that room."

As the characters do in the show, the dancers worried what they were going to say when they were called upon. "Everyone else's life was so much more interesting," Cilento said. "I just thought my life was so boring. I listened to Nick Dante before me and I thought, what could I say that could be anywhere up to what he talked about? You got so devastated just listening, everything was so interesting. When it got to you would it be as good, as interesting? Should you lie? Should you tell the truth? How could you spice it up?

"When it was my turn I just told my story," Cilento said. "I didn't beef it up. People were laughing—that was great. I think it was a real good experience. In the back of my mind I went in thinking, 'It's a job.' But then, being in that situation, I just couldn't even imagine how that could be a job. I couldn't imagine how any of us could make a show or a job out of it. It was just being in his company that was probably important at that time. And being among the dancers who were called—that was special."

Thommie Walsh said, "I listened to everybody's buzz. Michon, Tony, and Michael laid out huge sandwiches from the Stage Deli for us, we smoked grass or at least our little group did. People took catnaps which made me furious. *Who could sleep?*"

As dawn approached and passed, the dancers stretched out on the floor, propping their heads up on arms or pillows, listening to one another bare their souls. Lubricating the talk was the desire to please and impress Bennett. It helped the adrenaline.

Lopez recalls, "Since I was sitting at ten o'clock in the circle, I had to listen to all these other people. By then I'm dying to talk. Michael knew that I could dance and sing but he didn't know *me*, and this was my chance to let him know about me. So even though I related to the group, I was really talking to him. After all these years I felt I was telling Michael Bennett who I was, and he heard me."

Moreover, the others heard her, too. "I seemed to be entertaining because people were laughing," she said. "I cried only once, when I talked about the High School of the Performing Arts, about

when that woman, Gertrude Scher, told me I wasn't good, and I believed her. I was totally honest.

"The only time I felt a little inhibited was when people got into their sexual experiences. I hadn't had a lot of boyfriends and I felt kind of inadequate. The fact that these people were being so open blew my mind in a good way because I felt as if I had suddenly acquired all these friends. We all did have something in common: We all were dancers and we all wanted the same things. No matter how alone you had felt before, now you knew that other people felt as alone as you did. I had gotten to a point in my life where I was blocking out people I felt I had no time for. I figured they weren't really important anyway. But by the time the tape sessions were over, I was amazed that I had thought of crossing anyone off my list, thinking that they weren't good enough to relate to. I just fell in love with everybody."

Williams, who had been so anxious when he came in, drew courage from the frankness of those around him. "I remembered what had happened during my parents' divorce," he said, "and how the focus switched from being a son to being a replacement for my father for my mother. How at age seventeen that was a very big burden for me to carry and I couldn't cope with it. My mother kept saying to me, 'Why, why, why did he leave me?' And I kept saying, 'I don't know why. Don't ask me.' It was the first time that I had ever really talked about it to anyone. I answered all of the other questions, too."

Between the camaraderie, the wine, the smoke, the lateness of the hour, and the revolving questions and answers, the room was spinning in more than one sense. It became a pinwheel of bright eyes, long muscular legs in tights or dance pants, the perfume of sweat, high voices, a sense of intimacy . . . almost a lovers' intimacy.

3.

"CHILDHOOD"

In dancers' parlance, "childhood" is that period, innocent or not, from birth to one's first show. In this instance, "childhood" will extend to mean each dancer's history until they were hired for *A Chorus Line*.

The dancers were born between the early 1940s and the early 1950s, putting most of them in the first wave of the Baby Boom. They grew up in the years following World War II, in some ways a golden age for Broadway dancers. They came from New York City, upstate New York, New Jersey, Kansas, Michigan, Missouri, Vermont, Ohio, California, Florida, Arizona, Canada—even Trinidad. They made their Broadway debuts between the mid 1950s and the early 1970s.

They often were loners, usually smarter, more self-reliant, and more sensitive than the kids around them. But many of them got poor grades, born of an impatience with schoolwork. They wanted to dance. As is reflected in the show's song, "Hello Twelve, Hello Thirteen, Hello Love," childhood is a crucial and often painful time for dancers. Unlike most other professions, which can be chosen in late high school, college, or almost any time in adulthood, dancing is a career that often must be chosen before puberty. As a result, some of these dancers had established national and international reputations before they could legally obtain driver's licenses.

The key to their success was their ability to make themselves a part of a web of professional relationships centering on the major choreographers of the day: George Balanchine, Bob Fosse, Jerome Robbins, Ron Field, Michael Kidd, Peter Gennaro, Gower Champion, and others. The dancers' involvement with *A Chorus Line*