

ONE SINGULAR SENSATION

Marianka Swain explores the evolution and enduring popularity of *A Chorus Line*

“Every time I do the show, it feels like the first time,” explains Baayork Lee, the original Connie and choreographer Michael Bennett’s assistant, who went on to mount multiple productions of *A Chorus Line* worldwide, including the West End revival, opening at the London Palladium next month. “It’s a different journey with each cast. But the experience for dancers is universal – it transcends every language.”

Baayork believes the stripped-back production also contributed

to its global success: “It was one of the longest-running shows on Broadway and it’s had a rich life beyond that in schools and regional theatres, because you don’t need a helicopter or a barricade – refreshingly, it’s just people telling their stories, not a blockbuster movie on stage. However, it does mean there’s nowhere to hide; it’s all about the dancers, out there in the spotlight, and they have to commit body and soul to keep the audience hooked.”

Spotlighting dancers was the driving motivation of the show:

“Michael gave us a voice. Back then, dancers didn’t speak up – we did whatever was asked of us, whether that was standing behind a singer or somersaulting out of a window! Now, we contribute creatively and say if something hurts or doesn’t make sense.

“People are becoming more aware of what dancers go through, but there’s still a gulf between taking pictures of your kid in a tutu and understanding how hard we fight every day. If you attend open calls, like we had at the Palladium, there are 700 people queuing up, all talented, all trained, and it comes down to who wants it more.

“Michael’s genius was taking that common ground – we all audition, we’re all looking for the next job – and seeing the dramatic potential. He gave the audience a peek into that empty auditorium; we were the first reality show!” They also revolutionised the staging process by doing extensive workshoping, “which was a totally new concept. We’d dance in the mornings and in the afternoons Michael asked us questions: why did we start dancing, what happened when we were five, six and so on; that’s the heart of the show, the characters struggling, loving, growing, changing through dance.

“He was clever about casting a range, so an audience is bound to respond to at least one of the characters, and [composer] Marvin

Hamlish suggested grouping stories into montages, otherwise it would be a ten-hour show!”

Baayork admits it’s challenging playing yourself – “you don’t have a character as armour. But theatre’s not for the weak! You have to have confidence, as you’re rejected all the time. We do a lengthy audition process, as we want to put dancers through the mill and search for those characters; they’re reinvented each time, but the ideal is keeping that

strong framework and the new cast bringing themselves to it.”

Each cast member also needs a range of skills. “The ‘triple threat’ didn’t really exist before *A Chorus Line*; they were separate disciplines. We did all three because we were telling our stories, but I’d only trained in dance – I wouldn’t get cast today! Now, schools arm performers with all those skills, so the standard gets higher all the time – it’s really gratifying to see new generations ►

WHOSE LINE IT ANYWAY?

To coincide with the 2006 revival, the original 1975 Broadway cast contributed to a wonderful memoir, sharing the process of developing the Tony Award-winning show and the effect it had on their lives. *On the Line: The Creation of A Chorus Line* is published by Limelight Editions.



build on what we started.”

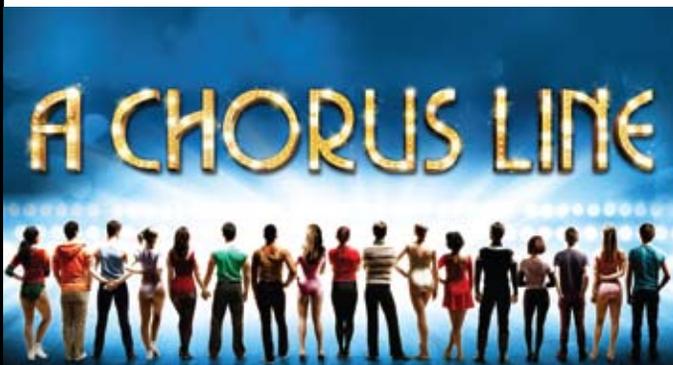
Baayork notes many of the show's issues are still pertinent. “We're more open about homosexuality and so on, but the raw emotion of Paul's monologue gets me every time, and we haven't solved all those problems; how you look is still part of whether you get cast, unfortunately. I've started a company for Asian artists, as a lot of performers still find it hard to get work outside of *Miss Saigon*!

“I also help dancers make the transition between performing and a second career. *A Chorus Line* gave me an incredible opportunity: I learned so much from Michael and Bob Avian, and they trusted me to put on the show around the world, which led to me creating my own work. Now, I take on interns and try to inspire them to do the same.

“Michael was the freest choreographer I've ever worked with – he would ask a drummer to play and just dance and dance. I was used to structure and hierarchy from the School of American Ballet; I never thought dancers could create for themselves. I basically became his assistant because I could scribble everything down the fastest! He gave us the freedom to dance and express ourselves, but also the discipline of structuring a piece and controlling our own destinies.

“My favourite number in *A Chorus Line* is ‘What I Did For Love’ – we've been given this passion for dance and, no matter how challenging it is, you have to follow your dream. I see that hope in every new cast and it just warms my heart. I'm so grateful for the gift of this show.” ●

WIN TICKETS TO A CHORUS LINE



Auditions are under way for a new Broadway musical. For everyone present, it's the chance of a lifetime. It's the one opportunity to do what they've always dreamed of – to have the chance to dance.

Based on true stories, *A Chorus Line* is the story of the auditionees who describe the events that have shaped their lives and their decisions to become dancers.

Told through captivating song, riveting drama and stunning choreography, *A Chorus Line* revolutionised Broadway, becoming one of the longest running musicals in New York theatre history, breaking records, winning nine Tony Awards, seven Drama Desk Awards, the New York Critics' Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

Now, for the first time since its award-winning London season premiered in 1975, the original creators join forces to bring this legendary musical to the world-famous London Palladium.

Boasting such classics as “One (Singular Sensation)”, “What I Did For Love” and “At The Ballet”, *A Chorus Line* is an iconic musical masterpiece – and we have three pairs of tickets as competition prizes. The tickets are valid for Monday – Thursday performances until February 18, 2013, subject to availability. There is no cash alternative to the prizes, they are non-refundable and non-transferable and not for resale. For a chance to win, send the answer to the question below, with your name and full postal address, to the address on page 5, or email dancetoday@dance-today.co.uk by January 18, 2013:

When did *A Chorus Line* first premiere in London?

A Chorus Line is at the London Palladium from February 5, 2013. For more information or to book tickets, visit www.achoruslinelondon.com or call 08444 122 957.