



The original cast of
A Chorus Line performs
“One” in the show’s finale.
Photo by Martha Swope.
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STEPS IN TIME

**Legendary
Dance
Numbers
from
Broadway
History,
Part One**

BY CARA JOY DAVID

Even in the era of small-scale musicals, there is still nothing as definitively Broadway as a big dance number. They perfectly convey the razzle-dazzle and, also, the effort and precision it takes to get on a Broadway stage. Here, in the first of a two-part series, *Encore Monthly* looks at five of theatre’s most iconic dance numbers.

“One,” *A Chorus Line*

A Chorus Line is a rare musical that is bookended by two of its most iconic numbers: “I Hope I Get It” and “One.” Both are often parodied. But it is “One” that truly showcases what an ensemble does when they work together.

“The opening number is very grounded and earthy,” said Baayork Lee, original *Chorus Line* cast member and keeper of the *Chorus Line* flame, having staged productions around the world. “There are some jumps, so the director [the character Zach] can see some variety, but it is very grounded. Then there is ‘One,’ which is very elegant. It goes back to the 1940s.”

None of the steps in “One” are particularly complicated—while it is simplistic to boil down the creation of co-choreographers Michael Bennett and Bob Avian to “hand, hip, hat, step, point, kick” that is much of it. What makes the number so powerful is its emotional impact. The cast has been baring their souls and showcasing their individual talents, but that isn’t what the job is about. The dancers must fall into line in the end—becoming, well, one.

As has been well-documented, *A Chorus Line* was fashioned from the stories of real dancers, many of whom wound up in the original cast. Each of those cast members were originally supposed to have a sparkly showcase in the finale—Lee was going to be

on a tall ladder in a long-flowing gown; Kay Cole was going to be on a piano. But that never got staged. Time ran out. The first version of the finale to hit the stage went completely in the opposite direction according to Lee, with each cast member wearing blond bob wigs as to look exactly the same. Those were soon gone, but the idea that the dancers should act uniformly, in the same sparkly costumes, remained.

“Michael Bennett knew how to build a number,” said Lee, who served as the original dance captain and the original assistant to the conceiver, co-choreographer and director. “He said: ‘You’ve spent all this time to be in the chorus, you need to look like one.’”

“Audition,” *42nd Street*

Come and meet those dancing feet! At the start of *42nd Street*, for a few seconds the curtain remains only slightly raised so the audience can do just that. It focuses the audience on the essence of the number—the sound of the feet hitting the floor, the sight of the legs moving in sync. The youthful energy in the number perfectly sets the scene of director/choreographer Gower Champion’s loving tribute to showbusiness ambitions.

The number was crafted to include steps that might be included later in the show-within-a-show, *Pretty Lady*: Different time steps, rolling shuffles. Just as when a real-life creative team gives auditionees relevant steps, so is it in the “Audition” number. The staging is so seared into people’s brains that when Randy Skinner was providing new choreography for the Broadway revival, it was one of the few numbers he did not overhaul.

“The dancing comes together with the melody to lift an audience,” said Skinner, who was a dance assistant on the original produc-



tion. “That is what you hope for when you are putting on a show. That was there.”

Skinner credits the enduring popularity of the piece to the universality of striving for your dreams and the power of tapping. “Flamenco and tap dancing are the two art forms that are auditory as well as visual...people have this inherent love for rhythm,” he stated. “Anytime you have a tap number that is well constructed and the audience can really hear the rhythm, there is an excitement to that you inherently get from people.”

That auditory element also makes the number extremely hard to execute—the more dancers that get onstage, the greater the risk that if one is off by even a millisecond, the sound gets muddled. Drills and dance assistants are essential to every production. The dancers in *42nd Street* really do dance almost until it seems their feet will fall off, but, in the end, what a show they have.

“We’ll Take A Glass Together,” *Grand Hotel*

The ever-inventive director-choreographer Tommy Tune was at his best with this exuberant number, featuring a dying character, bookkeeper Otto Kringlein, reaching for life and liquor. Though Tune had help—the number was developed around the skill set of the original star, the late Michael Jeter. In “We’ll Take A Glass Together,” Kringlein experiences uninhibited joy, perhaps for the first time in this life. He performs a rubber-limbed Charleston, often leaning on a liquor “bar,” which is in fact

essentially a ballet barre. The ensemble behind him is perfectly in sync, but Kringlein is all over the place, sometimes dancing in conjunction with his drinking mate, the suave Baron Felix Von Gaigern, but often wildly veering from side to side, taking up the whole space with his happiness.

The number might have been very different. Austin Pendleton was offered the role before Jeter, but passed because of other commitments. Pendleton credits Jeter with giving “the finest performance [he has] ever seen in a musical.” Pendleton himself did eventually do it. He got hired to go in during Jeter’s vacation. Then he got fired before beginning rehearsals after Tune heard him sing at a benefit. Then he got hired as the first replacement for Jeter. Then he got fired after Tune saw him perform briefly during his first dance rehearsal. Then, when Jeter’s first replacement, Chip Zien, was leaving, Pendleton got the call to audition, and was given the role, finally actually appearing onstage in a performance of *Grand Hotel*.

It was indeed the super-speed dance that was hardest for him to master. “The number repeats itself, the patterns, in subtle ways,” Pendleton explained. “In that particular number they’re called turns, when it starts going in a circle. When Chip was still in the show, we would go out after and I’d say: ‘In rehearsal today, I totally fucked up.’ And he’d say: ‘You forgot what circle you were in, right?’ Because they’re almost, but not quite, identical.”

In the end, for both Pendleton and the au-

dience, “We’ll Take A Glass Together,” is, as he puts it, “as exciting a number as I’ve ever seen in a musical.”

“America,” *West Side Story*

Considered a landmark piece in American theatre as soon as it premiered in 1957, *West Side Story* will forever be known for many reasons, but one is the way it used dance to drive the plot forward in a dramatic fashion. However, the best known (and most parodied) dance is a playful number: “America.” It still makes a statement though. As Rosalia yearns for the tropical shores of Puerto Rico, and Anita and the other female members of the Sharks gang sing of their love for America, each choreographed swish of a skirt, outstretched arm and stomp of a foot sends a message. The humor and joy in Anita’s kicks, hand gestures and head tilts hide a real tension. It is a tension made apparent in the combination of ballet and flamenco movements utilized—the unconscious mixing of traditions, seen in the steps and the multi-layered rhythms. The number builds throughout, the second half punctuated by two instrumental sections that give the cast a chance to dance without catching its breath. It all ends with the majority of the ladies coming downstage, doing the highest of high kicks straight into a drop to the floor and then, as a final flourish, striking a pose.

West Side Story as a whole will always be understandably identified with conceiver, director and co-choreographer Jerome Robbins. “I called him ‘The Man’ or ‘Big Daddy,’” origi-

nal Anita, Chita Rivera, said. “He made us really believe that we could act. I mean, dancers do know that they are actors without words. We know that we know we have to tell the story without the words. He made it absolutely clear. He taught us how to tell the story better than we ever told it before.”

However, it was co-choreographer Peter Gennaro who primarily is responsible for “America.” But Robbins did put his stamp on the number.

“It was originally boys and girls,” Rivera explained. “We took it into Jerry’s rehearsal hall, and he saw it and he went: ‘OK, you guys can go.’ We left the room; he and Peter stayed. The next time we saw Peter, the boys were gone and the girls were just in it. And that number has never been better than it is with just the girls.”

Of course, it is now best known for the film version, in which the male and female Sharks perform the number. But, either way, the spirit of “America” survives.

“Rich Man’s Frug,” *Sweet Charity*

“Rich Man’s Frug” is primarily director/choreographer Bob Fosse’s way of creating atmosphere. In the number, Fosse presents three different takes on the popular 1960s dance craze The Frug. A woman walks out in a high, tight ponytail, black dress and white gloves, flanked by two men. She leads with her pelvis out so far that her back is almost horizontal to the floor. This section, subtitled “The Aloof,” showcases Fosse’s skill with isolated motions. There are breakout mo-

ments, but, on a whole, there is a restraint. Then comes “The Heavyweight,” where pelvic thrusts are accompanied by quick punches, culminating in a knockout line. During “The Big Finish” the music becomes more joyous, as do the performances. The dancers begin by behaving as a clump exclaiming “yeah, yeah.” Soon the motions become wilder and big solos receive showcase. Here the audience sees the most erratic head rolls—the ponytail flies everywhere at a lightning pace.

“Fosse had a vision of doing skits,” said Suzanne Charny, who was the film’s lead Frug dancer, and also performed the role in Vegas. “He worked like Toulouse-Lautrec—his paintings and characters were of the time, but highly stylized. For Fosse, the vision came first and the sets came and then the music came and we ultimately did a lot of steps to the music because the music brought something out.”

The original Broadway “Frug” lead, Barbara Sharma, had a cuter take on it, according to Charny (who was also in the original cast). She wanted it to be more sensual.

“I used to go to the clubs to check out the scene,” she said. “It was all about the attitude. I had to be cool and sensual. The undulation of the arms needed that. ‘The Aloof’ called for it.”

Charny got the film because Fosse and Gwen Verdon (famed original *Charity* stage star, Fosse’s wife and the picture’s uncredited assistant choreographer) fought for her. Verdon also had a very direct impact on Charny’s performance. The gown costume designer Edith Head provided was one where the se-

quins were sown in a pattern, making it impossible for them to move with the body. Verdon was there for the fitting, ran to her hotel room, grabbed her own Norell gown and brought it over. She put it on Charny, took a scissor to it, and the rest is cinematic history.

It took six to eight weeks to film “Rich Man’s Frug,” with Fosse providing his traditional “your pinky is up” or “your wrist is tilted” feedback the entire time. Charny was wearing shoes half-a-size too small—her size wasn’t available—and developed a huge bump underneath the ponytail, which became infected. But she still loved the experience.

And, as a result of that experience, Beyoncé even emulated Charny. “Rich Man’s Frug” served as the foundation for the “Get Me Bodied” music video, with Bey herself playing the lead “Frug” dancer. There is perhaps no better evidence of a number’s impact.

Part Two of this story will appear in the next issue of *Encore Monthly*. 📖

Opposite Page Left: *42nd Street* on Broadway. Photo by Martha Swope. New York Public Library

Opposite Page Right: David Carroll and Michael Jeter with the chorus of Broadway’s *Grand Hotel* performing “We’ll Take a Glass Together.” Photo by Martha Swope. New York Public Library

This Page Left: Chita Rivera in the original Broadway cast of *West Side Story*. Photo by Martha Swope. New York Public Library

This Page Right: The cast of the film *Sweet Charity* perform “Rich Man’s Frug.” Dancer at center is Suzanne Charny. Photo courtesy Universal Pictures