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A Chorus Line

The Benetton of Broadway Musicals

You do step-kicks in America and the audience applauds.
It's depressing
—Michael Bennett

When *A Chorus Line* closed on April 28, 1990, it had racked up an astounding 6,137 performances, making it, at the time, the longest-running musical in Broadway history. Grossing almost $150 million on Broadway alone, the show was a financial juggernaut and went on to earn over $280 million on tour and internationally and was seen by over 6.6 million people in its fifteen-year run.[1] The show won the hearts of its audiences from the moment it premiered downtown at the New York Shakespeare Festival in 1975 before transferring to the Shubert Theatre on Broadway, where it walked away with nine Tony Awards in 1976 including Best Musical. It even garnered the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, not a poor take for a show about a group of dancers auditioning for a Broadway musical. Of course, a great deal of *A Chorus Line*'s magic and staying power was due to its conceiver, choreographer, and director, Michael Bennett, whose staging was so integral to the show's concept and structure that even today most productions of the musical still re-create his work. The musical also featured a tuneful score by Marvin Hamlisch (his first original score for Broadway) with lyrics by Edward Kleban, plus a funny and moving book by James Kirkwood and Nicholas Dante. It was all of these elements working together that made *A Chorus Line* the hit it was.

But is there more that accounts for the musical's success? On its surface, *A Chorus Line* is about what it means to be a performer on Broadway, but

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what drives the show forward is the racial politics of the seventies, which were infused with ethnic multiculturalism, new sparks from a then-burgeoning gay rights movement, and the previous decade's civil rights activism. This ethos, subtly woven into the fabric of the show, imagines a world in which everyone has an equal chance to succeed in life and where one's racial or ethnic background is not a hindrance to that success but an identity to embrace and a reason to celebrate. Though some of these factors are never explicitly referenced, they color and shape the form, characters, and content of this groundbreaking work and reveal just how central race is to the American musical. In imagining a world in which race has no impact whatsoever on the hiring process or the social forces that order our world, *A Chorus Line* offers lasting appeal to audiences of all backgrounds because it serves up the American Dream in all its unattainable glory.

A Chorus Line epitomizes a new genre that blossomed in the seventies known as the "concept musical," whose action is not structured by a significant forward-moving plot but rather by an overarching concept or idea (in this case, dancers auditioning for a musical).[2] Nothing particularly noteworthy happens in *A Chorus Line.* A minor romance transpires between a dancer (Cassie) and the director (Zach). Paul, a gay Puerto Rican dancer, is injured. Performers are selected and rejected. The musical is confessional in nature and structure, with each dancer singing and talking about his or her life.

A Chorus Line opens with a mass audition already in progress in which the dancers express their desire to be picked for the job ("I Hope I Get It"). This initial sequence results in the selection of seventeen individuals, eight men and nine women, who tell us about where they grew up, how they came to dance, their moments of sexual exploration, and the difficulties of being a dancer. From this information and based on how well they move, Zach, the show's director and choreographer, will select a final eight who will comprise the chorus line of the unnamed new musical he is casting. "I need people that look terrific together—and that can work together as a group," Zach explains. A straightforward enough request, which he then immediately complicates: "I think it would be better if I knew something about you—about your personalities."[3] This desire for personal, intimate details about the dancers' lives is a more unusual request, a strange audi-

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tion tactic if there ever was one. But more than that, placed side by side, these requests are completely contradictory. The first privileges the group; the second, the individual. Which matters more, and how are they to be reconciled? This tension between being part of an ensemble versus being the star is what *A Chorus Line* is all about, and it directly feeds into the show's racial politics, which are constructed in terms of the individual and the group.

A Chorus Line, using the metaphor of the audition, is a comment on what it means to be human: the desire to be picked, the desire to be loved, the desire to "make it" in the world. But the show reveals a further struggle, one that is a bit more specific to the world of dance and theater yet still pervasive in society in general: the conflict between establishing one's own individuality (being a "singular sensation," as one of Kleban's famous lyrics puts it) and belonging to a larger unit (in this case, a chorus line). Being part of a chorus line means conforming to the group, blending in, not drawing attention to oneself. It's the opposite of what it means to be the star of the show, to be an individual. The show's creators play with this concept all evening, having the characters tell us detailed, moving stories about their lives to the point where we feel as if we know each of these individuals intimately. And yet, given that they are relegated to a chorus line, their personalities are essentially vaporized, made meaningless by the anonymity that the line imposes on them.

The impact of race on this entire conflict is huge but has been an overlooked aspect of the musical. While the racial and ethnic backgrounds of many of the characters are brought into sharp focus, it's never made clear how these backgrounds are meant to fit into the final chorus line. In other words, how are individuals who are part of a minority, whether that group be ethnic, religious, racial, or sexual, supposed to assimilate into the larger whole—in this case, a chorus line, an artistic construct historically predicated not just on the uniformity of choreographic movement but also on the racial homogeneity of the line's members? How does one situate this legacy of racial separatism in light of *A Chorus Line*'s 1970s multicultural politics of diversity?

To get at the complex ways in which race is treated in the show, a look at the musical's origins is helpful. Termed "theater vérité" by some critics, *A Chorus Line* is based on the lives of actual dancers who first met in

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January 1974 in a midnight rap session with Michael Bennett. Long into the night, the group of approximately twenty dancers shared stories about their lives, their disappointments, their hopes, and their fears.[4] Bennett taped it all, ultimately using some of the actual stories from that session for the libretto, which Nicholas Dante and James Kirkwood wove together and spruced up with some uncredited jokes from Neil Simon. Some of the original participants in the all-night session, which would be repeated in February 1974, included Carole Bishop, Wayne Cilento, Priscilla Lopez, Donna McKechnie, Thommie Walsh, and Sammy Williams, all of whom ended up in the original cast of *A Chorus Line* playing characters that were based on their own lives.[5] After these sessions, Joe Papp, the head of the New York Shakespeare Festival, gave Bennett and his team months of workshop time, an unprecedented creative opportunity, so that they could develop the work in an unrushed fashion. The result was one of the biggest hits in the history of the Shakespeare Festival and Broadway.

Like the actors who attended the late-night sessions, the characters who make up *A Chorus Line*'s quilt are a diverse cross-section of America, each marked individually by name, age, and place of birth. What the libretto also takes time to note, though, is the race and ethnicity of the characters, particularly those who aren't white. In fact, virtually *half* of the chorus line members are marked as being non-WASP. "Mike Costa—it used to be Costafalone" discreetly reveals his Italian heritage by telling us about his less-Italian-sounding name change, Connie Wong "was born in Chinatown—Lower East Side," and Greg informs us that his "real name is Sidney Kenneth Beckenstein. [His] Jewish name is Rochmel Lev Ben Yokov Meyer Beckenstein, and [his] professional name is Gregory Gardner." Despite the fact that Greg could pass as WASP if he wanted to—he's even chosen a stage name for that very purpose—in the show's logic of purposely foregrounding difference, he is marked as Jewish. Perhaps one of the most unusual admissions in the initial go-around is Richie's. He tells us: "My name is Richie Walters. I'm from Herculaneum, Missouri. I was born on a full moon on June 13, 1948. And I'm black."[6] Why does Richie provide us with this last bit of info? As originally played by Ronald Dennis, a dark-skinned African American, he would certainly read as black. Is Richie's reminder actually a nod that he understands that the world of casting is often *not* color-blind and wants to remind Zach of this? In the show, white-

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ness, as in real life, remains unmarked, and the racial background of the white dancers goes unspoken. The 2006 Broadway revival of *A Chorus Line* played with this racial silence and cast African American performer Deidre Goodwin as Sheila, a role usually played by a white actress. There was nothing in the script to suggest that Sheila couldn't be black, but this casting decision reveals how race only seems significant when it's actually marked (casting Connie Wong with a black or white actress wouldn't make much sense, for example).

Paul and Diana, the two Puerto Rican characters in the show, meanwhile, have divergent takes on their identities. Paul tells us that his stage name is "Paul San Marco," but that his real name is "Ephrain Ramirez" and that he was "born in Spanish Harlem." Diana, on the other hand, says, "My name is Diana Morales. And I didn't change it 'cause I figured ethnic was in."[7] These two admissions, coming back to back, reveal opposite strategies. Diana decides to take advantage of 1970s multiculturalism and embraces her identity. Paul also goes multicultural, but does so by becoming Italian, a white ethnic, rather than a person of color:

> ZACH. For one thing, if you're going to change your name—why go from a Puerto Rican name to an Italian one?
> PAUL. 'Cause I don't look it. . . . People say, "You don't look Puerto Rican, you don't look Puerto Rican." But I am.
> ZACH. So you figured you looked Italian?
> PAUL. I, ah—just wanted to be somebody new. So I became Paul San Marco.[8]

Does Paul perhaps recognize that white dancers—a category that now includes Jews and Italians—might have a better chance of landing a job than dancers of color? Paul's desire to pass as white seems to parallel the fact that at the beginning of the show, he also wants to pass as straight, feeling uncomfortable discussing his homosexuality.[9] In the end, the lineup of dancers includes four people of color, two of whom could potentially pass as white if they chose to do so, and another four (three Italians and one Jew) who are marked as white ethnics, providing us with a contrast to the typical lily-white chorus line.

Was there ever before a chorus line in any real Broadway musical that

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actually looked like this? Probably not. It's as if the creators were purposely trying to make a statement about ethnic and racial inclusivity at this particular moment. If anything, that's the show's irony. *A Chorus Line* deconstructs the old-fashioned white version of what a chorus line is but in its place substitutes a "United Colors of Benetton" coalition of dancers, a vision that is both utopic in imaging a theatrical landscape that did not yet exist and naïve in its ability to consider the ways in which the real world's engagement with race shaped hiring practices, including on Broadway.

This emphasis on the cast's diversity, racial and otherwise, turns *A Chorus Line* into a theatrical social document writ large. With resonances of Studs Terkel's documentary text *Working*, published just three years earlier in 1972, in which Terkel captured the day-to-day lives of average American workers, *A Chorus Line* clings ferociously to the American Dream of hard work and determination. And yet, while that might be the overt thematic of the show, it's an ideology that clearly does not play out in real life, or for that matter in the Broadway musical, because as much as we'd like to believe that the best, most skilled, or most talented person will get the job, we sadly live in a country where race, physical beauty, gender, and sexual identity, to name just a few categories, still factor as determining elements in the hiring process. The Broadway musical is not exempt from this hard fact, particularly the chorus line. In fact, the entire concept of the chorus line was rooted in the idea that the chorus members should demonstrate not only unity of skill, talent, and choreographic execution but also *uniformity of race.* In an early moment of its existence, the chorus line was a theatrical element that at its core was defined by white racial homogeneity.

To understand the challenge that *A Chorus Line* poses to the history of chorus lines, we need to look back at what was probably the most famous early manifestation of the chorus line: Florenz Ziegfeld and his Follies, which appeared on the Great White Way from 1907 until 1931.[10] The Follies were theatrical extravaganzas that featured lavish production numbers, comedians, singers, and entertainers—Will Rogers, Fanny Brice, and Bert Williams were all notable mainstays. What defined the shows, though, was the Ziegfeld Girls, whom Ziegfeld turned into the Follies' signature element. He went so far as to create the "Glorified American Girl" in 1922, an all-white feminine fantasy that epitomized the perfect chorus girl. In the Ziegfeld Follies, the girls not only were all costumed alike, they were

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also united by a shared Anglo-Saxon racial heritage. For Ziegfeld and for many other Americans during this period that saw an influx of "dark" immigrants from eastern and southern European countries, the "model of blondness and fairness associated with northern Europe was eventually claimed by eugenicists as typical of the 'American race,' a rhetoric borrowed by the Ziegfeld enterprise for its Glorified American Girl."[11] The chorus line became a metaphor for a racially homogeneous America, which kept "inferior" immigrants at arm's length.[12]

It might appear that *A Chorus Line* doesn't stray very far from its Ziegfeldian predecessors. The curtain rises on a group of dancers while Zach, the show's choreographer, barks out:

> Again,
> Step, kick, kick, leap, kick, touch . . . Again!
> Step, kick, kick, leap, kick, touch . . . Again!
> Step, kick, kick, leap, kick, touch . . . Again!
> Step, kick, kick, leap, kick, touch . . . Right!
> That connects with . . .
> Turn, turn, out, in, jump, step,
> Step, kick, kick, leap, kick, touch.[13]

Taken out of context, it might not be clear at first glance what these lines are. Military marching orders? Instructions for a new gym regimen? They are, of course, a dance combination, but their insistence on forcing the dancers to perfectly execute each move is what will divide the rejects from the selected few. The lines demand order, repetition, precision, and, most important, uniformity.

Despite the fact that the dancers must conform to prescribed choreography, the musical provides us with an ensemble that, unlike the Ziegfeld Girl, is the exact opposite of cookie-cutter racial homogeneity. The emphasis on diversity within conformity was made iconic in the logo for *A Chorus Line*: a photo featuring all seventeen aspirants, not in lockstep harmony, but each one holding his or her body in a different posture. Connie has her hand on her chin, Sheila holds one hand on her hip, head cocked, and Al and Kristine, the married couple, hold hands. The focus on difference was further played up by Theoni Aldredge's costume designs.

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The original cast of *A Chorus Line*, shown here in their idiosyncratic poses on the line. From left to right: Don (Ron Kuhlman), Maggie (Kay Cole), Mike (Wayne Cilento), Connie (Baayork Lee), Greg (Michel Stuart), Cassie (Donna McKechnie), Sheila (Carole Bishop), Bobby (Thomas J. Walsh), Bebe (Nancy Lane), Judy (Patricia Garland), Richie (Ronald Dennis), Al (Don Percassi), Kristine (Renee Baughman), Val (Pamela Blair), Mark (Cameron Mason), Paul (Sammy Williams), and Diana (Priscilla Lopez). *Credit:* Photofest

The outfits that the dancers wear, with the exception of those in the finale, purposely look like something that the real actors might have pulled from their closets for an audition, and the variety of the clothes' styles and colors, from Al's TKTS T-shirt to Cassie's famous red leotard and skirt, is meant to further point up each character's uniqueness.

Despite this highlighting of individuality, *A Chorus Line* both references and criticizes earlier, more homogeneous chorus lines. Critics recognized a parallel between the 1975 tuner and the movie of *42nd Street* and other backstage Busby Berkeley films.[14] As the music critic Tom Sutcliffe writes:

> "A Chorus Line" is the stripped-down no-shit musical for the new depression. Thrilling, dazzling, enduring and relentless as "42nd

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> Street," it turns the "ultimate escapism" image of the musical on its head and lays waste the whole Busby Berkeley-onwards syndrome for the heartless as well as vainglorious fake it always was. In particular, it makes those film musicals of the '30s look brightly pernicious. "Golddiggers of 1933" began with "We're In the Money," a brazen celebration of the all-embracing triumph of being in work. "A Chorus Line," born of a less wide-eyed age, begins with a song called "I Hope I Get It," with the line "Please God, I need this job." And they *don't* all get it.[15]

While both *A Chorus Line* and *42nd Street* begin with audition sequences in which eager hopefuls compete for their spot "on the line," clinging to the belief that what will get them to the finish is pure talent, not a preference for type, race, or ethnicity, the 1975 work is more self-aware about the stress and difficulty in securing a job. *42nd Street*, on the other hand, indulges in heady optimism that the critic Michael Feingold notices:

> "You're going out there a dancer—but you're going to come back a star!" That line was just as silly when Warner Baxter first grabbed Ruby Keeler's elbow [in *42nd Street*] as it is now to people who call it camp or kitsch or whatever. But the myth was convenient to the movies. . . .
>
> Michael Bennett's "A CHORUS LINE" is a show about the kids and myth. It never questions the assumptions of the myth, which is a major drawback, but its creators have taken pains to be accurate to the lives of the people who worship at the shrine of Broadway.[16]

A Chorus Line becomes *42nd Street*'s contemporary sibling, but in some ways, it reads as more naïve than the latter work because the show's logic holds that all people, regardless of race, have equal opportunity in society, when in fact they don't. America might have come a long way since the segregationist politics of the 1930s, but race, unconsciously perhaps, still affected job and hiring decisions. *42nd Street*, on the other hand, just removes racial difference from the picture by casting its chorus line with only white dancers; African Americans and other people of color aren't even considered in the running. In *A Chorus Line*, the makeup of the

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line has changed but the myth of the American Dream still persists, with results that are now unrealistically color-blind.

In short, *A Chorus Line* alternates between alerting us to the racial and/or ethnic makeup of the various dancers on the line and reinforcing the idea that one's racial background doesn't matter at all. In the show's opening number, "I Hope I Get It," the wannabe chorus members sing of their desire to be chosen:

> ALL. God, I hope I get it.
> I hope I get it.
> How many people does he need?
> . . .
> Look at all the people!
> At all the people.
> How many people does he need?
> How many boys, how many girls?[17]

The dancers sing without expressing any fear of racial bias. The director just needs "people," some men and the rest women. Throughout the number, Zach offers instructions and feedback to the dancers, and in identifying them, he is careful never to mark them racially but simply by gender and what they wear: "Boy in the headband" and "Girl in brown."

The number culminates in one of the most visually iconic moments of the show. As Zach chooses his semifinalists, they line up, and on the final chords of "I Hope I Get It," "*the lights bump up revealing the line with their photos in front of their faces.*" This stage image is striking: the three-dimensional body replaced by the flat glossy. This moment segues directly into Paul singing:

> Who am I anyway?
> Am I my resumé?
> That is a picture of a person I don't know.
> What does he want from me?
> What should I try to be?
> So many faces all around, and here we go.
> I need this job, oh God, I need this show.

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This existential moment for Paul, a feeling that arguably all the characters on the line share, has particularly racial overtones. The separation of the face from the individual behind the photo asks the audience to look past race and the body, to not see skin color as any sort of true indication of who a person is, but rather to find the person *behind* the picture.[18] As the theater scholar Josephine Lee writes regarding the connection between race and color-blind casting, "Race thus became the actor's false mask over a more 'universal' humanness; nonetheless it was a mask that maintained its stubborn presence no matter how hard one worked to eradicate it."[19] This signature *Chorus Line* moment challenges us to rethink where a person's true identity lies, not located in his racial background, which is often, though not always, written on the skin and revealed by a photograph, but in the personal and unique details that make up his life.

While the final version of *A Chorus Line* addresses race unevenly, a look into the archives of its lyricist, Edward Kleban, turns up some cut musical numbers that offer a more direct acknowledgment of racial difference. Connie and Richie were given the song "Confidence," which speaks to their own perceived sense of internal strength in the world of showbiz despite being pigeonholed as actors of color:

> RICHIE. Most a them
> Out-sing me and out-kick me
> Still I feel
> This guy is gonna pick me
> I have got
> One thing the others lack . . .
> Confidence . . .
> Confidence . . .
> That separates me from the pack
> Most a them
> Know jus' what they are doin'
> But I look
> Around and I'm a shoo-in
> I have got
> One special quali*teeee*

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Confidence . . .
Confidence . . .
It's written plain all over
And will remain all over me
. . .
CONNIE. I am sure
That Richie thinks he's got it
But he's wrong
If only he could spot it
He forgets
That I go either way
Confidence . . . Ma'am . . .
Diffidence . . . Madam . . .
That is the wonder of Cathay
I've passed for Ethel Merman's little girlie
I've also done a year or two in *Purlie*, Dig it!
That is
Confidence . . .
Confidence . . .
By the by
This guy needs a confident person
I can be a confident person
. . . But I can also be shy[20]

In his book about Bennett's work, Ken Mandelbaum explains the genesis of the song: "The new character, Richie, played by Ron Dennis, was given a duet with Connie . . . in which the two 'token minority' figures on the line—the black boy and the Oriental girl—sang of the confidence instilled in them by the knowledge that the director of the show could not really do without them, no matter what he thought of their talents." "The song was about how we were always the only minorities in all-white casts," says Ron Dennis, the original Richie. "It was cleverly and subtly written. . . . When it was cut, Baayork [Lee, who played Connie] and I sat around for weeks not knowing how they were going to use us. They came up with the '4 foot 10' section of the montage for her, but I didn't get my song until just before we started previews, because they really didn't know what to do with me."[21]

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"Confidence" didn't make it to the stage, but neither did another number of similar ilk, called "Token":

> There's a new dance that's sweepin' the country
> From Chinatown to Watts
> If you love to dance you really hafta learn it
> For it's ev'rywhere if only you discern it
> It's called the Token
> It's the Token
> And it's colorful and very thought provokin'
> Though not a single word is ever really spoken
> It's called the Token
> Just between you and me
> . . .
> Can't be two, now
> Uh-Uh-Uh
> Wouldn't do, now
> Uh-Uh-Uh
> Never three or four or more
> I'm tellin' you, now
> Uh-Uh-Uh
> Just a smidgen
> Lonely pigeon
> Short shrift
> If you catch my drift
> It's called the Token
> It's the Token
> Came from Africa and Asia and Hoboken
> And it's danced wherever promises are broken
> It's called the Token
> Just between you and me[22]

The song reveals the prevalence of racial tokenism in 1970s society while cleverly never mentioning race at all. Ironically and perhaps inadvertently, though, *A Chorus Line* reinforces its own tokenism by casting the show the way it does, identifying what race or ethnicity most of the

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characters should be and thereby limiting who can play those parts. Both of these cut numbers go against the grain of the libretto, which ultimately pushes for giving the job to the most talented individual, regardless of background. Race is treated as a minor detail, no more important than where someone grew up. After all, Richie gets a job on the line, but Connie does not, proving that race neither guarantees nor denies people work.

That said, *A Chorus Line* well reflects the racial and cultural zeitgeist of the 1970s, a decade of multiculturalism, ethnic and racial pride, and gay rights in which cultural and racial minorities were finding new ways to perform and exhibit their identities. Black was beautiful, and ethnic whites such as Jews, Italians, and Irish were eschewing assimilation to identify with their cultural roots, while reaping the rewards of mainstream white racial identity. The sociologist Herbert Gans termed this latter phenomenon "symbolic ethnicity" in 1979, claiming that it is "unnecessary for [white] ethnics to surrender their ethnicity to gain upward mobility, and today ethnics are admitted virtually everywhere, provided they meet economic and status requirements."[23] White ethnics in the 1970s could now indulge in the cultural side of their ethnicity without having to endure any of the bigotry they might have faced earlier in the twentieth century. They could be ethnic *and* white at the same time.

For many social scientists, though, the relationship between race and ethnicity remained unclear. Are they interchangeable terms? Is one a subset of another? Is one biological but the other cultural? One thing was certain, the seventies were perceived as the decade of ethnicity. Werner Sollors, a literary and racial theory scholar, writes that the publication of Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan's *Beyond the Melting Pot* in 1963 not only "marked the end of an era. It paved the way for the revival of American ethnic identification in the 1960s and 1970s when attacks on the melting pot became the battle cry of 'unmeltable ethnics' who admonished their audiences to pay attention to ethnicity and to give up the assimilationist hope that ethnicity was going to disappear."[24] Gone was the message of *West Side Story*, with the Jets who wanted nothing more than to ditch their roots and be seen as full-blooded white Americans. Rather, this narrative allowed newly white individuals to be both proud Americans *and* culturally specific ethnic patriots.

The ethnic pride movement was a result of, if not a direct response to,

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the civil rights movement of the 1960s, except now it was whites, not blacks, who were standing up and claiming their heritages as Italians, Jews, Irish, and Poles instead of "bland" white Americans. Posed with the question "What is an ethnic group?" Michael Novak, the author of *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* (1972), answers: "It is a group with historical memory, real or imaginary. One belongs to an ethnic group in part involuntarily, in part by choice. Given a grandparent or two, one chooses to shape one's consciousness by one history rather than another. Ethnic memory is not a set of events remembered, but rather a set of instincts, feelings, intimacies, expectations, patterns of emotion and behavior; a sense of reality; a set of stories for individuals—and for the people as a whole—to live out."[25] From a celebration of ethnic foods to religious rituals, these white ethnics were happy to wave the banner of cultural heritage, *choosing* how they wanted to identify with a culture, if at all.

Where, though, did African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos fit into this group? They too had rich cultures and yet also faced marginalization in society due to racial prejudice. Ethnicity might be about choice, but racial phenotypes still limited the options for nonwhites. White ethnics, on the other hand, could indicate how they wanted to be read: white all-American majority member one moment, nationalistic ethnic minority the next.

Under this model, race and ethnicity become equal and flattened out in *A Chorus Line;* racial difference is treated no differently from any other kind of difference. Suddenly being African American and Italian American occupy the same rung. For all of the show's emphasis on diversity, just what is it that makes someone different? His race? Her place of birth? The color of a T-shirt? All these things are given equal weight, thereby calling the show's ostensible utopic politics into question. Sure, it would be great if Richie's being black were no more special than Al's wearing a TKTS shirt, but that's certainly not the way the world works now, let alone in 1975.

The significance of race and its relationship to difference connects to the musical's tension between individual and group identity. "Analysts of American culture," argues the sociologist Mary C. Waters, "have long noticed the fundamental tension between the high values Americans place on both individuality and conformity." Does one conform to the

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group (the chorus line) or shine as an individual (the star)? For Waters, the appeal of Gans's "symbolic ethnicity" is that it allows a white ethnic to "feel unique and special" and not be like everyone else, while still getting to take advantage of all the benefits of being white. This type of ethnicity becomes something the person can turn on and off, like a light switch, invoking it when useful or desired, but able to pass as part of the white racial majority on a day-to-day basis. We see this again and again in *A Chorus Line*, where the Jewish, Italian, and even light-skinned Latino characters often assert their ethnic backgrounds but hide them when necessary behind WASP-sounding stage names. Of course, a dark-skinned African American cannot "turn off" ethnicity so easily because of the racial component, revealing the shortfall in grouping all ethnic experiences together. As Waters explains, "The social and political consequences of being Asian or Hispanic or black are not symbolic for the most part, or voluntary. They are real and often hurtful."[26] "Symbolic ethnicity" mirrors *A Chorus Line*'s racial politics, as the concept itself is inherently theatrical. White ethnicity is marked by changes in one's name (like stage names), changes in culturally specific clothing (like costumes), and the performance of certain customs or rituals (like acting).

For Michael Bennett, race and ethnicity were just two more items on a long list of differences that distinguished one person from another. As he noted in an early interview about the musical, "I mean, think about going to school. Trying for any job. Being accepted. Being rejected. Being too short or too tall or too fat or too thin—I mean, we all have the equivalent. I wasn't too tall, I was too short, but . . . you know?"[27] Applying this worldview to the show, being black and being short suddenly become farcically equivalent, as if short people had faced hundreds of years of prejudice, widespread societal discrimination, or slavery. In the show, Val sings ("Dance: Ten, Looks: Three") about how she wasn't considered pretty enough to be a Rockette so got plastic surgery to enhance her appearance. Kristine's "challenge" is that she can't carry a tune ("Sing!"), and Diana's problem is not that she is Puerto Rican but that she can't please Mr. Karp, her acting teacher ("Nothing"), hardly the stuff of social strife. Connie doesn't seem to have a problem with being Asian American; rather, like Michael Bennett, she has a height issue. "Four foot ten. Four foot ten. . . . I used to hang from a parallel bar by the hour, hoping I'd stretch just an

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inch more," she sings.[28] Similarly, Richie's "Gimme the Ball" solo is about his realization that he didn't want to be a kindergarten teacher. This isn't to imply that the only issues that do or should affect people of color are of a racial nature, but it's interesting that despite the attention paid to diversity, no one seems to suffer from any sort of overt racial prejudice in the show.

The only area where a real sense of otherness does emerge is in terms of sexual identity. Both Greg and Paul are explicitly marked as gay, and Paul's long and moving monologue at the end of the show focuses on his coming to terms with his sexual and gender identity. In many ways, this isn't surprising. *A Chorus Line* came along only six years after the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York that helped kick the contemporary gay rights movement into full gear. While race was still a major topic of discussion in the United States, society was now also discussing homosexuality with new candidness. Sadly, despite being a character with whom we are meant to empathize, Paul doesn't make the final cut. Shortly after telling Zach about his being gay and working as a drag performer, he joins the other actors to perform a dance routine only to collapse to the floor from a knee injury.

The conflict between the individual and the group suffuses all parts of the show and is one of the signature visual and choreographic motifs of the original staging, as Bennett had the line of dancers continually dissolving and re-forming itself onstage. The individual telling his or her story leaves the line, and the other dancers disappear into the stage darkness, only to return at the end of the number and re-form the line. "While *A Chorus Line* had remarkably little dancing, especially for a show about dancers," writes Frank Rich, "it could be said that the entire show was danced: its performers kept moving back and forth in different patterns through the depth of the stage, forever splintering and then reconstituting their chorus line. It was as if the company were one giant, undulating organism forever torn between the shadows of the wings and the footlights down front."[29]

This tension also works its way into a subplot involving Cassie and Zach. The two were once romantically involved, and now Cassie has returned to New York looking for work after her career in California stalled. Despite the fact that she had featured roles in some of Zach's earlier shows, the problem is that Cassie is too good for the chorus but isn't good enough to become a "singular sensation," a star. She's in theatrical limbo, where no one will hire her, and has come to Zach to beg him for a job. "Well, you

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shouldn't have come. You don't fit in. You don't dance like anybody else—you don't know how," Zach says.[30] Even though he knows she's too good, Zach lets Cassie stay at the audition because he is still in love with her.

Cassie's distinctiveness soon becomes a problem as the cast begins to rehearse a number called "One" from the show's unnamed musical. Zach first instructs everyone: "Now—this is important! I want to see *Unison Dancing.* Every head, arm, body angle, *exactly the same.* You must blend. This is one of those numbers where you back the star—you're her frame. I don't want anybody to pull my eye."[31] This raises the question: is Zach's desire to not have anyone pull his eye possible in a chorus line made of multiple races? Would a single black person in an all-white chorus, or a single white person in an all-black chorus line, pull the audience's eye? This isn't a theoretical question. This precise issue had permeated the casting practices of another famous dancing institution, the Rockettes, who until 1987 had remained an all-white troupe. Only a few years earlier their director, Violet Holmes, had claimed, "One or two black girls in the line would definitely distract. You would lose the whole look of precision, which is the hallmark of the Rockettes."[32]

The rehearsal of "One" begins, and in spite of its jaunty melody and affable lyrics, this number turns sinister, the music becoming discordant at moments. As we watch the dancers go through their paces, we see how Bennett's choreography forces them to become conforming automatons, devoid of personality and individuality. In fact, "One" deconstructs itself in this very moment to reveal this imposition of sameness. While some of the chorus line sing the song's actual lyrics—"One/ Moment in her presence/ And you can forget the/ Rest"—the others rhythmically speak the "counts" of the song, "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight," revealing the driving forward beats that require that the dancers perform with complete synchronicity. As the dissonance grows, the lyrics become a mass of robotic instructions: "*One, hat, shoulder up*, walk, (*beat*) walk, *(beat*) stay pulled up, eyes front, *hat to chest, angle right hat to the head*, lead with the hip, follow thru; palm up, fill the phrase, elbow right, hat down, hat to chest, elbow up, *change the body, leave the head, shoulder left*, head, lead to the right, hat up, knee in, elbow." They all work to mold their bodies to the choreography, except for Cassie. Zach shouts corrections at her as the number progresses: "You're late," "Don't pop the head,

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Cassie," "Too high with the leg, Cassie," "Too much plié, Cassie," "You're late on the turn, Cassie." Displeased by her performance, Zach forces her to do the routine again with the boys, until he can't bear to watch any more: "You're distorting the combination, Cassie. Pull in. Cool it. Dance like everybody else." This outburst results in a showdown between the two where they finally come to terms with the end of their relationship while the other dancers continue going through their paces behind them, the music grown nightmarish to underscore the "horror" of being part of a nameless, unindividuated crowd. For Zach, Cassie is too good for the chorus line, and it breaks his heart that someone whom he loves so much would be reduced to such a role. "You're special," he tells her, to which she replies, "No, we're all special. He's special—she's special. And Sheila—and Richie, and Connie. They're all special. I'd be happy to be dancing in that line."[33] That Richie and Connie get special shout-outs is interesting—are they more "special" because of their skin color?—but Cassie's claim that everyone is unique only works to reinforce the show's dogged insistence on equality of identity and background.

The show concludes with Zach's final selection of dancers, but in a musical fantasy-cum-finale, the entire company (selected and rejected dancers alike) returns to perform the song "One," this time costumed in sparkling gold outfits. The finale gives them what they wanted, the dream of being in a dazzling Broadway show, *but* at the expense of their own individuality; now costumed alike, they all blend together, virtually indistinguishable. As Michael Bennett imagined this final sequence, the audience, having spent two intermissionless hours getting to know the life story of each dancer, was supposed to view the number as a sort of hell, because each person's history is essentially obliterated as they are made to high-kick in chorus line uniformity. As Bennett told Ken Mandelbaum, "That finale is so sad. The craft is wonderful, but you ask, did they go through all that just to be anonymous?"[34] In his initial concept for the ending, Bennett says:

> You're going to get to know all these dancers as individuals and care about each one. Then, at the very end of the play, they're all going to come out in tuxedos and top hats, and you're not going to be able to tell one from another. They're going to blend. They're going to do everything you've ever seen anyone in a chorus line do. It's

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going to be the most horrifying moment you will ever experience in a theatre. I have a vision of them forming a V and marching with frozen smiles, like in *Metropolis*. If I do this right, you will never see another chorus line in a theatre. Everybody will reevaluate what it is they're watching.[35]

Bennett's original concept involved not giving a final bow to the show's actual dancers, because he wanted to emphasize that the chorus members are eternally relegated to invisibility, never given their full due or acknowledgment. Instead, the chorus just keeps high-kicking as the curtain falls.

It's not just the staging of the finale that highlights this situation; the song "One" is itself a sad commentary on the lives of the dancers. "Fine irony lies in the music they sing and dance, 'One,'" observes Scott McMillin in *The Musical as Drama*, "for the number is *about* the individualist, the 'one,' the star whom they are supposed to be backing up . . . [who] never appears."[36] The lyrics are all about a woman who is sublimely special, a star. The boys sing:

One
Singular sensation
Ev'ry little step she
Takes.
One
Thrilling combination
Ev'ry move that she
Makes.

Then, later, the girls enter with a chorus of their own:

She walks into a room
And you know she's un
Commonly rare, very unique,
Peripatetic, poetic, and chic.
She walks into a room
And you know from her
Maddening poise, effortless

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The 2006 Broadway revival cast of *A Chorus Line*, costumed in matching gold outfits, performing the finale, "One," as seen in the documentary *Every Little Step. Credit:* Sony Pictures Classics/Photofest © Sony Pictures Classics

Whirl,
She's the special girl.

If this were a Jerry Herman musical, the "She" in question would be Mame or Dolly, but in *A Chorus Line* the woman is a nonentity who never appears. Instead, our attention is kept on the chorus in what is a strange moment of doubleness. We see them and in some ways, *they* are the stars, now dressed to the nines in their shimmering finale costumes, but at the same time, the dancers have been reduced to the background, made invisible, singing about a star who is much more famous than they are, made even more ironic and devastating by the fact that she is missing in action. Writes the drama critic Jack Kroll:

> It's a thrilling finish, but the thrill is laced with a kind of horror. All the sweat and desperation have exploded into this apotheosis of anonymity, in which the dancers' skills and personalities are welded into a banal kicking machine whose very mindless precision sends

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> thrills down the most sophisticated of spines. It's a sensational double image of the popular culture of our mass society. Those practical monosyllables we heard at the beginning—"Step, kick, step, kick, kick . . ."—have finally conditioned the desired response in both the dancers and ourselves. "A Chorus Line" ends on a fanfare that is also a lament, the most moving tribute this show could make to its heroes and heroines, the shock troops of an overentertained society.[37]

This finale is the American Dream theatricalized for the Broadway stage. It enacts the same philosophy that Sean O'Brien, a white ethnic interviewed by Mary Waters, articulates: "I think everybody has the same opportunity. It doesn't matter what their background is. The education is there and if they have the gumption to go after it, they can do anything they damn well please. It doesn't make any difference if they are Irish, German, Jewish, Italian, or black. There are all different groups who are multi-millionaires. They have the same opportunities. I think a black kid has the same opportunity as one of my own."[38] This is the philosophy of *A Chorus Line* and explains the current appeal of reality competition shows like *American Idol* and *So You Think You Can Dance.*

Yet a problem with *A Chorus Line* remains. The show wants us to read society as color-blind in a way that is not tenable. It acknowledges race and then disregards it. This is not to say that the goal of color-blind casting is not admirable or that theater should not continue to strive to be a utopic place. Harry Newman, cofounder of the Non-Traditional Casting Project, urges that "non-traditional casting does not of necessity imply tokenism or loss of identity. It's about having all artists considered as individuals with individual qualities, apart from belonging to groups based on often arbitrary distinctions such as skin color or ethnic origin. To be judged on individual ability is not 'playing white' either. It is allowing each artist to bring whatever she is to her work."[39] Indeed, such a statement should be an aim not only for theater but for society as a whole. Rather than trying to address race by pretending it does not exist in some sort of color-blind fashion, what if theater could be used as a mirror to reveal the deep complexities of race as a way to truly grapple with and repair the racial inequalities that exist in society? This latter option, arguably being more painful to engage and illuminating things that might be uncomfortable to

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talk about, might also be more productive in the long run. After all, we still operate in a society that is *not* color-blind and in which race plays a profound role. Thus, to function as if race is not a factor may be more of a disservice than a boon.[40]

A Chorus Line, then, is both utopic and dystopic in its view of American society. It's a place where everyone has an equal opportunity, but in the end it doesn't matter, because the individual is ultimately discarded. This ideology was not unique to *A Chorus Line*. In 1981, Bennett staged what would be his last great show, *Dreamgirls*, a musical about an African American girl group in the 1960s that achieves fame despite a plethora of personal and societal battles. The show was loosely based on the Supremes, but the music by Henry Krieger and the book and lyrics by Tom Eyen were wholly original. Yet even though much of the show is about the particular struggles of *black* artists, Bennett claimed that "the problems that the black characters in *Dreamgirls* have are just problems about life as an American, the problems you have when you're in your 20's and you find out that happily ever after doesn't mean the things you thought . . . and that you can get everything you want and it's not what you thought it was going to be, and if you're going to survive, you have to keep wanting other things." Such a statement doesn't hold, as the plot of *Dreamgirls* itself proves: a song by the Dreams is co-opted by a white musical group, Dave and the Sweethearts, and becomes a big hit, revealing the racial inequality that impacts the world of entertainment. Bennett expands further on his thoughts about *Dreamgirls*: "The important thing about *Dreamgirls* for me was that I approached the material as if cultural assimilation is something that has happened in America. . . . *Dreamgirls* is not about being black, it's about being human. It's a black musical, but it's about people. It's not a black version of a white show. It's very nice for young blacks to go to the theatre and see role models who are successful and still human."

Bernard Jacobs, president of the Shubert Organization, comments on Bennett's perspective:

> Michael was really a great advocate of civil rights, and he had a very strong feeling that he wanted to do a show which dealt with black people in the same way that most shows about white people deal with white people. He didn't want it to be a show that catered to

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race. He wanted it to be a show about blacks as people living in our society and having the same problems other people in our society have. . . . One of the problems with the show was that the critics, to an extent, were unable to deal with a show about blacks the same way they would treat a show about whites.[41]

But ultimately, weren't the critics of *Dreamgirls* right? As much as one might like to just treat people as people, not to acknowledge the particular ways in which race has shaped the lives of *all* people in this country, whether as minorities who have been targets of prejudice or as a site of privilege for a white majority, is a significant oversight.

And that is the exact omission that *A Chorus Line* makes as well. For despite the show's good intentions in attempting to recover the individual within the context of the chorus and its celebration of diversity, the musical fails to truly acknowledge the ways in which race remains a delineating factor in America. In fact, I would argue that the show's willful blindness to race has contributed to its success and popularity. People *want* to believe in the American Dream, in the notion that they do have a chance and that differences—racial, social, sexual, or otherwise—don't really matter. The true significance of this 1975 show, then, is that in America no matter how often society says people of color have a fair chance to succeed, such individuals must continue to fight for true equality in a world that promises freedom of opportunity but doesn't always deliver on that contract.

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