

# Stage Preview: 'A Chorus Line'

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BY EVAN HENERSON  
THEATER CRITIC

You never forget your time on the "Line," especially if you were one of the pioneers.

Nor do you forget your fellow "Line-ers," no matter how much time has elapsed. The 17 original company members of Michael Bennett's "A Chorus Line" are flung across the country. Several are still performing. Others have left the business entirely.

They've married and had children, written books, changed careers. Some have returned to "A Chorus Line" over the years or directed and choreographed productions of "ACL" of their own. A handful have died.

"A Chorus Line" opened off-Broadway on May 21, 1975, but ticket demand was so high that producer Joseph Papp moved it to the Shubert Theater on July 25, where it ran for 6,137 performances. The production won nine Tony Awards as well as the 1976 Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

Most of the originals gathered in New York in the fall of 2006 at the premiere of the Broadway revival of "A Chorus Line," (the touring version of which opened at the Ahmanson Theatre last Thursday.)

"We went over to Baayork Lee's place afterwards," recalls Patricia "Trish" Garland, who created the role of Judy Turner. "We were all able to reconverge because we're a really tight family. We may not be as close now, but we're still very connected."

"It's important to stay connected," agrees Kay Cole (Maggie Winslow). "Certainly in show business, with such a powerful, cathartic, life-changing experience, it's important to know what everyone is doing and that they're well and happy and hopeful."

LA.COM spoke to three of the Los Angeles-based "ACL" company members. They discussed the show's origin, its impact and their lives today.

**SAMMY WILLIAMS** One of three "Chorus Line" company members to win the Tony award (for best featured actor), Williams played Paul San Marco who quit school, joined a drag review and ultimately wins the approval of his parents. Williams, who left show business for a time to study floral design, is back taking acting classes and developing a one-man show "And the Winner Is ..." based on his life. He recently appeared in "All This and Heaven Too" at the Macha Theatre.

Pre "ACL": Williams appeared in "Applause" and "The Happy Time" as well as a national tour of "Funny Girl."

Time on the "Line": five years between Broadway, L.A., tours and European companies.

On Michael Bennett: "The process of putting together "A Chorus Line" was like a therapy session. Every day, we would go in and be analyzed, directed, manipulated and choreographed. We were puppets and Michael was the puppeteer."

Not always such a big happy family: "The show is about competition. It's an audition where we're competing against the best of the best for those jobs. Michael, being the ingenious director he was, created that competition, that competing mind-set for us backstage. We were a competitive group of people, and originally we didn't like each other. Some of us didn't get along with each other."

Out of the chorus into the whirlwind: "I keep going back to it being a learning experience. I was 25 years old when we started "A Chorus Line." I was a young kid from Trenton, N.J.

I didn't have a lot of experience in theater. I went literally from being a dancer in the chorus to being a Tony award-winning actor. There was a lot that I missed along the way. I had to go back and learn all those things I had missed.

One singular experience: "I think everyone who is in show business should have an experience like I had in "A Chorus Line" at least once in their career. It was brilliant, fascinating, fabulous and heart-wrenching. All the fantasies you could possibly dream about, we all had. I wish it to everyone in the business.

**KAY COLE** The North Hollywood resident is a frequent Southland director and choreographer as well as a teacher. Her most recent credits include the DVD series "Professor Crunch and the Daffys" and the reading of "I Married Wyatt Earp" for the Festival of New American Musicals.

Cole created the role of Maggie Winslow, who comes from a troubled home and fantasizes about an Indian chief father figure with whom she dances around the living room. The song is "At the Ballet."

Pre-"ACL": Appeared in "Hair" and "Jesus Christ Superstar" on Broadway.

Time spent on the "Line": About 3 1/2 years, including the Broadway and Los Angeles companies and a European tour. Cole returned to the Broadway company to play Diana Morales for four months.

Joining the company: "Michael Bennett had seen me, and he asked me to audition. He put us through an audition that was exactly like the show. We danced, we sang, we talked."

"You say this show is about ... us?": "I didn't think the idea was crazy. I did, however, think it might have a limited appeal. We were dancers talking about each other and about our lives."

Why it worked: "The universality of the piece touched across all kinds of bridges and oceans to touch plumbers and receptionists, engineers, whatever. People are chosen, and sometimes, if you look better, you get a better job. Everybody feels they are judged in one way or another and maybe not always honestly or always fairly. It does happen, and it's human nature. I think that's what people related to."

**PATRICIA GARLAND** Garland and her sister, Jacki, both auditioned for Bennett's show, but it was Trish who won the role of funny Judy Turner from El Paso, Texas.

Garland, who directed several productions of "A Chorus Line" and wrote an episode of "Baywatch," runs the Trish Garland Studio in Sherman Oaks and is considered a national expert in Pilates.

Pre "ACL": Garland previously worked with Michael Bennett in the Broadway company of "Follies."

Joining the company: "Michael had very specific questions that he wanted answered and he just went around the room. For me, it was a little more challenging because my sister was there as well, and we were the only blood relatives in that room. Of course, we had no idea where this was going or what was happening. I didn't feel it was appropriate to say things about my sister that perhaps were negative but true in my life, and having my sister look at me and go, 'Oh, so you hated me all of those years.' So I wasn't very forthcoming, and he didn't get as much material out of me."

Time on the "Line": Garland went with the majority of the original cast to Los Angeles, where, in the summer of 1977, her "Line" time came to an unexpected end.

"I lived out the Paul story. I shredded ligaments in my knee," she says. "I kept going in and being there, but I couldn't perform."

If it's 11 a.m., it must be Fosse: "I auditioned for Bob Fosse for 'Liza With a Z,' so, besides "A Chorus Line,"

that was one of the biggest moments of my life. During the daytime, I was working with Bob Fosse and at night I was working with Michael Bennett.”

Life-altering? Not exactly: “I think other people thought it changed our lives or that we changed. What (the experience) did was it gave me confidence, certainly, and a different identity. It was a dream come true that dancers could actually become stars on Broadway. Was it life-changing? No. It complemented my life.”

On the return of the “Line”: I’m really glad it’s here again. I’m genuinely glad that more people get an opportunity to see this great musical that I think transcends time. No matter what occupation you’re in, you have to stand before others and be reviewed and interviewed and show your best or not. Some people get it, and some people don’t. There were 15 lives that you watched, and you were able to make your own judgments based on who you were as to who should get it and who shouldn’t. We tapped your heart, and, hopefully, that’s still what they’re doing, connecting to people’s hearts.

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preview

## **A CHORUS LINE**

**Where:** Ahmanson Theatre, 135 N. Grand Ave., L.A.

**When:** 8 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, 2 p.m. Saturday, 1 and 6:30 p.m. Sunday; through July 6.

**Cost:** \$30-\$100.

**Info:** (213) 628-2772, <http://www.centertheatregroup.org/>.