

# A CHORUS LINE

A *CHORUS LINE* CONCEIVED AND ORIGINALLY CHOREOGRAPHED AND DIRECTED BY MICHAEL BENNETT  
BOOK BY JAMES KIRKWOOD AND NICHOLAS DANTE MUSIC BY MARVIN HAMLISCH LYRICS BY EDWARD KLEBAN  
ORIGINALLY CO-CHOREOGRAPHED BY BOB AVIAN CHOREOGRAPHY RE-STAGED BY BAAYORK LEE DIRECTED BY BOB AVIAN

May 21-July 6, 2008 • Ahmanson Theatre

# A CHORUS LINE DISCOVERY GUIDE

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## 1975.

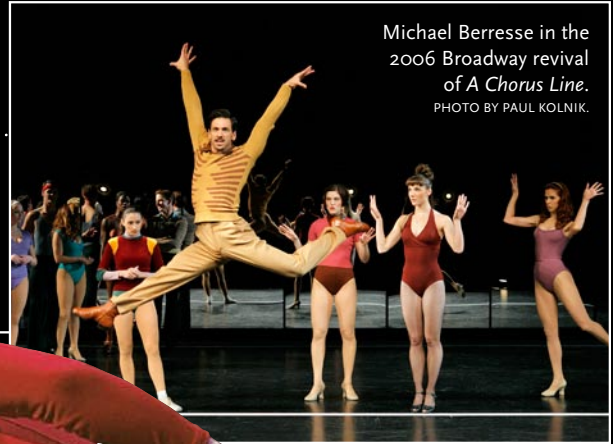
On the bare stage of a Broadway theatre, 17 dancers audition for the chorus of a new musical. They are talented, dedicated and competitive, but to get this job, these usually anonymous performers will have to do more than dance well: They will have to reveal who they really are. This is the story of *A Chorus Line*, the landmark 1975 Tony Award and Pulitzer Prize-winning musical play. The acclaimed 2006 Broadway revival of *A Chorus Line* is appearing this season at the Ahmanson Theatre.

This Discovery Guide has been created to complement and enhance your experience of *A Chorus Line*. You will find here a summary of the play as well as background on the original show's creation and the new revival.

Each section includes a few provocative ideas, issues or questions relating to the story or history of this watershed musical play.

# Cast of Characters

Michael Berresse in the 2006 Broadway revival of *A Chorus Line*.  
PHOTO BY PAUL KOLNIK.



**Zach**, director and choreographer of a new Broadway musical

**Larry**, his assistant

**Cassie Ferguson**, dancer who rose from the chorus to become a renowned soloist

**Don Kerr**, dancer, 28, from Kansas City, Kansas

**Maggie Winslow**, dancer, 25, from San Mateo, California

**Mike Costa**, born Costafalone, dancer, 24, from Trenton, New Jersey

**Connie Wong**, dancer, 34, from Chinatown, New York City

**Gregory Gardner**, born Sidney Beckenstein, dancer, 32, from New York City

(CONTINUED)

Charlotte D'Amboise in the 2006 Broadway revival of *A Chorus Line*.  
PHOTO BY PAUL KOLNIK.



The 2006 Broadway revival cast of *A Chorus Line*.  
PHOTO BY PAUL KOLNIK.

## Cast of Characters

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**Sheila Bryant**, dancer, 29, from Colorado Springs, Colorado

**Bob Mills III**, dancer, 25, from upstate New York

**Bebe Benzenheimer**, dancer, 22, from Boston, Massachusetts

**Judy Turner**, dancer, 26, from El Paso, Texas

**Richie Walters**, dancer, 27, from Herculaneum, Missouri

**Kristine Urich-DeLuca**, dancer, 23, from St. Louis, Missouri

**Al DeLuca**, dancer and husband of Kristine, 30, from the Bronx, New York City

**Valerie Clark**, born Margaret Mary Houlihan, dancer, 25, from Arlington, Vermont

**Mark Anthony**, born Mark Philip Lawrence Tabori, dancer, 20, from Tempe, Arizona

**Paul San Marco**, born Ephrain Ramirez, dancer, 27, from Spanish Harlem, New York City

**Diana Morales**, dancer, 27, from the Bronx, New York City



Jeffrey Schecter in the 2006 Broadway revival of *A Chorus Line*.

PHOTO BY PAUL KOLNIK.

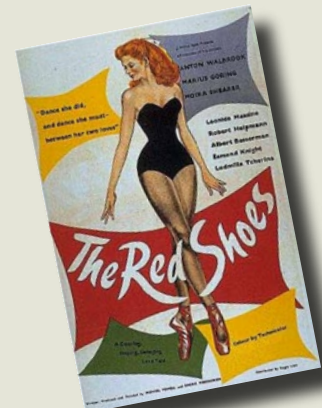
## The Red Shoes

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“AND THEN I SAW *THE RED SHOES*,” says Sheila in *A Chorus Line*, “And I wanted to be that redhead.” Sheila’s female colleagues concur — as would countless thousands of girls who came of age after Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger’s classic film was released in 1948. Considered by many to be not only the greatest of all dance movies, but also one of the finest films ever, *The Red Shoes* is credited with inspiring a generation of women to take up ballet. It also inspired many, like the women in *A Chorus Line*, to devote their lives to dance.

An intensely romantic and dark fable, *The Red Shoes* is the tale of an ambitious ballerina, Vicky Page (“the redhead,” played by real life ballerina, Moira Shearer), who becomes the protégé of a brilliant ballet impresario, Lermontov. He creates for her a ballet based upon the fairy tale *The Red Shoes*, about a woman compelled by magic shoes to dance herself to death. In the end, Vicky, torn between her love for a composer and her art, falls (or jumps?) to her death.

“Why do you want to dance?” Lermontov asks Vicky, who replies, “Why do you want to live?” This vision of dance as not only a calling, but also something essential to one’s very being, is echoed, with somewhat less melodrama, in *A Chorus Line*. ●



## Synopsis



The 2006 Broadway revival cast of *A Chorus Line*. PHOTO BY PAUL KOLNIK.

**ON THE BARE STAGE** of a Broadway theatre in 1975, Zach, a director, auditions dancers for his new musical. As he puts them through increasingly complex **combinations**, we see the competitiveness of these Broadway “**gypsies**.” Many of them, with the notable exception of Cassie, reveal their inner thoughts and anxieties about the audition in a song titled “[I Hope I Get It](#).”

Zach chooses 17 to remain and continue to audition for his eight-dancer chorus. As chorus members, these dancers will also play small acting roles, but rather than have them read from the script, Zach intends to interview them. They do not have to perform, just talk about themselves. No one is comfortable with his unusual request, but they all need the job.

A montage of songs, dialogue and monologues reveals the lives and personalities of the dancers. Mike, Italian-American and the youngest of 12, tells of plotting to take his sister’s place in a dance class in the song, “I Can Do That.” In “At the Ballet,” Maggie, Bebe and Sheila share their childhood experiences of having been inspired by the film *The Red Shoes* and discovering in dance an escape and haven from their unhappy homes. Four showstopping numbers chronicle the struggle with puberty, high school, parents and, finally, the freedom found in adulthood. Val reveals how she discovered that, although she is a great dancer,

she is not pretty enough for showbiz. But, as she explains in the song “Dance: Ten; Looks: Three,” cosmetic surgery (or, more specifically, “tits and ass”) changed her career.

While the group takes a break, Zach confronts Cassie, his former lover. He thinks she has the potential to be a star, and does not understand why a soloist like her is auditioning for the chorus. But Cassie’s career has withered and she knows why: because she cannot act. Although Zach has something to prove, Cassie just wants a job doing what she loves. “All I ever needed,” she sings in “The Music and the Mirror,” “was the music, and the mirror, and the chance to dance.”

Upon hearing everyone’s stories, Zach teaches the company his new musical’s showstopper, “One.” It is a chorus number: the dancers must perform in perfect unison, which means that Cassie must restrain her soloist instincts. After one of the dancers suffers a serious injury, however, Zach forces them all to address the heart-wrenching question:

What happens to dancers when they can no longer perform? The answer comes in the form of “What I Did for Love,” Diana’s singular declaration that she will never regret a life of dance. Finally, Zach must decide which eight of the 16 remaining dancers have earned a place in his show. ●

### TALK ABOUT ...

**1.** An audition is a job interview, albeit a very specialized one, and *A Chorus Line* is, in a way, the story of an unorthodox job interview. Was there anything in *A Chorus Line* which resonated with your own job interview experience? What is the most unusual thing you have asked or been asked in a job interview? What was the most difficult interview you’ve ever had?

**2.** The characters in *A Chorus Line* love to dance, but they know that even if they are successful, their careers will probably be short. Sooner or later, most will be supporting themselves with work they do not love, or, at least, that they love less than the dancing which defines them. How important is it that one’s profession be something one loves, that it be not just a job, but a calling?

# A Singular Creation: The Reality of *A Chorus Line*

**LATE SATURDAY NIGHT**, January 26, 1974, after the curtains had fallen at the Broadway theatres, 19 of Broadway's most talented gypsies gathered in a New York City gym. At the start of the informal meeting, which was being recorded, the 30-year-old wunderkind choreographer, director and former gypsy Michael Bennett announced, "I really want to talk about us, where we came from, why we're dancers, what the alternatives are, why we think

we're in this business." "I don't know whether anything will come of this," Bennett added. "We'll just talk."

And talk they did. For the next 12 hours the dancers shared intimate accounts of their lives

and careers, stories that became not merely the inspiration for, but to a considerable extent the actual substance and words of a show that Bennett was already calling *A Chorus Line*. In a departure from the traditional methods of creating a musical, Bennett and his collaborators developed the score, libretto and production essentially at the same time, and did so not as a commercial venture, but in workshops at the non-profit, off-Broadway [Public Theater](#). By the time it opened at the Public on May 21, 1975, *A Chorus Line* was already so renowned among New York's theatre cognoscenti that the show was quickly moved to Broadway. *A Chorus Line* had its first uptown performance at the Shubert Theatre on July 25, 1975 and went on to become one of the most critically acclaimed and beloved of American musicals, winning nine Tony Awards and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, the latter being an



The 2006 Broadway revival cast of *A Chorus Line*.

PHOTO BY PAUL KOLNIK.

## TALK ABOUT...

Perhaps the most famous single line of any "backstage musical" is delivered in the film *42nd Street* when, at the premiere of a new musical comedy, a desperate director must send a young chorus girl on to replace his injured leading lady. "Sawyer, you're going out a youngster," he tells her, "but you've got to come back a star!"

Most backstage musicals are about being or becoming a star, but *A Chorus Line* has a fallen almost-star, Cassie, who wants to return to the chorus and is willing to give up her artistic individuality, her "star quality," to do so. Zach is baffled by her decision. "Why shouldn't you be the best you can be?" he asks. "That's not a decision, that's a disease," Cassie replies. "God, good, better, best — I hate it!"

What do you think is the significance of this repudiation of "stardom"?

In what other ways is *A Chorus Line* similar to or different from other backstage musicals that you've seen?

extremely rare feat for a musical. The production ran for 15 years and, between 1984 and 1997, held the record for the longest running show in Broadway history.

No single element of *A Chorus Line* explains the show's exceptional power. Rarely in the American musical has a show's components — the story, characters, songs, choreography, staging, design, acting, etc. — been so intensely or effectively integrated. But from the start, *A Chorus Line* was distinguished by its fans for having a quality not normally associated with musicals: authenticity. As a genre, the musical tends toward formulaic stories, fairy tales, fantasies and stereotypical characters. The general dramatic situation in *A Chorus Line* — folks competing for a position — may be conventional, but the world of Broadway dancers is portrayed with unprecedented detail and authority.

As for the characters, they seemed to audiences in 1975 less like character types than real, specific

people telling their own private stories. This is not surprising, as much of the script was taken verbatim from interviews with real, specific dancers. For many theatregoers, there was also a **Pirandelloian** reality to the original production of *A Chorus Line*. The cast consisted of dancers with little acting experience who were playing dancers with little acting experience. They reveal themselves to a Broadway director much as 19 real-life dancers did to director Michael Bennett on that snowy winter's night in 1974. And, further, eight of the dancers at that first meeting played characters based on themselves as part of the original cast of *A Chorus Line*.

The verisimilitude allowed millions who were not in showbiz to identify with the 17 Broadway dancers. Thirty-odd years later, that reality is still a quality that separates *A Chorus Line* from other musicals and, curiously, is now enabling a “musical play” deeply associated with a particular era and particular people to evolve into a timeless work of art. ●

### **Boomerisms** Some references in *A Chorus Line* that may be obscure to folks who came of age after 1975: .....



Cyd Charisse and Fred Astaire in *The Band Wagon*, 1953.  
©MGM

**Cyd Charisse:** Born Tula Ellice Finklea, Charisse is one of the great dancers and stars of the American movie musical. During the 1940s and 50s — the Golden Age of the MGM musical — she was the favorite partner and co-star of the two giants of film dance, Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly.

**Troy Donahue:** A teen idol of the late 1950s and early 60s, Donahue came to epitomize the clean-cut “pretty boy” movie stars manufactured by Hollywood before the rise of the 60s “counterculture.” Donahue’s most famous film is *A Summer Place* (1959) in which he starred with fellow teen idol, Sandra Dee.

**Jill St. John:** Born Jill Oppenheim, St. John has been a working actress since her childhood in the 1940s. She emerged as a sexpot screen siren in the 1960s and perhaps is now best known as the “Bond Girl” of *Diamonds Are Forever* and star of one of the more famous episodes of *Seinfeld*, “The Yada Yada.” Off-screen, St. John is known for her sharp intelligence and jet-set lifestyle.

**Peyton Place:** A scandalous 1954 bestseller whose title became the byword for the sordid reality behind small-town America’s puritanical façade. Adolescent boomers zealously studied the book for information about sex.

**Valium:** Original trade name of the still much-prescribed sedative diazepam, Valium was very popular in the 1970s both as a medical and recreational drug. *A Chorus Line* is not the only work of the era to comment on Valium’s ubiquity.

**Gwen Verdon:** A Culver City girl who spent her infancy in orthopedic braces, Verdon became a Broadway gypsy and, subsequently, one of Broadway’s star actor/dancers of the 50s through the 70s. A longtime colleague and sometime wife of director-choreographer-filmmaker Bob Fosse, Verdon earned showbiz immortality with her performance as the temptress Lola in the Broadway and film versions of *Damn Yankees*. ●

## Extending the “Line”: *A Chorus Line* Returns

“REVIVING” A REVERED MUSICAL TODAY often means keeping the original score and libretto, while completely re-imagining the production. This is not a strategy easily applied to *A Chorus Line*, which, thanks to Michael Bennett’s genius and innovative process, is a theatre work so unified that, for millions of fans, *A Chorus Line* without Bennett’s choreography and “cinematic staging,” or Robin Wagner’s minimal and mirrored set, or Theoni Aldredge’s costumes simply is not *A Chorus Line*. Still, while the Broadway revival of *A Chorus Line* remains true to the original, it is not a slavish re-creation of it. Rather, it can be thought of as the latest stage in an ongoing development process that began in January, 1974.

The revival reunites the surviving members of the show’s original creative team, with co-choreographer Bob Avian directing and Baayork Lee, who created the role of Connie Wong and was the original production’s dance captain, re-creating the choreography. Almost all the changes, whether in the set, costumes, score or staging, are subtle. For instance, Bob Avian has looked for ways to clarify the drama. “When Bob looked at the piece again,” explains Baayork Lee, “he realized that we are a play with music — which is exactly how we were billed in the beginning ... So we are really exploring the play with this production.” Lee gives an example: “[Bob] saw that we could concentrate more on the book of the show if there wasn’t quite so much movement in the background at certain moments. So in the tap number, we freeze for the vocal lines.”

One thing that is not changing is the period setting. There is no attempt to “update” the book or change references (*Peyton Place*, Jill St. John, Troy Donahue, etc.) that might be obscure to younger audiences. *A Chorus Line* is so deeply rooted in the experience of characters who came of age in the 1950s and 1960s, that updating it would lessen its verisimilitude.

But in one fundamental way, the new *A Chorus Line* is radically altered: it has a different cast, comprising young artists who grew up in a very different world from that which shaped the

### Backstage Musicals on Film: A Selection

THERE ARE COUNTLESS stage and film musicals about performers putting on a musical show, probably because the story line and setting provide an excuse for the song and/or dance numbers. Here’s a very short list of classics that can be found in most video stores.

**42nd Street** (1933): The drama of creating a musical comedy for Broadway. Featuring escapist fantasy, a harsh, unromantic vision of showbiz, and Busby Berkeley’s hallucinatory choreography, *42nd Street* is the quintessential backstage musical.

**Swing Time** (1936): Fred Astaire is a dancer who arrives in London to star in a show — oh, who cares about the story? It stars the incomparable Fred with his most popular partner, Ginger Rogers.

**Singin’ in the Rain** (1952): Gene Kelly stars and Stanley Donen directed this movie musical about, yes, making a movie musical in the early days of “talking pictures.”

**The Band Wagon** (1953): Fred Astaire is an aging musical star who hopes a new musical comedy will be his Broadway comeback, but the show’s pretentious director wants to do *Faust*. Widely considered, along with *Singin’ in the Rain*, the greatest of MGM’s classic musicals.

**A Hard Day’s Night** (1964): A different kind of music; a different backstage. From The Beatles and director Richard Lester, a mock documentary that takes you behind the scenes with a rock band caught up in a media and fan frenzy.

**All That Jazz** (1979): Legendary Broadway director-choreographer Bob Fosse made serious, sardonic musicals, both on stage (*Chicago*) and in the movies (*Cabaret*). But this autobiographical portrait of a self-destructive Broadway director is his masterpiece.

**Fame** (1980): Follows ambitious students at New York’s High School of the Performing Arts. Can they make it? “If they’ve really got what it takes,” the poster proclaimed, “it’s going to take everything they’ve got.”

**Dreamgirls** (2006): Bill Condon’s film, based on the 1981 Broadway musical directed by Michael Bennett. ●



characters and creators of *A Chorus Line*. One of the challenges for the newcomers has been to both make the characters their own and satisfy Avian and Lee, who have an intimate knowledge not only of the world of the play, but also of the performers who originally created — and/or inspired — the roles.

“I think of it as a whole *A Chorus Line* school,” jokes Lee about how she makes sure that the new cast is familiar with the history of the show and its characters. “Understanding all of that is really important,” she explains, because the acting, singing, and dancing in the show combine as a continuous “fabric that Michael [Bennett] was weaving.”

According to Deidre Goodwin, who played Sheila in the New York revival, the newcomers did have the chance to do the roles their own way. “I think we’ve had a lot of freedom,” says Goodwin. “Sometimes, the stamps [i.e. original performers] were so strong — on certain characters in particular — that it took a little while for both sides to trust and say, ‘Yeah, we can go that way.’ I think it’s a different show because we are different people. It’s been really exciting to see the whole thing blossom and bring a new life to it.” ●



The 2006 Broadway revival cast of *A Chorus Line*. PHOTO BY PAUL KOLNIK.

## The Changing Line: Broadway’s Gypsies, Then and Now

**THE DANCERS AUDITIONING** for Zach’s show in *A Chorus Line* do not expect to have to act or sing — indeed, one, Kristine, cannot sing. American musical theatre (partly because of its origins as a variety show) had long separated the jobs of chorus dancer, chorus singer and actor. That this was beginning to change when *A Chorus Line* was created in 1974 is, in fact, one of the show’s themes: Zach is looking for dancers who can act, and the need to be multi-talented is an unspoken element of the dancers’ anxiety about their future. *A Chorus Line* was both a celebration of the Broadway gypsy and a requiem

for the traditional chorus line, whose demise *A Chorus Line* hastened by showcasing dancers who were also stirring actors and singers. The “triple threat” (a term Baayork Lee insists was inspired by *A Chorus Line*) actor-singer-dancer would become the norm — even the minimum — on Broadway, where, as Bob Avian observes, “The bar is so much higher now — certainly than when I was a dancer and also since we did *A Chorus Line* originally.” Sorry, Kristine, there is no longer much work in the musical theatre for a dancer who cannot sing. ●

## Michael Bennett

**BORN MICHAEL BENNETT DIFIGLIA** in 1943, Michael Bennett (who, like several of the characters in *A Chorus Line*, changed his name for showbiz) left high school and his home town of Buffalo, New York, for a career that included performing in a Broadway chorus while still a teen, a stint as a background dancer on the television music show *Hullabaloo*, and winning eight Tony Awards for choreography and directing, two before he turned 30.

While *Ballroom*, Bennett's first show after the worldwide triumph of *A Chorus Line*, was a failure, he had a hit in 1981 with another "backstage musical," *Dreamgirls*, the story of a girl group not unlike *The Supremes*. Unfortunately, Bennett's struggles with substance abuse and, more significantly, AIDS, kept him from ever completing another show. He died in 1987.

Quite apart from his extraordinary choreographic and directing skills, Bennett brought to the American musical theatre a crucial combination of qualities. He was part of the Broadway musical tradition, but was eager to open that increasingly insular tradition to new stories, new (or newer) music, new energy and new methods. He was committed to doing serious dramatic stories and had an instinctual pop storytelling savvy. It is difficult to overestimate Michael Bennett's status among the musical theatre creators of his generation — or what a serious loss his early death has been for the American musical. ●



Marvin Hamlisch (L) with Michael Bennett (R) during rehearsals for the original production of *A Chorus Line*.

## TALK ABOUT...

**1.** In *A Chorus Line*, Zach wants to see if the dancers will be able to do small acting roles in his show, but instead of giving them an acting audition, he interviews them about their lives.

Why do you think Zach does this? Why does he believe this will give him a better idea of a dancer's potential as an actor? Does it suggest how Zach thinks about acting as opposed to dancing? Is it appropriate for him to insist that the dancers talk about themselves?

**2.** Bob Avian has observed that *A Chorus Line* reflects its era and that it will not have the same effect today as it did in 1975. "The show opened during the sexual revolution, and it said things that had never been said before on the stage, especially not on the musical stage," says Avian. "At the time, part of the appeal — or lack of appeal, depending on the city we were in — was the shock value."

In what ways do you think *A Chorus Line* reflects the 1970s? Are there aspects of the show which you think may be less powerful or resonant today? Aspects that are equally or more resonant now? ●

## Resources

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### Glossary

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#### Combination:

In dance, a pattern or sequence of steps, movements and positions or a combination of such patterns

#### Gypsy:

American theatre term for a chorus dancer, especially the hardworking professionals willing to perform anywhere, anytime and dedicated to the often nomadic life in the theatre

#### Pirandelloian:

Nobel Prize-winning Italian dramatist and writer Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936) explored the uncertainty of identity and interrelationship of fiction and truth. In his most famous play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, six characters interrupt the rehearsals of a new play by Luigi Pirandello and demand the opportunity to tell their own stories.

#### WEBSITES

[www.achorusline.com](http://www.achorusline.com)

The official website of the 2006 Broadway revival; includes production details and a blog

[www.musicals101.com/chorus.htm](http://www.musicals101.com/chorus.htm)

Musicals 101 is a "Cyber Encyclopedia of Musical Theatre, TV, and Film." The section on *A Chorus Line* offers a history of the show and director-choreographer Michael Bennett.

[www.achorusline.org](http://www.achorusline.org)

An unofficial website created by Baayork Lee, original cast member, director of many productions of the show, and the choreographer of the current Broadway revival. It is meant to provide information on all the productions of *A Chorus Line*, as well as guidance to those who want to see or produce the show.

#### BOOKS

[\*A Chorus Line: The Complete Book of the Musical\*](#) by Michael Bennett, James Kirkwood, Nicholas Dante, Marvin Hamlisch and Edward Kleban (New York: Applause Books, 1995) The musical's book, along with two reminiscences and a number of photos

[\*On the Line: The Creation of A Chorus Line\*](#) by Robert Viagas, Baayork Lee and Thommie Walsh with the Entire Original Cast (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1990) An intense and provocative account of how *A Chorus Line* came into being by the dancers who, in some cases, literally gave their lives to the show

[\*A Chorus Line and the Musicals of Michael Bennett\*](#) by Ken Mandelbaum (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989) Thoroughly researched and passionately written, this remains the best book on the great director-choreographer.

#### RECORDINGS:

[\*A Chorus Line \(1975 Original Broadway Cast\)\*](#) (Sony Classical, 1975)

[\*A Chorus Line – The New Cast Recording \(2006 Broadway Revival Cast\)\*](#) (Sony, 2006)  
The recording of the 2006 Broadway revival cast

#### FILM & VIDEO

[\*A Chorus Line\*](#) directed by Richard Attenborough (MGM, 1985) Hollywood's adaptation of the beloved musical is not highly regarded. Michael Bennett had wanted to make the movie about dancers auditioning for a movie musical.

[\*Broadway: The American Musical\*](#) directed by Michael Kantor (PBS, 2004)  
An acclaimed documentary on the American musical; the third disc of the three DVD set covers *A Chorus Line* and Michael Bennett.

[\*The Red Shoes\*](#) directed by Emeric Pressburger (Eagle-Lion, 1948) The movie that launched thousands of dance careers, Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's revered romantic fable of the magic of ballet has been released on DVD by the Criterion Collection.

## About P.L.A.Y.

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### Funder Credits

PERFORMING FOR LOS ANGELES YOUTH RECEIVES GENEROUS SUPPORT FROM the Center Theatre Group Affiliates, a volunteer organization dedicated to bringing innovative theatre and creative education to the young people of Los Angeles.

MAJOR SUPPORT IS ALSO PROVIDED BY the Annenberg Foundation.

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT FOR P.L.A.Y. IS PROVIDED BY the Bloomingdale's Fund of the Macy's Foundation, the Employees Community Fund of Boeing California, The Sascha Brastoff Foundation, the Brotman Foundation of California, The Dana Foundation, the Darden Restaurants Foundation, the James A. Doolittle Foundation, the Lawrence P. Frank Foundation, The Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation, the William Randolph Hearst Education Endowment, the Walter Lantz Foundation, the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs, the B.C. McCabe Foundation, the MetLife Foundation, the Music Center Fund for the Performing Arts, the Kenneth T. & Eileen L. Norris Foundation, the Dwight Stuart Youth Foundation, the Weingart Foundation and the Zolla Family Foundation.

