



July 22, 2001
THEATER

THEATER; Broadway to Park South, A Trouper Keeps Trekking

By BARRY SINGER

THE tiny cabaret stage at Arci's Place on Park Avenue South is not big enough to accommodate everything that the Tony Award-winning dancer and singer Donna McKechnie can do, to say nothing of all the things she has done. Yet it is on Arci's stage that Ms. McKechnie will present a retrospective of her work in the theater -- "An Evening With Donna McKechnie: My Musical Comedy Life" -- beginning on Tuesday (through Aug. 11).

"My career in a nutshell," Ms. McKechnie said recently, with no little bemusement. "I just have to be careful not to kick anybody."

Once, musical-theater legends generally worked in Broadway theaters. Today, those stages are often reserved for musical-comedy novices from television and film. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Fresh blood can revivify and musical-theater legends can sometimes be born on the spot. Witness Reba McEntire's beguiling and unsuspected gift for musical comedy last season in "Annie Get Your Gun."

Such happy occasions are the exception, though. In the last decade, Broadway producers have grown addicted to the synthetic public relations rush provided by the injection of unfledged television and film stars and demi-stars into their musical productions. The relative popular success of this practice has encouraged yet another bad habit: dispensing with the search for bona fide musical-theater talent in favor of hiring a "legitimate" actor who can act a song rather than sing it.

Fresh from a dance class and over lunch at a restaurant on the Upper West Side, Ms. McKechnie reflected on this: "Producers today who are hiring people for musicals who've never done musicals and think they'll just be able to act it, I say to them, 'Good luck.' Great musical theater producers once knew how to involve themselves in the creative process, and they also knew how to get out of the way, and when. The people in charge now are all about dollars. They've disturbed the balance. There's no one in charge anymore, creatively."

Ms. McKechnie has been a quintessential Broadway gypsy for 40 years, since her debut at 16 in the original production of Frank Loesser's "How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying" in 1961. One of her choreographers on that show was Bob Fosse. Throughout the 1960's and 70's she was the

muse of Michael Bennett, the director and choreographer, who, in "A Chorus Line," enshrined Ms. McKechnie's cult status as Broadway's greatest chorus dancer by creating the role of Cassie with her and for her.

For a brief moment, Bennett and Ms. McKechnie were married. Though they had long since divorced, she was inevitably perceived after he died of AIDS in 1987 as the widowed repository of his legacy, the embodiment of Broadway's own incalculable loss.

"Michael Bennett's dream of what musical theater could be was essentially limitless," Ms. McKechnie said. "Musical numbers that moved seamlessly from drama to music and back again were what Michael aspired to. And I kind of attached myself to that dream. It was one of the things that we believed together as young dancers in New York."

Today, Ms. McKechnie finds herself more or less marginalized on a Broadway musical landscape that the likes of Bennett and Fosse would find almost unrecognizable. "Doing a musical is not just acting," Ms. McKechnie said. "It's total theater. It's our Kabuki. It's a lifetime of devotion to build the craft, the confidence and the ability to sing and dance and act believably.

"The trick is to make the audience feel as if they are themselves singing and dancing, without letting them be aware of it. It's a heightened reality, it's not naturalistic theater. Not that naturalistic theater isn't heightened reality, of course, but when you have to justify the enormous projection of energy that it takes to just go into song or dance, you realize why it's such a humbling experience every time. And I'm still learning."

The act that Ms. McKechnie will present at Arci's is an abridgement of a one-woman theatrical memoir she hopes to bring to Broadway soon entitled "Inside the Music." While she has directed the show at Arci's Place, a fellow "Chorus Line" alumnus, Thommie Walsh, will direct the longer theatrical version. The book for that show was written by Christopher Durang. "I wanted Chris from the start," she said. "But it was only a fantasy, truthfully. I was shocked when he actually said yes."

And what is her show about?

"A little girl from the Midwest in the 1950's who runs away to New York to be a dancer," she said.

For years now, Ms. McKechnie has continued to work, often on the road, in practically any legitimate vehicle that will have her -- from the ill-fated "Annie Warbucks" of several seasons back to the critically acclaimed 1998 Paper Mill Playhouse revival of "Follies" in which she delivered what many regarded as the definitive portrayal of Sally Durant, the nostalgia-blinded former chorus girl.

"Being in theater is a brutal career choice, third maybe to boxing and prostitution," Ms. McKechnie said. "But I'm very proud of it. It is amazing that I'm still doing this. But it was always really important to me to be a creative artist. Not to be a star, not to be rich, not to be famous. My impulse as a dancer was never just to move but rather to interpret the music. I needed meaning. It completed me."

Photo: Donna McKechnie, who will perform at Arci's Place. (Ruth Fremson/The New York Times)

