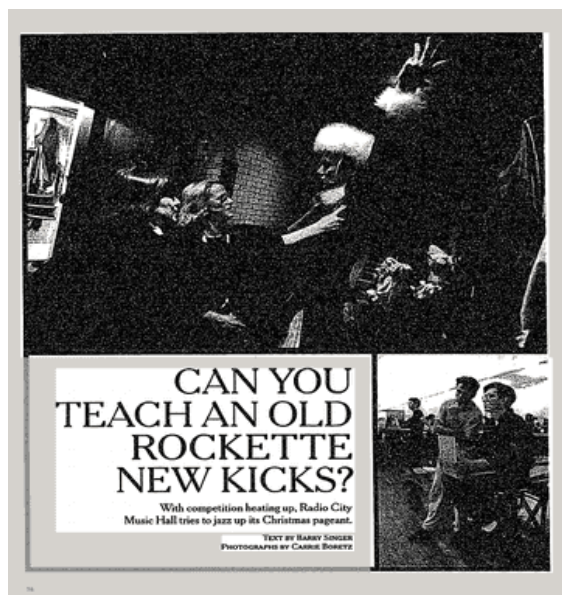


Can You Teach an Old Rockette New Kicks?

By Barry Singer

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IT IS THE THIRD SATURDAY IN October, the weekend before rehearsals formally begin for the Radio City "Christmas Spectacular," and no dancing Rockettes are slated to be anywhere near the Music Hall. One Rockette though (a backstage-tour escort), in full-spangled plume, has just entered this seventh-floor rehearsal room as silently as a Rockette in spangles can enter a room. Her new boss is putting three male assistants -- Rockette approximators -- through some new paces, her new paces, and the Rockette is anxious. Among her peers and assorted Radio City personnel, she is not alone.

For the first time in memory, there is a legitimate challenge to Radio City's reign as the American capital of holiday revenue (\$35.5 million last year) and revue. Madison Square Garden (along with Nickelodeon Family Classics) is mounting a big-dollar musical version of "A Christmas Carol" -- the same Dickens chestnut that has long occupied a favored spot in the Radio City show. Talk about nerve. Talk about pressure.

And who has Radio City hired to reshuffle its Rockettes and fuss with its dancing bears (if not to lay a hand on its camels, its Wooden Soldiers or the birth of Jesus)? Robert Longbottom, a director and choreographer whose biggest hit was the Off Broadway "Pageant," a wicked parody in which beauty pageant contestants were played by drag queens.

Longbottom inherits 57 Rockettes, up to 36 of whom will appear on stage at any given time. "I wanted to do something a little more up-to-date, a little sexier," he explains after his Rockette visitor has left. "I've scrambled them up, before getting them back into that kick line." Longbottom, a boyish 37-year-old with sober black eyeglasses, turns back to his whirling assistants. "I know they can do it."

Change, for the "Christmas Spectacular," has long meant unchange. "Everyone wants to be new and 'now' but nobody wants to stray too far from Grandma's house," is how Howard Kolins, the show's producer, puts it. "Flattery is the greatest source of . . . no . . . well . . . copying is the greatest source of, well . . . imitation is the mother of theatrical inspiration. We change very carefully."

Clearly there is nothing more miraculous about Radio City Music Hall and its "Christmas Spectacular," replete with Rockettes, than the fact that they each still exist at all. How do you keep alive, gracefully, New York's grandest movie palace, its gaudiest stage revue and the lone kick line left in town? What becomes an anachronism most?

Tasseled drapery. Hydraulic stage-craft. Regimental tapping pulchritude. Christmas.

It isn't easy.

SINCE THE MUSIC HALL'S opening night, Dec. 27, 1932, nearly 2,000 Rockettes have kicked across the 144-foot stage. Though no one at the Music Hall will confirm it, a weight-limit infraction is just about the only thing that can get a Rockette fired. Lengthwise, Rockettes must measure between 5 feet 5 1/2 inches and 5 feet 9 inches; to create the illusion of uniform height so central to Rockette mystique, the tallest are spotted in the middle of the line, with the rest splayed out in descending order.

There are 13 new Rockettes this season, an extraordinarily high number. Longbottom's production team includes Henry Krieger, the composer of "Dreamgirls" whose new opening tune, "Santa's Gonna Rock and Roll" (with lyrics by Bill Russell), rockets the show into the 1990's by way of the 1950's.

Longbottom has also been turned loose on the "Nutcracker Suite" segment, a Radio City ballet standard performed by human dancers dressed as really big bears.

In rehearsal clothes, no two Rockettes are much alike -- a reassuring sight somehow, confounding the cult of uniformity. Fanned out, they fill the studio almost wall to wall. Longbottom's male dance trio demonstrates the new opening number.

"Ladies, please stand tall."

Like teen-agers at their first prom, the Rockettes have been swaying hesitantly to the music. Wham! -- 114 tap shoes now land in near unison on the hardwood. Bam! -- the line crumbles and reforms. Frug-ing and flashes of the Mashed Potato insinuate themselves into the Rockettes' insular universe. "Not bad," Longbottom mutters at the reckless climax. The Rockettes giggle and gasp for breath, flushed survivors of a brand new roller coaster ride.

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RADIO CITY MUSIC HALL, AS A corporate pyramid, operates with intimidating efficiency on seemingly equal parts bureaucracy, paranoia and tightly budgeted craftsmanship. Bonnie Sinclair, director of costume and wardrobe, is particularly concerned with uniformity: "Rockettes' hems must be measured from the floor up, with shoes on, to make sure they all line up exactly the same. It's a special science." The publicity staff maintains a watchful

omnipresence: "No, you can only speak to Santa Claus in character. Santa Claus, for us, is like Mickey Mouse for Disney. Santa does not exist out of costume." The Rockettes themselves, of course, have their own concerns. "New girls will step in and grab hold and the girl next to her will have to say, 'Don't hang on me!' " says Beth Woods, an 11-year veteran. "We really don't touch -- even though it looks like we're all connected. You have to hold your own self up."

James A. McManus, Radio City's president and chief executive, oversees the empire from his own historical perspective: "Walt Disney Productions for 10 years. I was involved to a large degree with the planning and construction of Walt Disney World."

"Me?" chips in Arlen Kantarian, a marketing executive. "Before this, I was vice president of marketing for the N.F.L. Before that? Pepsico."

Dress rehearsal backstage, it is like war. The troops massed in the wings. The overwhelming light and sound. The displaced farm animals (awaiting the Nativity). The Rockette armadas charging up from the basement.

The Rockettes' new costumes, of green velveteen, are shredding under the armpits and elsewhere. "And that's still no excuse for their not knowing where they are!" Longbottom moans as Rockettes roam the stage. The dangling silver balls on their new green hats dangle too far, slugging many a Rockette in the mouth.

NOV. 11: YES, THERE IS AN opening night, with full panoply -- freshly powdered Rockettes beneath a glittering marquee. Across the avenue, protesters from the Society of Stage Directors and Choreographers rail against the Music Hall's longstanding refusal to pay royalties to the Christmas Show's freelance

creators, like Bobby Longbottom. At his window table in the Rainbow Room, 65 floors above Rockefeller Center, Longbottom sweats through a lavish preopening supper.

Moments before 7:30 P.M., Rudolph Giuliani steps out from behind the Music Hall's towering stage curtain and offers a mayoral welcome. The orchestra pit rises majestically. The lights dim. It is time for Christmas in November.

Virtual entertainment ecumenicism. That is the Radio City "Christmas Spectacular" in sum. The show is a brazenly affectionate compendium of theatrical Americana: a little vaudeville, a whole lot of burlesque, along with Broadway, the circus, the theme park, Saturday morning cartoons -- all laced with a powerful dose of old, old-time religion. "People just love the idea of variety," Longbottom observes wonderingly, "and this show is relentless. At the end, you just want to say: 'Enough!' "

The new opening number clicks. The Rockettes' ponying splashes of rock-and-roll kitsch tickle the ticketholders, who clap in time to the beat -- but fully applaud only when the kick line surfaces. The reconceived "Nutcracker" proves bearishly balletic and genuinely charming. Ultimately, though, it is Roxy Rothafel's extraordinary auditorium that comes off best, elevating everything, if only by proximity.

The Radio City hierarchy is, for the moment, satisfied. Change has come and gone and the paying customers did not revolt. They seem hardly to have noticed, in fact. Advance sales are stronger than last year, and a sixth show has been added to the already unholy five-a-day schedule. Madison Square Garden's "Christmas Carol" remains but a distant, untested threat.

"This is not an official offer, but I believe I will do the show next year," concedes a weary Bobby Longbottom after the curtain has fallen on the last robed Radio City pilgrim. "I've also just been hired to create a new musical 'Wizard of Oz' on ice, which should be fun, though I don't skate. I think I might need a minute or two away from Christmas just now."