

Sacramento LOA caps '99 season with a rousing 'CHORUS LINE'

This is show biz at its naked core

By Karen D'Souza
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This Pulitzer Prize-winning musical goes behind the scenes at one of those grueling exercises in alienation known as a Broadway audition head shots in their hands and fear in their hearts, 17 dancers pour out their souls, sweat, and wait as their ranks dwindle to the magical chorus line number of eight.

Sacramento Light Opera Association's first-rate incarnation of this Michael Bennett musical runs through Sunday under the blue-and-green big top.

Welcome to 1975, when velour body suits, dorky suspenders and Jordache jeans were all the rage. It may be a trick of lighting, but this cast of hard bodies actually makes them synthetic fashion faux pas look cool.

Chorus Line may be dated, but the central themes of Chorus Line remain insightful, true and thrilling. To wit, auditioning is an extreme sport. This is show business at its naked core. It's about smiling until your face cracks, lying about your age (or experience) and dancing as fast as you can.

Rejection and unemployment are unavoidable rites of passage. Anyone with

skin thinner than burlap need not apply.

Zach, the director, is a sort of dancing drill sergeant who works the dancers into a frenzy of movement. In the opening moments of the show, during the signature *I Hope I Get It* number, the sweat literally flies off the stage. Zach (Blane Savage) scrutinizes every move the dancers make. At a glance he targets one hapless auditioner as not up to snuff. "Girl in the back, Any ballet?" When she says no, he barks, "Don't dance!" She skulks off the stage, her dream crumpled up in her dance bag.

Savage, who appeared in the film version of this show, spends most of the play in the shadows. His gruff questions cut through the darkness like the voice of God as he puts the would-be chorines through their paces.

As if jazz, tap, and ballet weren't enough, Zach demands that the company members bear their deepest secrets about their childhoods, their hopes, and their insecurities. As the stage revolves, the dancers grapple with issues of molestation, coming out as a homosexual, and turning 30 in a

twenty-something profession.

Far from being anonymous cogs in a high-kicking machine, each dancer emerges as a deeply committed individual.

Sheila (Paula Leggett Chase, who rocks in the role she played on Broadway) can't come to grips with her age. After all, at 29 she figures she's got only a few years left as a hooper. So she smokes, pops Valium (hey, it's the '70s) and cracks wise to hide her vulnerability.

The vagaries of time mean nothing to Val (Mia Price), for whom silicone is a middle name, Val Wiggles her way through *Dance Ten: Looks Three*, a homage to the wonders of cosmetic surgery. In her mind, the keys to theatrical success are the bust and the bottom. OK, so she puts it in snappier terms.

As it happens, bawdy language and adult themes pepper the script, but there's nothing: vulgar about the proceedings. Look past the sass and strut and you discover a musical about incurable romantics clinging to their art in a world ruled by commerce.

Show-stopping songs such as *What I Did for Love* and

Nothing, which Vonnie Roemer nails, suffuse the musical with poignancy, grit, and electricity. Roemer plays Diana, who went to acting school to learn how to "be an ice cream cone." Her passionate retelling of arcane improvisational classes is worth the price of admission.

If there is a false note in this show, it is the romantic entanglement between Zach and Cassie (Kathi Gillmore), the has-been star who wants back in the chorus. Savage and Gillmore fail to make a believable connection between the two characters, robbing the show of some of its underlying tension.

In the end however, there is room in this musical for only one obsession and that is the stage. In the climactic *One*, the dancers are pitted against each other in a battle of top hats and timing. All that matters is - beating the other person out of the spotlight.

For anyone who has ever been drawn to the ritual madness of life in the theater, A CHORUS LINE remains a singular sensation.

