

SPOTLIGHT

ON *Chita Rivera*

by Clint Hamblin



Chita Rivera and Gwen Verdon in Chicago

A star of legendary proportions, Tony Award winning Chita Rivera continues to be the most versatile and compelling actress ever to appear on Broadway. Rivera has originated what have become unsurpassable performances of classic musical char-

acters. She is a rare irreplaceable breed, with seemingly no one on Broadway multitalented enough to fill her shoes.

The triple-threat actress, singer and dancer extraordinaire, Chita Rivera, will be in Boston for the national tour of *The Dancer's Life* on Tuesday, May 1 through



Chita Rivera in The Dancer's Life

Sunday, May 6 at the Colonial Theatre. Written by Terence McNally and directed by Graciela Daniele, Rivera's living retrospective is filled with celebrated musical selections from her numerous Broadway credits.

When asked how it all started, Rivera remembered being an energetic 11-year-old. "My mother sent me out of the house because I was breaking everything. I was sent to a ballet school where I did as I was told." George Balanchine's officials picked the home-wrecking Chita del Rivero to join the New York City Ballet, but it wasn't long after that when chance led to Broadway and a remarkable journey began.

"I was a 17-year-old ballerina who accompanied a friend to an audition for the Broadway chorus of *Call Me Madam*," Rivera remembered. "I had no intention of pursuing a part in the show and was really surprised when Jerome Robbins cast me as a principal dancer."

Robbins would later direct and choreograph the ground breaking *West Side Story*, choosing the young Rivera to play Anita. This 1957 production is generally thought of as Rivera's transition from the chorus to Broadway star stature.

A flock of Broadway credits followed, including *Bye Bye Birdie* with Dick Van Dyke and the Tony and the Drama Desk Awards for Best Actress for her performance in *The Rink* with Liza Minnelli.

Rivera was cast in the film version of *Sweet Charity*, playing Nicky opposite Shirley MacLaine. After a lengthy stay in Los Angeles, friends and colleagues Fred Ebb, John Kander and Bob Fosse lured Rivera back to New York to star as Velma Kelly opposite Gwen Verdon in their new musical, *Chicago*. Rivera did a cameo in the more recent film of the same name.

In December of 2002, Rivera was the first Hispanic to receive the coveted Kennedy Center Honor in Washington, DC, and her sixth Tony nomination followed for co-starring with Antonio Banderas in *Nine*.

Rivera's continued employment on Broadway has lasted more than 50 years. Now in her mid-70s, she is more vibrant and alive than you would ever expect.

When asked why the retrospective, Rivera recalled, "A producer asked if I'd

be interested in doing a production about my life as a dancer and I didn't think I would because I didn't want to talk about me. I was sitting next to Liz Taylor at the Kennedy Center when about 45 brilliant dancers came out on stage, and that's when I realized that I had to do this show."

The Dancer's Life covers Rivera's journey from a 17-year-old aspiring ballerina to the Broadway legend she has become. Having worked with such greats as Fosse, Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim, Rivera performs the song and dance numbers she made famous in some of her biggest hits, including *West Side Story*, *Chicago*, *Bye Bye Birdie* and *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. Musical numbers including "America," "Somewhere," "All That Jazz," "Put On A Happy Face," "Big Spender" and so many more are all performed by Rivera and her company.

Rivera's passion for theater is rivaled only by her passion for dance. For several years, she has been an honorary board member of Boston Youth Moves (BYM), a local non-profit organization dedicated to the arts. Established by Jeannette Neill and Jim Viera, BYM offers scholarships and dance-training programs for teenagers in the Greater Boston area.

"Jeannette Neil is doing an unbelievable job," Rivera said, "Her technique, warm-up - she really does it right. She is totally dedicated to her kids and if she needs me to speak or be at a function, I'm always available."

"Chita is very generous with her time," said Neill of Jeannette Neill Dance Studio. "The young dance students truly appreciate who she is and respect her amazing accomplishments."

Already looking toward her next project, Rivera is considering doing *The Visit*. "Kander and Ebb wrote *The Visit* which we did at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago," she continued. "We got good reviews, and we think it may come up the later part of this year or first of next year." McNally did the adaptation from the film starring Ingrid Bergman and Anthony Quinn. "We had a great time with it in Chicago," Rivera said. "We're hoping to do it at the Signature Theatre outside of Washington with Ann Reingold directing."

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