

Michael Bennett

Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered History in America, 2004

Born: April 08, 1943 in Buffalo, New York, United States

Died: July 02, 1987 in Tucson, Arizona, United States

Nationality: American

Occupation: Producer

BENNETT, Michael (8 April 1943; 2 July 1987), dancer, choreographer, and director.

Born Michael Bennett DiFiglia in Buffalo, New York, one of two sons to a machinist father and a secretary mother, Bennett began dance lessons at the age of 3. He became proficient in tap and jazz dance and before finishing high school joined an international tour of *West Side Story* in the role of Baby John, directed by Jerome Robbins. Upon returning to New York he achieved success in the dance ensemble of several Broadway shows, including *Subways Are For Sleeping* (1961), *Here's Love* (1963), and *Bajour* (1964). Ambitious and highly motivated to achieve his own distinctive success, he choreographed his first professional musicals, *A Joyful Noise* (1966) and *Henry, Sweet Henry* (1967) before he was twenty-five years old. Both of these musicals flopped, but Bennett received critical acclaim for his efforts, and the first of several Tony Award nominations for his choreography. Bennett's efforts subsequently moved steadily toward commercial success, as in his choreography for Neil Simon's *Promises, Promises* (1968), Andre Previn and Alan Jay Lerner's *Coco* (1970), Stephen Sondheim and George Furth's *Company* (1970), and Sondheim's *Follies* (1971) which Bennett co-directed with theatrical veteran Hal Prince. For *Follies*, Bennett won two Tonys, one for direction and one for choreography.

Bennett's most important work, *A Chorus Line*, opened at the Newman Theater at the New York Public Theater in May 1975 and moved to Broadway in July of that year. Universally hailed as a landmark of musical theater craft, the work resulted from more than a year of development in which dancers discussed their personal histories in tape-recorded sessions which were then adapted into songs, monologues, and dance sequences coordinated by Bennett and his collaborators. The resulting "backstage musical" chronicled the lives of seventeen Broadway dancers during a grueling audition. The show welded confessional stories of childhood fantasies, dysfunctional family life, sexual identity confusion, and professional disappointments to a carefully coordinated structure of costume, lighting, musical score, staging, and humorous dialogue. Widely celebrated as the ultimate Broadway musical, *A Chorus Line* ran 6,137 performances before it closed 28 April 1990 and garnered many awards, including the Pulitzer Prize, the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, and the Tony Award for best musical.

Himself bisexual, Bennett's work consistently broached sexuality to appeal to lesbian, gay, and bisexual audiences. *A Chorus Line* included frank discussions of sexuality by several gay characters and offered an array of coming out stories within the supportive social environment of entertainment professionals. Bennett's next Broadway hit, *Dreamgirls* (1981), chronicled the rise of an African American girl-group from amateur talent shows to international stardom. Set in the 1960s and 1970s, *Dreamgirls* featured fantastical glamorous imagery admired by some LGBT audiences, including exquisite costumes and production numbers reminiscent of Hollywood film musicals of the 1940s. Bennett's unproduced musical *Scandal* (1984) explored a woman's sexual adventures in Europe and included a "ménage-à-trois ballet" as well as a lesbian sex fantasy sequence.

Bennett formed Plum Productions to oversee his business interests in 1971. Clearly interested in the wellbeing of the New York dance and musical theater communities, in 1977 he used profits from his successes to purchase a building at 890 Broadway in New York and converted the space into a premiere dance rehearsal site. Although he directed some nonmusical plays, including George Furth's *Twigs* (1971)

and Neil Simon's *God's Favorite* (1974), he achieved greater renown as choreographer and "show doctor" for other people's projects, including Cy Coleman and Dorothy Fields' *Seesaw* (1973), the musical that made Tommy Tune a Broadway star.

Provocative, acerbic, and emotionally manipulative, Bennett enjoyed no long-term intimate relationships and remained closeted to those he did not know well. According to associates, his brief marriage to Donna McKechnie, a star dancer with whom he worked in *Promises, Promises*, intended to offer him entry to a heterosexual world of entertainment industry power-brokers; their union lasted from 4 December 1976 until their divorce in 1978.

Known as the "king of backstage musicals," Bennett also developed *Ballroom* (1978), which was a commercial and critical disappointment, and *Chess* (1986), but was forced to withdraw from the latter as his health declined. Bennett moved to Tucson, Arizona, in 1986, and died there of AIDS-related cancer in 1987. The next year, he was elected to the Theater Hall of Fame. His legacy to the world of musical theater was to celebrate craftsmanship that knits plot, character, music, stage design, and dance into a seamless whole, fully equipped with emotional highs and lows best suited to the theatrical moment.

Thomas F. DeFrantz

Further Readings

Bibliography

- Gerard, Jeremy. "Michael Bennett, Theatrical Innovator, Dies at 44." *New York Times* 3 July 1987.
- Mandelbaum, Ken. *A Chorus Line and the Musicals of Michael Bennett*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989.

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