



Martha Swope

Donna McKechnie in *A Chorus Line*—"Seeking approval in the mirror."

## Broadway's Bountiful Season

**The economy notwithstanding, New York's Great White Way is aglow with a diversity of hits and box-office jubilation.**

by Henry Hewes

As the 1974-75 season emerged, it became evident that Broadway was more bountiful than usual. Amazingly, at a time when most other businesses were hurting, box-office revenue was up 25 percent over the previous year and came within \$1.5 million of surpassing the all-time 1967-68 high of \$58,941,809. It appeared that people forced to eliminate the larger expenditures from their budget were substituting the more modest luxury of theatergoing. Or possibly the increased attendance could be attributed to the extraordinary diversity of the kinds of theater to be found not just

on Broadway but all over New York City.

Everyone was delighted to follow the world-weary, cocaine-addicted Sherlock Holmes as he nonchalantly employed all his brain and a little of his heart to stay one jump ahead of the ruthless arch-criminal Professor Moriarty. Equally popular was Peter Shaffer's more modern psycho-detective story, *Equus*, about a boy's worship of horses, and about the conflict between that pure passion and the dull norms of society which led him to a shocking, brutal act.

A horse of quite a different color was provided by a pair of South African actors in two short plays by white

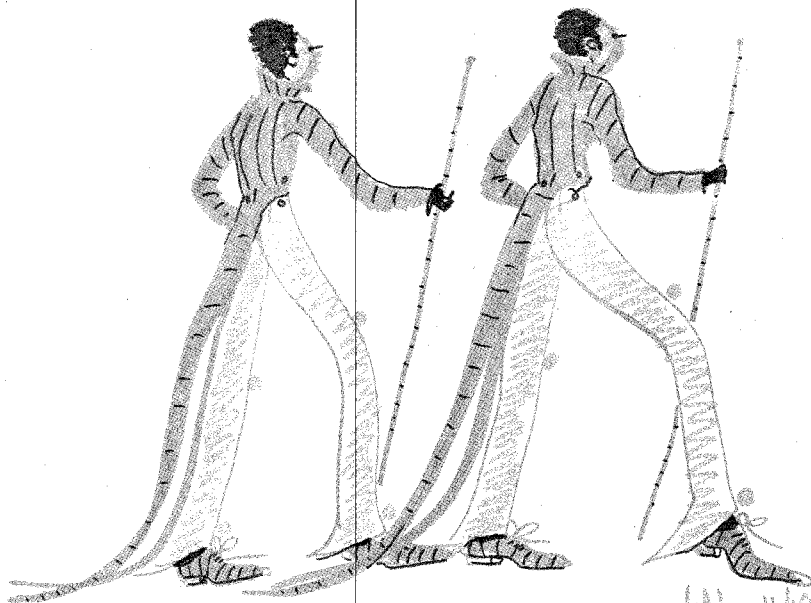
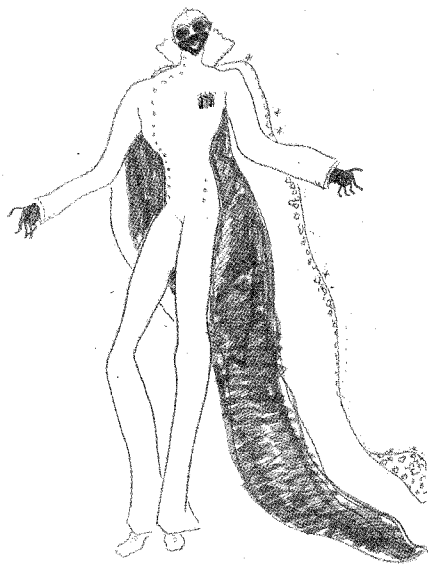
playwright Athol Fugard, about the wretched conditions endured by the black population in South Africa. In the first of these plays, *The Island*, the two actors were convicts who excavated their own souls in a way that both used and burst the conventions of theater. In the other play, *Siswe Banzi Is Dead*, they showed an incredible good nature and sense of ludicrous humor that made their tribulations about identity all the more poignant. Also joking about a grim subject was *The National Health*, Peter Nichols's grotesque romp through a British hospital ward, which obliquely managed to reaffirm life among the sick and dying.

A grimmer subject still is the grief and despair underlying the apparent congeniality of a family at Sunday dinner. Eduardo de Filippo's *Saturday, Sunday, Monday* proved a spirited and moving treatment of this universal theme. A new translation of Molière's *The Misanthrope*, with a great, elegantly decadent set by Tanya Moiseiwitsch, made an eloquently bitter statement about sophisticated modern living.

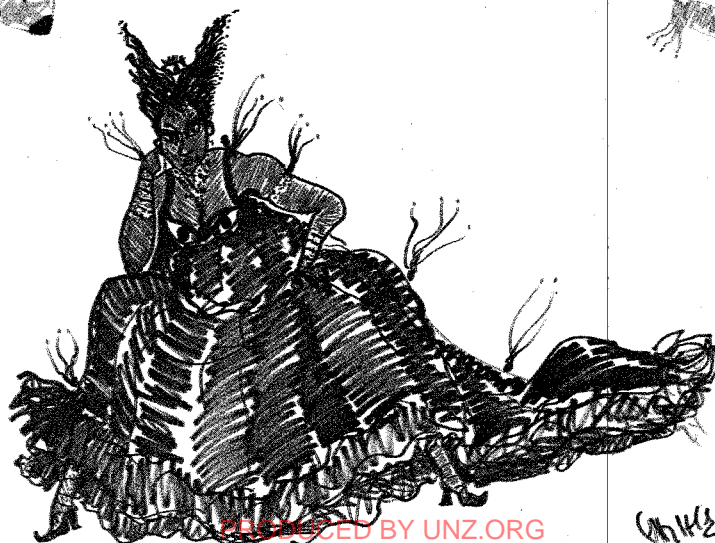
There was much difference of opinion about Edward Albee's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Seascape*. Some found its leisurely first act so boring that even its more interesting second act could not redeem the play. Others adjusted to the tempo and became totally fascinated with the playwright's imaginative perspective on our civilization and its probable future.

A similar controversy was provoked by the appearance on Broadway of Robert Wilson's unique and strange *A Letter for Queen Victoria*, whose non-linear form baffled and bored Broadway-conditioned audiences, but which evoked admiration from some of the leading critics and won Wilson a Maharam Award for his imaginative use of design.

Of this assortment of the most significant Broadway plays, only *Sherlock Holmes* and *Equus* were box-office hits. But the theatergoer was also pleased to find a modest supply of less-demanding evenings available. Among the other entertaining shows that wound up in the black were Bernard Slade's *Same Time, Next Year*, Alan Ayckbourn's *Absurd Person Singular*, and Terence Rattigan's *In Praise of Love*; and revivals of Noel Coward's *Private Lives*, Somerset Maugham's *The Constant Wife*, and the Arthur Laurents, Stephen Sondheim, Jule Styne musical *Gypsy*. In addition to these eight, two comedies (Murray



*Geoffrey Holder's original costume sketches for The Wiz.*







Polly at Brooklyn's Chelsea Theater Center—Brought Carrie F. Robbins the Maharam Award for her costume designs.

Schisgal's *All Over Town* and Terrence McNally's *The Ritz*) and three musicals (*The Wiz* by William F. Brown and Charlie Smalls, *Shenandoah* by Philip Rose, Gary Geld, and Peter Udell, and *Rodgers and Hart*) also retained the possibility of becoming financial successes.

Although many hailed this prosperity as a sign that "show biz as usual" was still healthy, an honest analysis indicates that this season's richness can be largely attributed to long-overdue changes in theatrical-production methods that are now beginning to make themselves felt. The most visible example of this came at the very end of the season with the production of *A Chorus Line*.

BEFORE MOVING to Broadway's Shubert Theater, this new smash hit had opened in May at Off-Broadway's Public Theater, and had been voted Best Musical of the season by the New York Drama Critics Circle. Moreover, it won this honor by an even greater margin than did *Fiddler on the Roof* in 1965. This is astonishing because *A Chorus Line* seems to be a random collection of unremarkable elements. Yet these unremarkable elements are so sensitively orchestrated that in the theater, at least, they become ultimately thrilling and totally remarkable.

The musical begins casually. A choreographer is auditioning dancers for the

chorus line of a forthcoming Broadway show. In businesslike fashion he reduces the group to 17 applicants for eight jobs. The final testing takes place on a stage that is bare except for a white stripe painted across the floor and a back wall of mirrors somewhat more splendid than the ones found in dance studios. Robin Wagner has designed these mirrored panels so that they rotate from silver to black as the action moves back and forth from reality to theatrical make-believe. Similarly, Tharon Musser has created a subtly effective lighting scheme wherein the dancers' public confrontations are played in white light, and their private thoughts and inner emotional responses are done in a purplish glow.

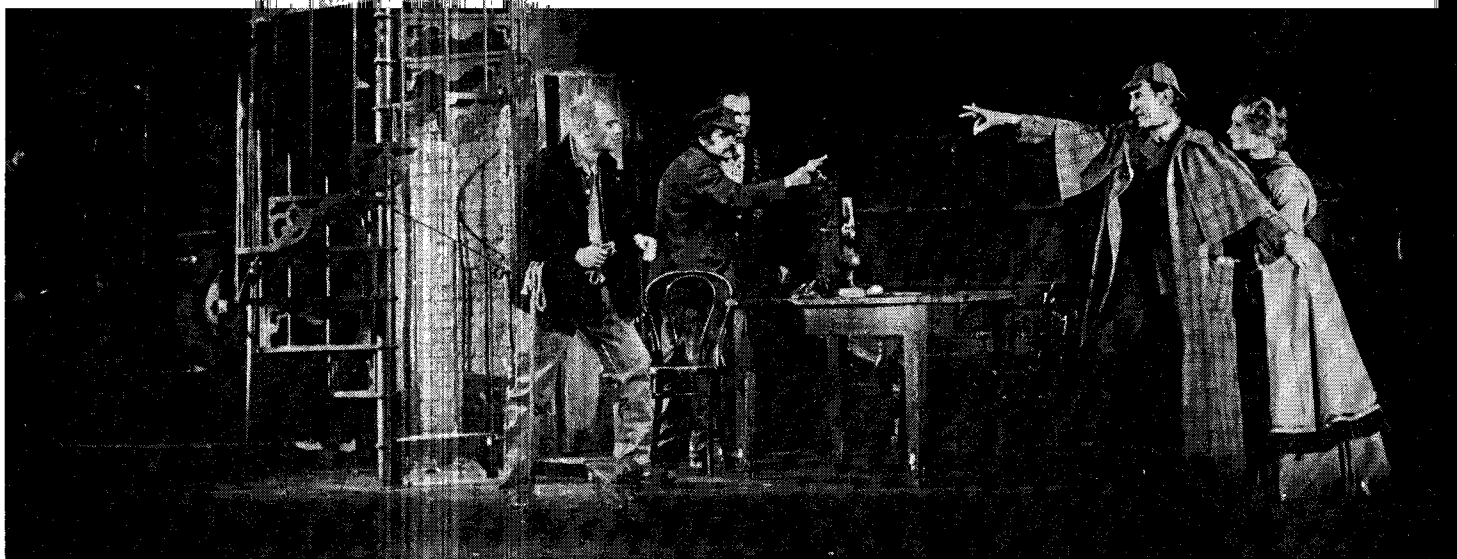
The plot is simple. Because the dancers will be required to speak a few lines in the show for which they are auditioning, the choreographer, Zach, asks each of them to step forward and tell him something about themselves. What they tell, either in monologue or in song, turns out to be quite ordinary, but becomes unusually compelling. These are the experiences of unspecial people, and they describe the cultural poverty of mainstream America. Some talk about how the ballet was their fantasy escape from a sordid or frustrated home life. Others tell about the terrifying discoveries of their adolescence. And a few others tell about the pain of starting out to pursue a career in New York.

Why are these confessions so engaging? It is because they are spoken by characters whose ordinary lives are going to be made extraordinary by relatively short careers of faithfully executing complicated, but not very profound, chorus-line routines on Broadway. Furthermore, the whole process takes on an extra dimension when we realize that the cast is made up of the very people who are seeking such careers.

The most striking instance of this is Donna McKechnie's portrayal of Cassie, who is too good for the chorus line but who is tired of not quite making it as a star. It is hard for her to suppress her natural flair in order to fit in smoothly with the rest of the dancers, and in the purplish light she expresses her frustration in a marvelously dynamic dance solo, in which, like most dancers, she seeks approval in the mirror. Carole Bishop, as Sheila ("I'm going to be 30 real soon, and I'm real glad"), also expresses her own story and provides much of the show's humor with her sarcastic backtalk. Most memorable of the other dancers is Sammy Williams as Paul, who tells about the humiliating moment when his parents discovered he was working as a transvestite chorus boy—which, incidentally, is not Williams's story but that of Nicholas Dante, who co-authored the book with James Kirkwood.

Beautifully orchestrated music played by unseen musicians constantly but un-





Reg Wilson

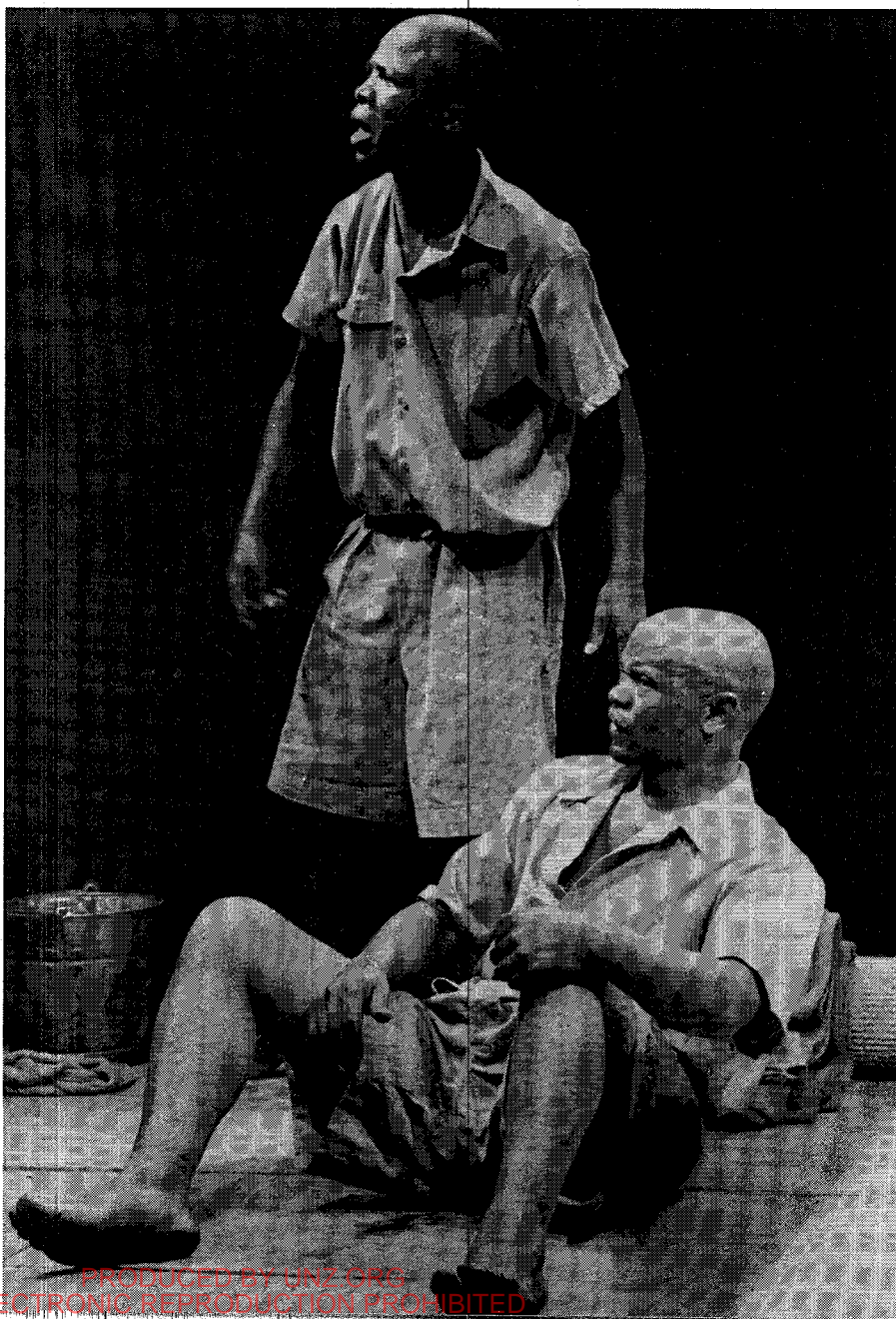
*Frank Dunlop's staging of Sherlock Holmes—The most entertaining revival in years.*

*John Kani and Winston Ntshona—  
Agonized prisoners in The Island.*

William L. Smith

obtrusively underscores almost all the action. Then, about two-thirds of the way through the audition, a note of inexorability is heard as the dancers are tested for elimination in an inspired piece of pseudo-sophistication about a girl so impossibly attractive that "one smile and you know no one else will do, you know you'll never be lonely with you know who." Zach leads them through a precisely timed series of maneuvers that would confound an NFL quarterback, and it is fascinating to see this meaningless magic so masterfully executed by human beings in practice clothes.

The action now becomes intense. In spite of their competing with each other, the dancers are united in their awareness of the desperate unsatisfactoriness of the work conditions they all must face over and over again. When one dancer who seemed sure to be hired badly injures his knee, his co-workers band together to help him, and seem to be saying, "An accident to any one of us is felt by all of us." Zach's final cruel question before his final cruel elimination of half the dancers is, "What do you do when you can't dance anymore?" After a variety of depressing answers, one girl (Priscilla Lopez) thoughtfully sings that she'll have no regrets because dancing is what she did for love, and "love is never gone, as we travel on, love's what we'll remember." This bittersweet sentiment is quickly followed by Zach's hiring eight



and firing eight. The audition is over and the lights fade out. However, as the audience begins its applause, the dancers reappear in fancy satin costumes to perform a kick-step production number. The contrast between the genuine and vulnerable backstage life we've been watching and the confident bravura of the polished number is overpowering. There is also a self-recognition by the audience, who can see themselves applauding in the mirror. The grinning dancers seem to be saying, "Our depersonalized, mechanical kick-step automatically makes you clap, and it means nothing. Theater and life both should be better than that, don't you think?" It is this communion of understanding between the common, yet potentially special, people on both sides of the painted line that gives *A Chorus Line* its universal evocativeness.

In the opinion of Michael Bennett, who conceived, choreographed, and directed *A Chorus Line*, it could not have been successfully created under prevailing Broadway conditions. Fourteen months ago he felt such despair about Broadway that he was considering buying some land for \$10 an acre in New Zealand and emigrating there, where he might start a modest theater. Then Joseph Papp asked him if he would be interested in staging a revival of *Knickerbocker Holiday*. Bennett, who had a few months earlier held two 12-hour talk sessions with 21 dancers and had encouraged one of them, Nicholas Dante, to try his hand at writing a script based on the kinds of things that were said during these sessions, countered with a proposal that Papp make it possible for him to work on a musical about dancers under workshop conditions. Papp's cus-



Fred Eberstadt

*The La Mama Repertory Troupe*

#### Critics' Choice—Best of the Season

(In approximate order of preference. Those originating in subsidized productions are followed by the names of those theaters or companies.)

*A Chorus Line* (Public Theater)  
*Equus* (National Theatre, England)  
*The Island* (Royal Court Theatre, England)  
*The National Health*  
 (National Theatre, England)  
 (Long Wharf Theater)  
 (Circle-in-the-Square)  
*The Taking of Miss Janie*  
 (New Federal Theater)  
 (Mitzi Newhouse Theater)  
*Siswe Banzi Is Dead*  
 (Royal Court Theatre, England)  
 (Long Wharf Theater)  
*Seascape*  
*Shenandoah* (Goodspeed Opera House)  
*The Wiz*  
*Same Time, Next Year*  
*Summerfolk*  
 (Royal Shakespeare Company)  
 (Brooklyn Academy of Music)  
*Saturday, Sunday, Monday*  
 (National Theatre, England)  
*Yentl, the Yeshiva Boy*  
 (Chelsea Theater Center)  
*Kid Champion* (Public Theater)  
*Absurd Person Singular*  
*The First Breeze of Summer*  
 (Negro Ensemble Company)  
*London Assurance*  
 (Royal Shakespeare Company, England)  
*The Sirens* (Manhattan Theater Club)  
*Mert and Phil* (Vivian Beaumont)  
*Black Picture Show* (Vivian Beaumont)  
*The Ritz* (Yale Repertory Theater)  
*Hothouse* (Theater Strategy)  
 (Chelsea Theater Center)  
*Fishing* (Public Theater)

#### Most Distinguished Revivals

(Henry Hewes's choice)  
*Sherlock Holmes*  
 (Royal Shakespeare Company)  
*The Good Woman of Setzuan*  
 (La Mama Repertory Troupe)  
*The Misanthrope*  
 (National Theatre, England)  
*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*  
 (American Shakespeare Festival)  
 (American National Theatre & Academy)  
*Mother Courage* (Performance Group)  
*Pericles* (New York Shakespeare Festival)  
*A Doll's House* (Vivian Beaumont)  
*The Sea Gull* (Manhattan Project)  
 (Public Theater)  
*All God's Chillun* (Circle-in-the-Square)  
*Where's Charley?* (Circle-in-the-Square)  
*Of Mice and Men*  
 (Southern Methodist University)

#### Most Interesting New Alternate Theater Productions

(Henry Hewes's choice)  
*Trilogy* (La Mama Repertory Troupe)  
*The Lost Ones* (Mabou Mines)  
*A Letter for Queen Victoria*  
 (Byrd Hoffman Foundation)  
*Pandering to the Masses*  
 (Ontological-Hysteric Theater)  
*The \$ Value of Man*  
 (Byrd Hoffman Foundation)  
 (Brooklyn Academy of Music)  
*Listen to Me* (Judson Poets Theater)  
*Hotel for Criminals* (Lenox Arts Center)  
*Stage Blood*  
 (Ridiculous Theatrical Company)

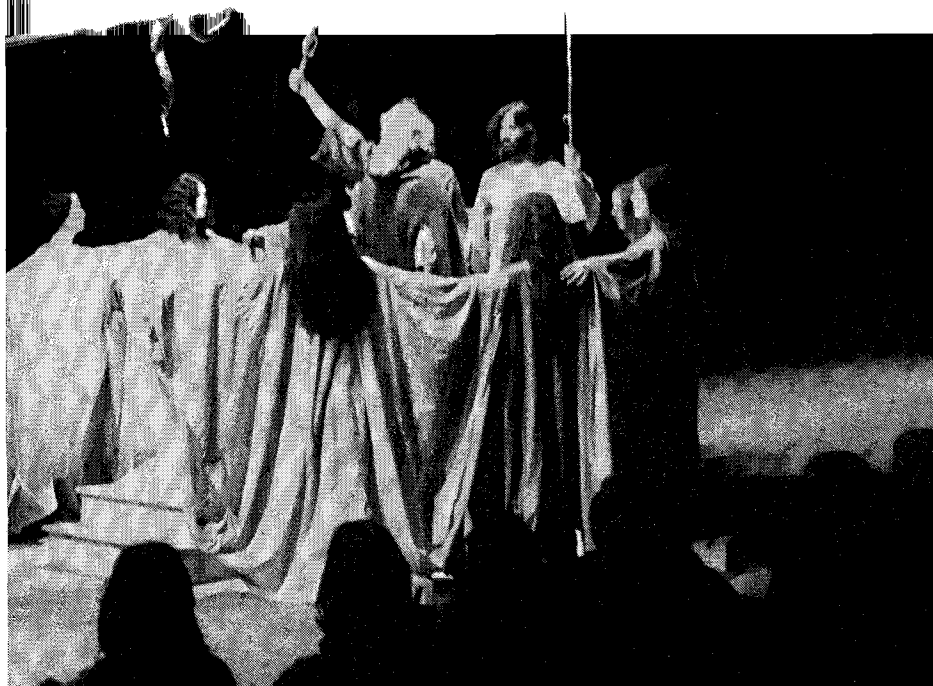
NOTE: *The Manhattan Project's* *Alice in Wonderland* and *the Ridiculous Theatrical Company's* *Bluebeard* were re-revived to further enrich the season.

tomary formula at the Public Theater is to begin new projects with a reading for which the actors are paid \$50 each, and then, if warranted, to proceed into a workshop with the actors receiving \$100 a week. In this case, however, he listened to a tape made up of excerpts from the talk session, for which the dancers were paid nothing. (However, they will all receive a share of the author's royalty, whether or not their particular words were used.) "I liked the project," says Papp, "because it was a single idea with a single purpose. But there was a great danger—sentimentality. It had to keep a hard, authentic, documentary quality."

BENNETT BROUGHT IN composer Marvin Hamlisch and lyricist Edward Kleban, whose earlier work at the La Mama Experimental Theatre Club had revealed his talent. At the end of August, Bennett and 16 dancers began a five-week workshop with a three-and-a-half-hour script and three songs. Then Bennett took time out to direct Neil Simon's new play, *God's Favorite*, on Broadway, returning to begin a second 10-week workshop at the end of December.

In mid-February Papp watched a rehearsal and became worried. "The show was becoming the very thing on which it was trying to shed some light," he says, "and the sequence with Cassie seemed pure soap opera. The work was innovative, but I wanted it to have more mean-





roduction of *Trilogy*—The season's outstanding theatrical achievement.

ing, to express the cry of these people." The producer had a tough decision to make. He'd invested \$54,000 in the two workshops, and proceeding into a full production was a costly commitment. Luckily for the Public Theater, which now stands to earn several million dollars from *A Chorus Line*, he didn't communicate his misgivings to Bennett, and decided to go ahead. But his decision was based not on the material but on his faith in Bennett's ability.

Papp further showed his confidence by staying away from the project until a preview early in May. When he saw it he wept and knew that Bennett had transformed the material into a hit: "In a funny way the so-called sentimentality had been drained out of the script by the music. The music was carrying the action of the show, freeing the actors from any task other than just speaking honestly."

Bennett had also solved the problem of Cassie's sequence, partly by dividing it into two scenes, and partly by using the other dancers to demonstrate the mechanized nature of what she had to deal with. The director says, "I suddenly realized that I had no right to tell Cassie not to go back to the chorus, so I gave her a chance to argue it out with Zach."

However, what guided the structuring of the musical was the goal of getting the audience to Paul's monologue without that monologue becoming shocking. Originally Paul had ended with the line,

"My father said, 'Take care of my son.'" Says Bennett, "It was too much a set piece. Then my secretary told me that Nicholas had told her it was the first time his father had ever called him 'son.' I added it, and the afterthought gave the speech a new shape, a fresh jump from past to present."

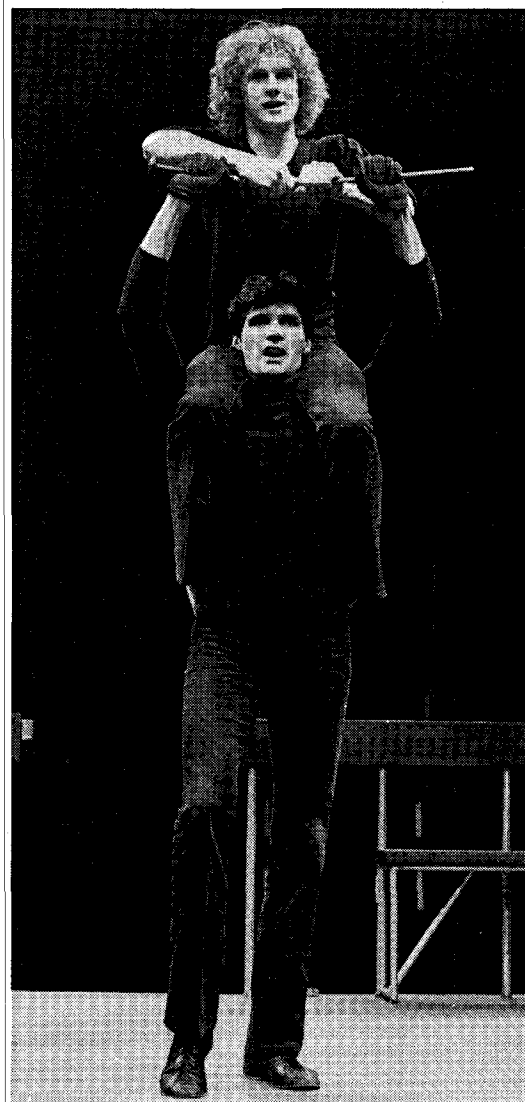
Also essential to the musical's statement was the ending, which cost an extra \$50,000 and was only added during the final two weeks of previews. "The ending gets the audience off the hook emotionally. The transformation of people it has come to know as individuals into a mechanical unit is the sad truth of the matter, but for many the dance is the kind of happy show-biz number they've been waiting for all evening." Bennett finds it most appropriate to a work that started out to be about show business and ended up by being about life.

*A Chorus Line* is, of course, only one of the overwhelming number of outstanding New York theater events to come from subsidized theaters. Of 23 works receiving votes in the New York Drama Critics Circle balloting, only four began as commercially financed Broadway productions (see box). And all of the season's most distinguished revivals also benefited from the creative hospitality of deficit-financed work.

ALL OF THIS suggests that passionate theatergoers will look more and more

to the Off-Off-Broadway sector for the most interesting theater. For, even this season, a considerable portion of the best theatergoing was found there in the so-called alternate theater. Indeed, the theatrical production some critics considered the outstanding achievement of 1974-75 was Andrei Serban's *Trilogy*, presented at the La Mama Annex. The work most imaginatively explored themes found in *Medea*, *The Trojan Women*, and *Electra*, pushing theater into a larger territory than we knew existed. Serban and his La Mama Repertory Troupe also fashioned a brilliant revival of Bertolt Brecht's *The Good Woman of Setzuan*.

Other alternate-theater groups had a good year, too. Mabou Mines boasted an actor, David Warrilow, who in an adaptation of *The Lost Ones* emerged  
(Continued on page 50.)



Van Williams

Peter Firth rides "Nugget" in *Equus*—Voted the season's best play.



## A CENTRAL VISION

### Ragtime

by E. L. Doctorow

Random House, 271 pp., \$8.95

Reviewed by Stanley Kauffmann

E. L. Doctorow's last novel, *The Book of Daniel* (1971), dealt with the children of a couple who had been executed in the early Fifties for atomic espionage. It was the best American political novel in a generation. Now he has written *Ragtime*, which takes place between 1908 and World War I and, though utterly distinct from the previous book in narrative and method, is a kind of prologue to it. Quintessentially *The Book of Daniel* depicted the ideological climate of mid-century: showing how political radicalism had been brought to this country from Central and Eastern Europe, how it had flourished under the economic pressures of the Thirties, and how the predominantly Anglo-Saxon, gently meliorist qualities of this country had been irrevocably changed. Now Doctorow goes back to the beginnings of that change, and he extends the scope from politics to a wide spectrum of an era, a fateful era. *Ragtime* is a unique and beautiful work of art about American destiny, built of fact and logical fantasy, governed by music heard and sensed, responsive to cinema both as method and historical datum, shaken by a continental pulse.

That makes it sound huge, but in fact it is a shorter novel than its predecessor. The size of *Ragtime* is in its subject, its depth, and its powerful distillations. Doctorow has worked with two principal groups of characters: historical personages—J. P. Morgan, Henry Ford, Harry Houdini, Emma Goldman, Harry



Illustrations: Culver

"The 'ragtime' effect of the book's prose captures a change in the rhythm of American life, a change to the accelerated, impelling beat of a new century."

Stanley Kauffmann is film and theater critic of the New Republic and teaches at York College. His latest book is *Living Images*.