

TheaterWeek

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The *Kiss of* **Chita**

BY GERARD RAYMOND

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Meet Chita!

The star of the West End's *Spider Woman* on dancing, drag, and death.

Gerard Raymond

Chita Rivera returns to Broadway in late spring with *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. It's been nine years since she won a Tony for *The Rink*—far too long a wait to see her in an original musical in New York. As *Spider Woman* director Hal Prince put it, she is “one the few remaining musical comedy superstars—they don't exist that way any more.”

Born Conchita del Rivero of Puerto Rican descent, the actress/singer/dancer is part of Broadway legend. She created the roles of Anita in *West Side Story*, Rose in *Bye Bye Birdie*, Anyanka in *Bajour*, Velma in *Chicago*, and Anna in *The Rink*. Now she's creating two roles: the movie star Aurora and that character's last role, the Spider Woman.

Kiss of the Spider Woman, based on the novel by Manuel Puig, with music by John Kander and lyrics by Fred Ebb, resurfaced in Toronto last June after the much publicized false start at Purchase, New York, the previous year. The show subsequently opened in London last October and won the Evening Standard Award for Best Musical. Terrence McNally's book for the musical is set in an unnamed Latin American country, specifically the prison cell which Valentin (Anthony Crivello), a political prisoner, is made to share with Molina (Brent Carver), a homosexual doing time for “corrupting a minor.” Molina copes with the horrors of torture and death around him by reenacting scenes from the films of his favorite actress, Aurora. Her performance of the Spider Woman haunts him. Throughout the musical, she acquires a life of her own, and seems to exist even outside Molina's movie fantasies.

Whatever your response to the work is—there are those who hate it and those who adore it—Chita Rivera gives a star performance as Aurora/Spider Woman. Displaying the energy and magnetism with which she mesmerized audiences who saw *West Side Story* 36 years ago,

Rivera weaves in and out of the narrative, entrusted with the almost impossible task of embodying the themes of the musical. All the more remarkable, as you watch her suspended in mid-air at the center of a giant spider-web, or whip up a storm in an energetic dance number, is the fact that this lady celebrates her 60th birthday this month. As one English critic rhapsodized tactfully, “Lifting her astonishingly flexible legs to almost unimaginable heights, it is impossible to believe that she is just a few months short of her bus pass.”

I met Rivera in her dressing room at the Shaftesbury Theater just before she had to go in for her make-up call. On the dressing table stands the short cut, Louise Brooks-type wig she wears as the Spider Woman, and in the adjoining room hang the slinky costumes she wears for her numerous appearances as Aurora. Dressed in black leather pants and sporting a red beret with a black feather, Rivera is warm and friendly. She is smaller in real life than her stage persona might lead you to believe. But as she talks passionately, making large gestures and flashing her wide smile, she projects that irresistible personality with which she effortlessly commands her audiences.

TheaterWeek: How did it come about that you are in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*?

Chita Rivera: As you know there was an earlier production in Purchase and a critic had suggested that I should be spoken to. I was offered the part by Fred Ebb, John Kander, and Terrence McNally—they were the group of men that did *The Rink*—and Hal Prince, with whom I did *West Side Story*. They are great friends of mine. Besides, I have been around long enough to know everybody!

Did you have any qualms about going into a show that had generated so much negative publicity in its first incarnation?

No, because when you have the best

people in the business you have to just trust. I am not a fool but I do trust, and Kander and Ebb I would trust with my life. They have proved it time and time again, and so has Terrence.

I saw the show in Purchase and it is an absolutely different show. When they knew they had me, they wrote it with me in mind. So I walked into a suit that fit. And then once you are in there, you get comfortable and make little changes.

What attracted you to the roles you play in the show?

The concept of the Spider Woman role is very interesting. I usually go towards that role when I start to talk about the show because Aurora is easier to play. She is simply Molina's imagination. I know they say the Spider Woman is also Aurora, but she is a whole other being—she is actually fate or death. I am far more interested in this character. I love the fact that I am allowed to play an alluring, loving, and welcoming death. I know Molina is fearful of her, but eventually he does welcome and accept her.

What did you think about while preparing to play... death?

My mind went immediately to a wonderful movie called *Death Takes a Holiday* with Fredric March. I have experienced many important departures in my life, and I just put all my thoughts and feelings about life after death into it. I find it interesting that the part has come my way. I have a feeling that it is a lesson for me, an education that I probably need myself. Many people speak words, but they don't listen to what they are saying. I lost my mother about seven years ago; it seems like yesterday. That was a difficult time for me, and at times it still is. So it's learning to accept all of that.

Everyone who sees you perform is struck by your remarkable agility.

[Rivera laughs] I think that is due to awfully good genes. My mother was an amazing woman, a beautiful, statuesque,

limber lady. My dad died while we were all quite young, so I don't remember much about him except that he was a musician and very loving. But my sister is very limber also, and my brother was an athlete, so I think it runs in the family.

You also trained under Balanchine as a ballet dancer when you were a

teenager. Do you still draw upon that experience?

Oh my goodness, yes. I think that classical ballet is really the first step and the strongest step a dancer can make. It's excellent technique. I started dancing when I was seven, and then I got a scholarship to the School of American Ballet when I was

14 and continued there for three years. I am just glad I didn't stay in the ballet, which was my intention. This way my life is much fuller and bigger—it takes a larger scope.

Do you train a lot to stay fit?

Just before I start a show, if there has been time in between shows. But for a long time, the shows would come one after the other. Then I would go to Positano and sit on the rocks and eat and drink whatever I wanted and get the sun. I'd relax and enjoy it—[making a wide gesture]—life! And then I'd swim and swim and swim. Also, the steps in Italy are excellent exercise. So you don't always have to be in a class. [Laughs] I wouldn't tell that to students. They have to go to class.

Whereas you have earned the right not to?

I have definitely earned the right not to! Absolutely! I wish I had said that! Dancers are absolute masochists. They don't realize it until it's too late.

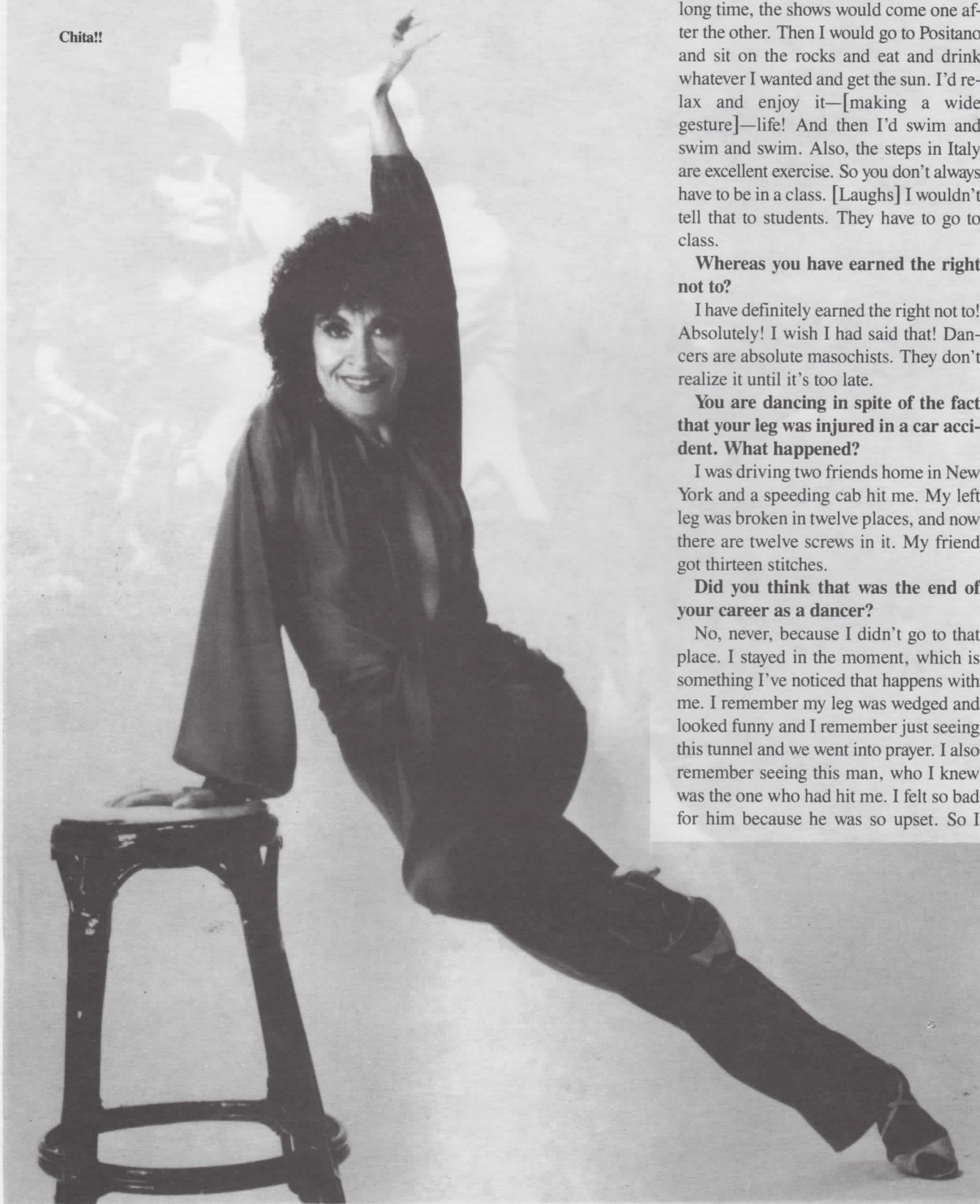
You are dancing in spite of the fact that your leg was injured in a car accident. What happened?

I was driving two friends home in New York and a speeding cab hit me. My left leg was broken in twelve places, and now there are twelve screws in it. My friend got thirteen stitches.

Did you think that was the end of your career as a dancer?

No, never, because I didn't go to that place. I stayed in the moment, which is something I've noticed that happens with me. I remember my leg was wedged and looked funny and I remember just seeing this tunnel and we went into prayer. I also remember seeing this man, who I knew was the one who had hit me. I felt so bad for him because he was so upset. So I

Chita!!



looked up at him and said, "I'm all right." By the way, do you know that, a year and a half later, I met him. Isn't that amazing! I was at an automobile dealership to pick out a car for my daughter and the dealer introduced me to this man saying, "This is the guy that hit you." He wasn't driving a cab anymore and he was very nice. I showed him the leg and said, "Look, look I'm fine." And at that moment we were able to just tie it all up with bow. That was lovely. I like that story a lot. I must give that little tale a name!

How did you get the leg back into shape?

I was out of commission for eleven months. I wanted to dance badly. First, I did my cabaret act. It was pretty difficult and I was not happy with my performance, but I had to do it, and I made it through the hour and 15 minutes. Then I took a few cruise ships. I felt that was an excellent way to do it, because I thought nobody would catch me out there if I made a fool of myself, they would never see me on the water. I did a few of those, which made me get stronger and stronger. That helped a lot, outside of my constant therapy.

And now, does it bother you at all?

It doesn't do anything when the weather gets bad, it's just different from the other leg. The only time I am reminded about my leg is when I go through security at the airport and the metal screws set off the alarm.

So the climbing you have to do in *Spider Woman* doesn't faze you at all?

Well, you see, I was a tomboy as a kid and if you are lucky, you never really lose the child. So there I am. It is perfect for me to be climbing. Cheetah is the monkey in *Tarzan* isn't it? So you see it all fits!

You were nominated for a Tony Award five times but didn't win, and referred to this in the song "Losing," which you performed in your cabaret show. How did you feel after you actually won the award on your the sixth nomination, for *The Rink* in 1984?

I am very honored that I have a Tony and I totally enjoy it, but I have this magnificent piece of special material ["Losing"] that Kander and Ebb wrote for me that I cannot use anymore. So which do I want—the Tony or the material? I always say the material! Actually, I am one of those people who really believes that the nomination is the most important thing.

But there were Tony parties and you would hear about the kids just screaming vulgarities because I would lose. I am just glad I got it so that everybody who was making me crazy about getting it—and wanting it for me—can relax now, and I can go on with my life.

The award notwithstanding, *The Rink* failed on Broadway!

Yes, it really broke all of our hearts, because we really believed in it. My image for *The Rink* was a beautiful one. There was this magnificent picture that I had framed of the gentlemen who tried to assassinate the Pope kneeling in front of the Pope. They had their hands together and it was just so moving. It was the ultimate forgiveness, and that was what *The Rink* was all about. It was about forgiveness between a mother and a daughter. It is a pity that a show like that had to go by the way-side, because it was important enough to share.

You've had your share of flops over the years—*Merlin* comes to mind.

Merlin was absolutely breathtaking—the illusions, the costumes, the sets. They say that Doug Henning should not have done it himself and maybe that was it. But this was the master who created all these illusions. Somebody decided they didn't like the way we were postponing and postponing, somebody got up on the wrong side of the bed—that is the way I feel about it.

Now I was in 149! [Meredith Willson's 1969 flop musical about Christopher Columbus] That should have been shut down, and even *Bring Back Birdie* (1981) was not as good as it should have been. The idea was sensational, but put together wrong. That was fine when it closed, but *Merlin*, there was a place for *Merlin*. And *The Rink*? I'll never forgive them for that!

Given the fact that you don't have any dialogue in *Spider Woman* and you don't have the chance to build up a real character, isn't this show different from anything you've done before?

It's odd for me not to be at the absolute core of a show but it is a challenge to encircle the play, to be above it. I call it being an outsider who almost controls everything that is going on. It was very hard for me at the beginning, because, for instance, the script just says "Spider Woman Fragment number 9." Fragments! I have to make the fragments into something whole.

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So how do you do it? What is the thread you have to hold the fragments together?

I don't really know how. That's a good question and you are making my life miserable! No, I am just joking. I am going to have to think about that!

The Aurora sequences were specially choreographed for you, weren't they?

Yes, we desperately needed extra choreography when we moved in from Canada. Rob Marshall is an up-and-coming choreographer and a wonderful man. He assisted Graciela Daniele on *The Rink*. He came in, saw what was needed to be done, and did it. And it fits and blends perfectly with the play. I certainly want Rob Marshall to do a lot of things for me.

But with your experience of having worked with Jerome Robbins, Bob Fosse—some of the great Broadway choreographers—have you ever wanted to choreograph for yourself?

I have a sense of what I want, but a sense is a very different thing from a gift. I don't have the gift. I can do high school versions for children, but I would never ever try to fool anybody with my talent as a choreographer.

The Aurora sequences deliberately evoke famous icons from cinema history—Marlene Dietrich, Carmen Miranda. Since they all come from the imagination of a gay man, do you ever feel you are playing aspects of Molina in drag?

Yes, but How much time do we have? How many hours? [She laughs.] It's wonderful, because we are all made up of male and female and some have stronger sides than others. It's the beautiful side of this particular man. And he treats what he considers beautiful with great respect and great love, and it's lovely to be enamored like that.

As a matter of fact, Brent [Carver, who plays Molina] and I do something nobody even sees: One day before we made our entrance through the curtain in his cell, he just [she demonstrates someone blowing gently in her direction]. I don't know if he was just breathing heavily or what but I received it as if he had breathed into my mouth and allowed me to come through. It was such a great image, because we are mirrors of each other. It gives me goose pimples to see how souls want to get into souls. Ohhh!

TW