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National Museum of African American History and Culture

Playbill for The Piano Lesson

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BROADWAY BABIES continued

made into a star, and Vereen's sinous, pelvic-grinding routine in the war sequence became famous when captured in the first successful television advertisement for a Broadway show.

In his last two shows, Dancin'(1978) and Big Deal (1986), Fosse did away with collaborators altogether. No one had ever dared attempt a full evening of unrelated show dance numbers, but by 1978, Fosse was star enough in his own right

that the electrifing series of numbers that

was Dancin' was able to attract audiences for over four years on Broadway. Big Deal, on the other hand, was a story-and-song show, but Fosse wrote it, basing it on an Italian film called Big Deal on Madonna Street, and, rather than commissioning a new score, took old standards and bent them to his staging concepts in this story of depression-era Chicago. It featured the last gaudy Fosse showstopper, "Beat Me Daddy Eight To The Bar."

GOWER CHAMPION

Unlike Jerome Robbins and Bob Fosse, eight-time Tony-winner Gower Champion worked almost exclusively on conventional musicals, but he was a surreptitious innovator. Even with shows featuring standard book scenes interrupted by songs, he managed to make an entire evening dance. By combining subtly artistic craftsmanship with standard razzledazzle, he raised even the strongest shows he worked on to a higher plateau.

His real breakthrough came when he directed and choreographed Bye Bye Birdie in 1960. A thoroughly conventional, unpretentious and irresistible show, it allowed Champion to take charge and create fresh, bright numbers which included a phalanx of teen-agers tying up the phone lines while confined in a multi-tiered box. Birdie marked the only time a star dancer, in this case Chita Rivera, had the lead in a Champion show, and Champion took advantage of the situation by giving Rivera a dream ballet in which she considered various methods of having her boyfriend done away with, a number with out-of-control Shriners, and an eleven o'clock solo called "Spanish Rose." But it was Champion's stylized evocation of turn-of-the-century New York in the 1964 blockbuster Hello, Dolly! that proved to be the ultimate conventional musical staging of its day. It contained the greatest series of bravura numbers in a single musical, and there was an artfulness about their staging that set Champion's work apart from the standard professionalism of the period. Champion's final Tony Award was a posthumous one, for another series of lavish production numbers for 42nd Street in 1981.

SADDLER, GENNARO, LAYTON and FIELD

If Robbins, Kidd, Fosse and Champion dominated the field during the fifties and sixties, there were other Tony-winning choreographers who made their mark. Donald Saddler won Tonys for the urban freneticism of 1953's Wonderful Town and for setting Ruby Keeler, Helen Gallagher and Bobby Van tapping on Broadway again in the 1971 revival of No, No, Nanette. Peter Gennaro staged dances for such hits as Fiorello! and The Unsinkable Molly Brown, then won a Tony in 1977 for Annie. Joe Layton burst upon the Broadway scene as choreographer of The Sound of Music in 1959. Quickly moving into direction, Layton's Tonys were for his strikingly contemporary staging of the Richard Rodgers musical No Strings (1962) and for the rousing series of production numbers he staged for Joel Grey as George M. Cohan in George M! (1968). The late Ron Field was honored for Applause and for Cabaret, in which he staged the wickedly comic numbers led by M.C. Joel Grey which commented on the action which they interrupted.

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MASTER THEATER QUIZ -- #5 Which television star won a Tony in a revival of Fosse musical? (a) Daly (b) Lansbury (c) Neuwirth

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[[full page image]]

Gap pocket-t \$10.50, and jeans \$32, as worn by KEVIN ANDERSON, actor

INCLINED. It's a penchant for the unexpected. Gap.

[[left margin]] THE GAP 1990 [/left margin]]

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