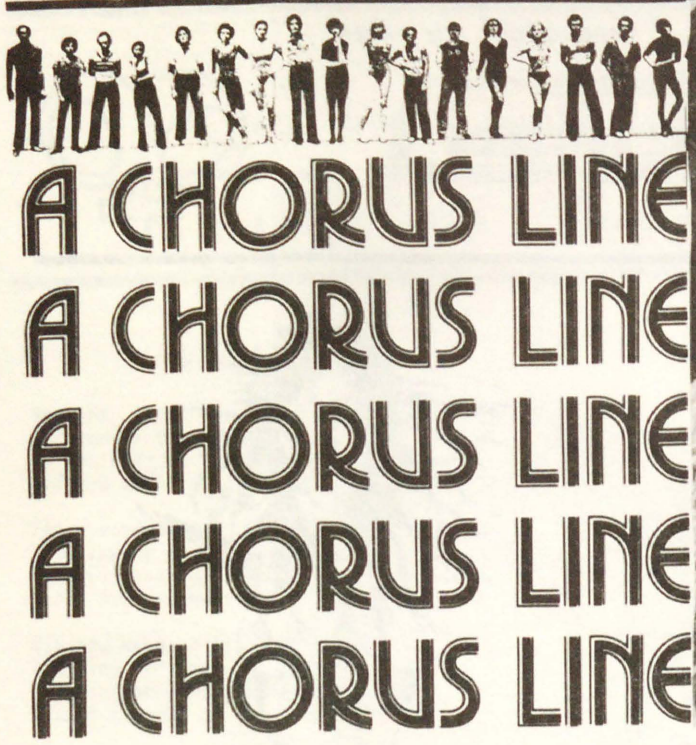
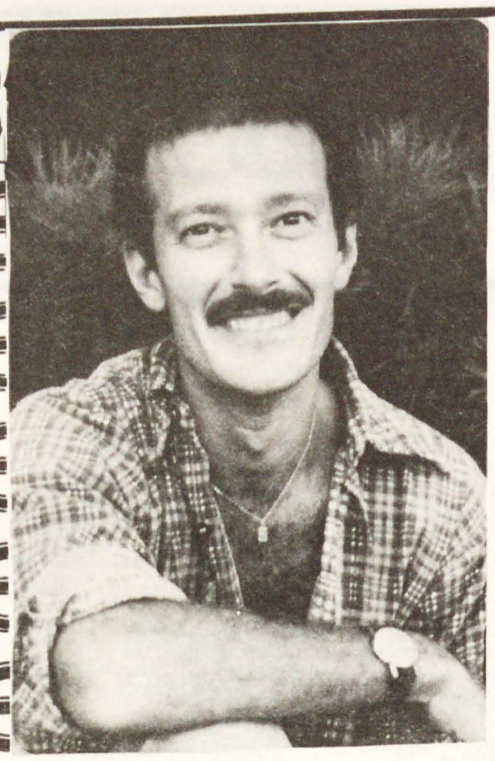




An Interview with Sammy Williams of A Chorus Line

SAMMY IS THE WINNER OF A TONY AWARD FOR HIS PORTRAYAL OF PAUL SAN MARCO IN THE ORIGINAL NEW YORK PRODUCTION OF A CHORUS LINE, AND WAS PART OF THE COMPANY RECENTLY PERFORMING IN NORFOLK. HE TALKS ABOUT HIS CAREER AND ABOUT HIS DEALING WITH THE ROLE OF PAUL AND HIS OWN HOMOSEXUALITY.

Interview and Photos by J.D.

Our Own: How did you get into show business?

Sammy Williams: Well, my sister used to be a dancer, and I was the youngest of three children, so just to keep my mouth shut, to keep me occupied, my mother would take me to dance class. And the only thing I could do was sit and watch, so I would watch. And I would go home and imitate what I saw. In the story of A Chorus Line the song "I Can Do That" is my story, that's the story that I told. I would pick it up from watching my sister and I would say, "Yeah, I can do that," and I could. And one day my mother talked to my dancing teacher about it, and they coaxed me. They gave me everything from ice cream to money. They coaxed me to get up and try it and I finally did; and once I got over my fear of doing it in front of people, I was hooked, and I never stopped. I was eight years old at the time.

OO: What about your first big break?

SW: My first big break? God, I've had so many in my life. The first time I performed professionally I was about ten years old. There was a place doing a summer theatre production of South Pacific and they were looking for two children. My dancing teacher's daughter was working there and she recommended me to come down and audition for the role. I came down and, I guess, just sparkled everybody's eyeballs, and I got the job.

My first New York show was when I was eighteen. I had graduated from high school and I had worked for the state of New Jersey for a year. Through doing some college productions Tommy Tune, the choreographer, said that I should come to New York and audition, and I auditioned for his summer stock company of Milwaukee Melody Top. I was the worst. I didn't get the job at all, but he said to keep trying, cause he thought I was very talented.

Three weeks later I had gotten a summer stock company of Sweet Charity and Funny Girl. And three weeks later there was an ad in the paper for kids from 12 to 18 to do a show called The Happy Time, staring Robert Goulet and David Wayne. One of the guys in the show who was my roommate at the time said, "You gotta audition for this, you're perfect for the part." I said, "Hold on, I am not ready for Broadway. I mean, this is my first big job, I'm just not ready." But he convinced me, so I went down to audition and walked away with a Broadway contract, and two months later I was doing my first Broadway show. And from there I did Hello Dolly and See Saw, and then Applause. And then the big break, the big, big break, was Chorus Line, of course.

OO: You were in the original cast of Chorus Line, right?

SW: Yes

OO: I understand that some of the original cast members had some input into the characters. You already mentioned the song "I Can Do That." Would you comment on some other inputs, like for example, the character of Paul. Did you have any input into that?

SW: Well, it's basically Nicholas Dante's story, who is the co-author of Chorus Line. My life, as far as Paul is concerned, is very similar, there are a great many parallels. That's why I was so right for the role.

Michael Bennett (the director) was very, very smart in choosing the people that he chose for those characters, because, if they were not those people, at least their lives were very similar. So it was very easy and also very painful for me to get up and tell that story. That's why it was such a natural performance. I was in essence telling my own story. I mean, I never worked in drag, but as a child I used to dress up in my mother's clothes. I was a real flamer, and I was very effeminate, and I did go through high school being mocked. Also growing up and being a dancer...at that time that was just something that boys didn't do. You either played baseball and football and all that stuff, or you were a weirdo. Of course, the big word at that time was "Queer."

So I was a real loner and my life was very close to the story that Paul tells, and I can relate to it easily. I guess that's why I do it as well as I do, cause it is part of my life.

OO: Is it helpful or necessary to be gay to play the role of Paul?

SW: No, not really. The boy who is replacing me is not gay. His name is Evan Pappas.

The thing about this character, the thing about playing Paul is that you cannot act it. If you try and get out there and act it, you're going to fall flat on your face. It's the kind of thing that has to be totally spontaneous and real. It has to be real, for the audience to believe it and to have the audience with you.

I don't know how Evan's going to be, but just talking to him, I think that he has all of the qualities that Paul needs. He's sensitive, he's the kind of person that you just want to put your arms around and say, "everything's going to be all right." These are real necessary things that the character needs, so I feel he's going to be okay.

OO: When I saw you in the show, the words came out and they were very powerful, but there were also a lot of emotions underlining them, some very complex emotions. Would you try to express what those emotions were?

SW: Well, first of all there's a great deal of fear. In the very beginning of the show Zach (the director) says, "I'm looking for specific people for a Broadway musical. I'm going to ask you a series of questions and the only thing I ask is that you answer honestly." That's basically what he says. So right away you don't really know what it is that he's going to ask. But as you sit and listen to the people, you hear the questions that he's asking.

It starts with childhood. Paul was raped at the age of six--that was cut out of the show a long time ago--but he was raped at the age of six, so that's something that he doesn't want to discuss. Zach talks about school. Paul quit school because he was homosexual. Zach asks about first becoming an adult, your first sexual experience, or whatever, and how did you get into show business. It works its way up, and all those things are things that Paul doesn't want to discuss, especially in front of all these people.

I feel that Paul as a character is really having a difficult time accepting the things that have happened to his life. They are in the past, but they are things that he just doesn't want to bring up. Growing up was a very painful experience for him, and it's something he would rather forget.

Now, Paul is there auditioning for a job, he needs the job, he wants the job. But what does talking about his past have to do with getting the job. So he feels, "Ask me anything but don't ask me about my family, about how I got into the business. Don't ask me any of those questions." But these are the things that Zach wants to hear, these are the things that Paul resists.

So, comes the confrontation with Zach. Zach asks, "When did you start dancing?" Paul answers as briefly as possible, "Sixteen years old." Next question, "What did you do up until that time?" He spits back, "I don't know." For Paul it's like, "Oh, God, how am I going to get out of this? I don't want to answer these questions." So that's the first big emotion... fear.

All right, Zach excuses the people and says, "We'll do this later, Paul." The second emotion is expressed by the feeling for Paul that "I goofed, I blew it." He walks off the stage going, "Oh, fuck, what did I do?"

He comes back on, they start all over again. Zach says, "Look, Paul, I really like the way you dance." Paul feels, "Oh? Okay, well, big deal." Paul is a little angry that Zach did this to him, so he tries to come out and deal with it, but there's some anger there that Zach embarrassed him in front of all those people.

So that's the second emotion that Paul has as he walks out there. So Zach says, "Wait a minute, I really like the way you dance. Let's try this again. I'm interested in you for the show." And Paul is resistant, and finally Zach has just had it. He says, "Look, Paul, I've seen you dance, I have your picture and resume, if you don't want to do this..." And finally Paul says, "Okay, you want to hear it, I'm going to tell it." He's made the decision, he starts telling his story.

What emotions are there? There's anger, there's embarrassment, there's love, there is dignity, definitely dignity. Paul talks about having left the Jewel Box (where he performed in drag), and why he left: because everyone there considered themselves to be freaks. Paul didn't consider himself a freak, it was just a situation he had gotten himself involved in. It was show business--it was the asshole of show business--but it was the business. That's what was important, that it was the business.

So he had within himself dignity. He accepted his homosexuality years ago when he was fourteen and he looked himself in the mirror and said, "I'm 14 years old and fat and a fag, got. Now, what am I going to do with my life?" In high school, in society, wherever, he was being judged, always being judged in his young adult life. And it was very clear to him that he had to live his life on his own.

So there's some frustration there because he wants to be accepted. So when he's working at the Jewel Box he finally takes a good look around him and says, "Wait a minute, these people don't care about themselves. there's no dignity here, I'm leavin

So he goes out into the real world he doesn't have an education, he ge these shit jobs...washing dishes, waiting on tables. That's not for h he wants to perform. So when the Jewel Box asks him to come back, there's a kind of relief. There's love in his heart. For no matter ho bad the Jewel Box was, for the firs time in his life he had friends, an they were important to him...that's love. That's another of the emotion

So we've got fear, anger, frustration, dignity, embarrassment, and love. And those are about the five six emotions that I think I go thro up and down, during the course of t monologue, which lasts about 14 minutes.

OO: That's the first emotional break in the show. It's all music up to that point, and the monologue comes on real heavy.

