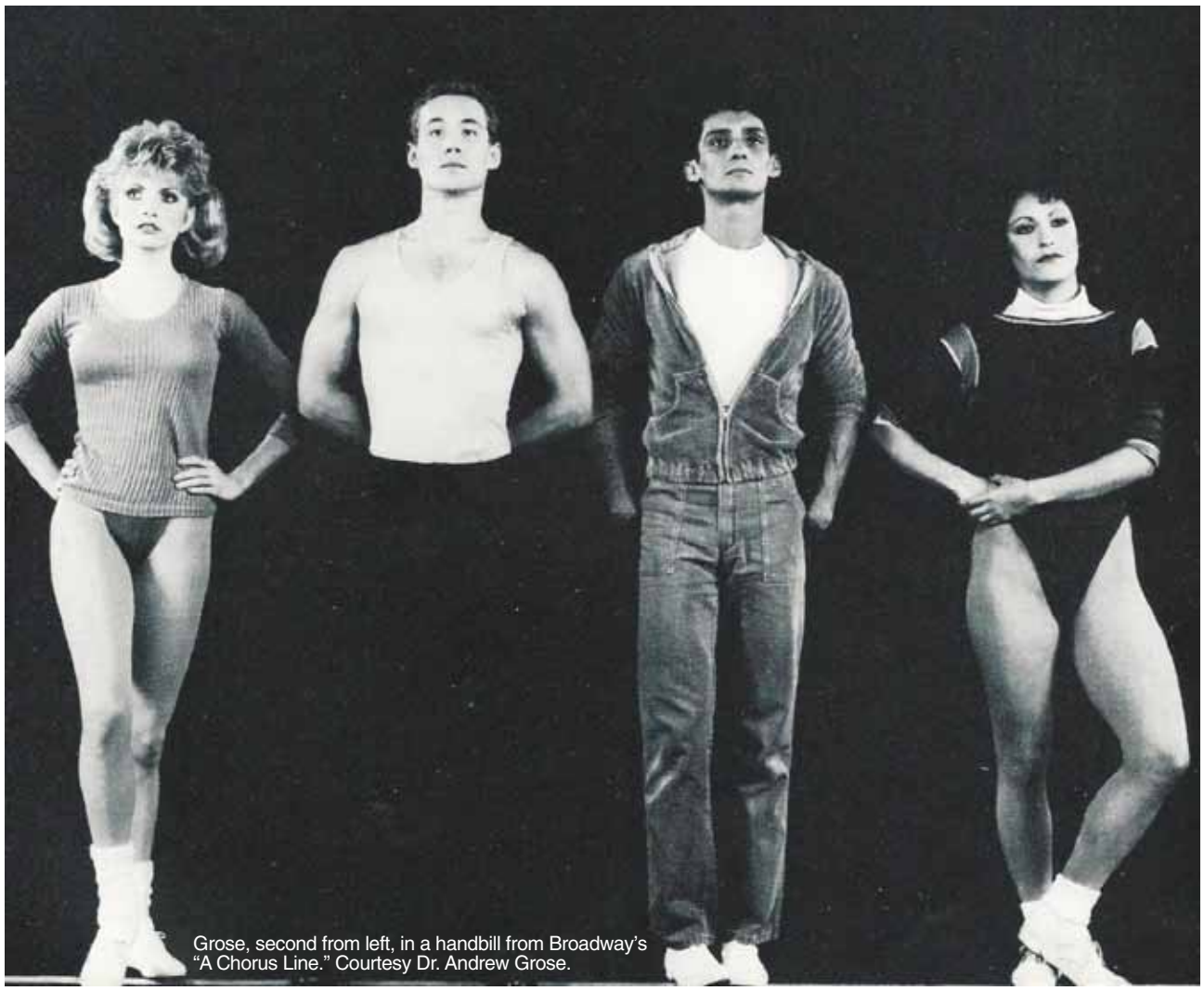
ONE SINGULAR SENSATION…

From thespian to trauma surgeon

By Andrea Kennedy



Grose, second from left, in a handbill from Broadway's "A Chorus Line." Courtesy Dr. Andrew Grose.

Surgery is medicine's great production, a scrupulous dance in stainless steel where players are sterile and scrubbed. And when a character arrives after a tragic turn, Andrew Grose takes the stage.

An orthopedic trauma surgeon at Westchester Medical Center in Valhalla, Grose's script consists of reconstructing the body, fixing shattered femurs and repairing complex pelvis fractures. But before his days in medicine, Grose performed less in the OR and more on The Great White Way.

"I was 20 when I was in 'A Chorus Line,'" he says. "That was my first Broadway show."

As physicians go, Grose still radiates that particular poise and posture uncharacteristic for the typical slouching surgeon – the kind not lost after years of stage training. In nearly military form, he's tidy and trim, as if every hair were tailored to his head. It's what you hope to see in a surgeon or someone on the stage.

COMING OF AGE

What began as a drama stint as a young teen – his mother was a music teacher – escalated into performing the most famed pieces of American musical theater on the most famous stage in the world in less than a decade. Grose first pursued ballet, his raw dedication to daily dance class playing out like a montage from "Billy Elliot." While most doctors learn how to stitch in medical school, Grose learned by sewing his ballet shoes at age 15. By 17, he was studying at the prestigious School of American Ballet in Manhattan, where the speed, amplitude and rigor of Balanchine technique prepped him more for the surgical world than he realized.

"In ballet class, you go, you don't speak, you don't ask questions, you're expected to see something once physically and understand what it is and mimic it as perfectly as possible," he says. "You only ever get negative feedback on what you didn't do well, and at the end you applaud. That's great training for surgery."

After studying for a summer in the footsteps of famed dancers (and proving to himself he could do it), Grose departed Manhattan for Syracuse University where he overloaded on courses to complete his drama degree a year early. He got a 'D' in dialects for never making it to class, though you'd never know that by his way with a brogue. BFA degree in hand and dance craft sharpened, Grose set the stage for an auspicious career in his true passion in the arts – American musical theater.

STAGE PRESENCE

"I was fortunate to work very quickly," he says, and with one of the most legendary names in the business, Jerome Robbins. "Most major advances in American musical theater came either from him or because of him."

After Michael Bennett's "A Chorus Line," in which Grose played the naive Mark, he landed on the stage for Robbins' first show after a more than 20-year hiatus. "Jerome Robbins' Broadway," an anthology of his top works, saw Grose as a gang member in "West Side Story," a Siamese dancer in "The King and I," a dancer in "Fiddler on the Roof" and more. It was a "crash course in all great musical theater of the 20th century," he says, that came with a singularly rigorous rehearsal schedule. Working with Robbins meant learning from a master honing artistic perfection, Grose calls him a "genius" and "malicious madman" in the same breath. But it also meant Robbins' showbiz buddies joined rehearsal to offer notes – Leonard Bernstein, Steven Sondheim, Twyla Tharp and Mikhail Baryshnikov to name a few.

"Yeah," he says, grinning. "It was awesome."

He came, he saw, he conquered. First ballet, then Broadway. After the highly lauded Robbins show wrapped, Grose set his sights on his next pursuit – to direct. After all, he claims – surprisingly – he's not a performer by nature. His wife, the lovely and talented Gina Lamparella, is and performs on Broadway still.

"I was only an actor and dancer, because I like being there watching theater," says Grose, who these days just prefers to share the stage at home with his two daughters. "I was happy to be in the chorus, a small cog in the wheel of a great piece of theater."

Back at Syracuse, Grose taught in his alma mater's theater department at the ripe age of 24. When he wasn't molding talent for university productions, he was directing and choreographing for professional stages, including Ithaca's renowned Hangar Theatre. His work earned acclaim for shows such as "Carousel" and "Chicago," and people still talk about his revival of "Merrily We Roll Along" (in a good way). The latter, one of Sondheim's fantastic flops, lured Grose to take a risk when no one else would. "It was really very good," he says, a tall compliment for someone averse to self-flattery.

But wrapped up in his shows, Grose found himself among the troupe of tormented artists and sought more than the stage could offer.

"When I was directing and choreographing, I never left," he says. "I slept and dreamt what I was working on. I woke up and it was in my mind. I didn't have a personal life." Grose pauses, then gives a quizzical look directed toward himself. "So I thought I'd be an orthopedic trauma surgeon?"

While teaching theater, Grose found his Tuesday nights consumed by watching physics classes that aired on local TV for the city college kids. The affair

escalated into taking biology classes and working with patients in a medical office – which he aced and loved, respectively – and soon landed Grose at New York Medical College, where he originally intended to pursue pediatrics. (He once adapted a production of "The Adventures of Narnia" for a children's rehab hospital.) But destiny had another plan, exposing a reluctant Grose to the trauma service for a month during medical school. The rest, they say…

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THE SHOW MUST GO ON

Cut to present day in Grose's OR, the place to which people are taken when they're hit by a bus – or worse.

"As a trauma specialist, by definition, the day you see me in the hospital you'll never be the same," says Grose, who also follows patients through their essentially lifelong rehabilitation. "We define ourselves to some degree by our bodies, and culturally we take that for granted. To ask your body to learn how to do something that's unnatural for you, that part of my training serves me very well."

Not to mention grace under pressure. That same calm and confidence he brings daily to life-and-death situations (yoga helps, he says), Grose must now impart to his own residents at Westchester Medical Center. As an attending – he can't seem to get away from directing, whatever the stage – he's their Robbins, rehearsing them seemingly ad infinitum until the practice is perfect.

"(Robbins') was a beautiful lesson to learn, because you realize that if you get outside your comfort zone, you can be better than you ever, ever thought you could be," Grose says. "If you stay in your comfort zone, you're probably going to be OK, but if you really want to be great at something, you have to let comfort go." ■

Dr. Andrew Grose