



PATTIE LUPONE PHOTO

New Year's Eve in 1993 at Patti Lupone's house in Kent. From left, John Weidman with Laura Weidman and Jonathan Weidman, Bob Avian, Lila Coleburn, Marc Shaiman, Scott Whitman, Mia Farrow, Steve Clar, Peter Wooster, Steven Sondheim, Peter Pileski and Jim Sacksteder.

BY TRACEY O'SHAUGHNESSY
REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

Katharine Hepburn couldn't sing. She couldn't dance.

She seemed to have been born without rhythm.

But Bob Avian, a first-generation Armenian kid who grew up on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, was stuck with her. In 1969, the year Avian worked with Hepburn, he was a young choreographer on the Broadway musical "Coco."

Alongside him was the choreographer Michael Bennett, Avian's best pal and a man who would go on to revolutionize Broadway with his Tony award-winning "A Chorus Line." Ultimately, as Avian relates in the newly released "Dancing Man: A Broadway Choreographer's Journey," which he wrote with Tom Santopietro, he would figure out a way to gloss over Hepburn's stunning musical meagerness.

It didn't help.

"I had always imagined that Devil's Island apart, there was no place I would rather not be in than Las Vegas," wrote New York Times critic Clive Barnes. "There were one or two moments in

'DANCING MAN'

Avian kicked up his heels as iconic choreographer

the first act (of "Coco") when I began to wonder whether the verdict had been a little hasty."

"Coco" was awful — and sold out every performance of Hepburn's eight-month contract.

"We were just so disappointed the show wasn't good enough," Avian said. "That's the star power she had. Everybody wanted to see the show. There wasn't a ticket to be had."

Avian would go on to work



Avian

on some iconic Broadway productions, including "Company," "Dreamgirls," "Follies" and "Sunset Boulevard." But he will always be most associated with "A Chorus Line,"

which he co-choreographed with Bennett, his closest friend for years until his death, of AIDS, in 1987.

"It was a perfect relationship," Avian said. "I didn't ever want to be him and he didn't want to be me. I was never trying to take his job from him."

Santopietro, a Waterbury native who urged Avian to write the book, said Bennett understood "that Bob completed him." Avian's expertise was ballet; Bennett's was jazz and tap.

"But it's really that they completed each other temperamentally," Santopietro said. "Bob has the eye of a great editor and could say to Michael: 'This is too long,' etc. And Bob could be completely honest with Michael, and I think other people were hesitant about that. Michael was mercurial and had a temper. Bob was calmer and could calm things down."

"Dancing Man" is the star-studded, briskly written story of an improbable Broadway legend. Avian, who lives in Kent, is the son of Armenian immigrants displaced by the Turkish genocide. His mother was a seamstress. His father worked as a chef.

Avian started as a dancer under Jerome Robbins in "West Side Story," major hit musicals, like "Sunset Boulevard" and "Miss Saigon," and he tells the puckish tale of a virtually self-taught man who seemed to alight on Broadway's most influential

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AVIAN: 'Dancing Man' tells improbable story

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musicals of the late 20th century. "Company," "Follies," "Funny Girl," "Hello Dolly," "A Chorus Line" — all of them bear Avian's imprint, many of them as a co-collaborator with Bennett.

Although Avian didn't begin to dance seriously until he was 17, he hit it big almost immediately after he successfully auditioned for the second New York run of "West Side Story." Avian, just out of Boston University, writes of working with the legendary and volcanic Robbins, "who scared us all to death," berating dancers with insults that left them in tears.

"It was a horror show to endure," Avian writes. "But what a giant talent his was and his gift remained monumental."

"He's an incredible taskmaster," Avian said. "He was just so tough and so mean and so insulting to everybody. He'd look at some girl and say, 'What are you doing on the Broadway stage; you should be a nightclub dancer. You don't belong here.'"

Avian began rehearsing for "Funny Girl" the week after it opened in 1964.

"The cast really loved her," he said of Barbra Streisand. "They all appreciated her stardom. She never missed. She always showed up. She was never out. Always impressive. And the audience ate her up. Her career was blossoming all at the same time, with recordings and TV."

It's impossible to overstate how electrifying the young Streisand was, but Avian gives readers a clue: Among the celebrities who came to see "Funny Girl" were not only Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, hot in their "Cleopatra" days, but the hermetic Greta Garbo.

He was a kid in love with movies who mimicked the dance steps until, by 10 or 11, he writes, "Even with no training or technique, I knew I could pull it off."

And he did. "Dancing Man" is the story of one man's kick line through Broadway's last 50 years.

"As he said to me, he was always in the room where it happened," said Santopietro, an author of seven books, including "The Sound of Music Story" and "Why 'To Kill a Mockingbird' Matters."

"My philosophy about my career was simply to go through any door that opened up," Avian writes. "If there's an opportunity lying in front of you, take it. Don't be scared of change. You never know where it will lead."

"Dancing Man" moves with a percussive patter that seems to parallel Avian's meteoric success, but it does not offer much in the way of personal insight. Avian doesn't discuss his perspective or reveal inner demons, if he has any. One minute he is dancing in the "West Side Story" tour in Israel. The next he's working with Streisand on "Funny Girl." The next, he's touring in Vietnam with Mary Martin in "Hello Dolly."

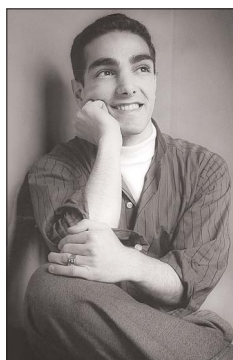
He was in Berlin, touring with the company of "West Side Story," when the Berlin Wall went up.

"We were doing a matinee," he said. "One day there was such a buzz in the theater, the stage hands, the audience, and we heard, eventually, 'They're building a wall, they're building a wall.' We didn't know what they were talking about."

Avian's success, which would soon move from dancing in the chorus to choreographic mega hits, came in part because of his close and enduring relationship with Bennett, whom he met during rehearsals for "West Side Story."

The two clicked.

"I had a gift that complemented his," Avian said. "I just didn't have the emotional need to be a star, and I was very happy to push his star. It takes a lot of pressure to carry that weight. And I didn't have that emotional need. I wanted him to be the boss. I'd clean up behind him. We got to be known as tough cop, good cop. It was a very weird kind of chemistry we had. It suited both of us so well."



CONTRIBUTED
Avian early in his Broadway career



CONTRIBUTED
Bob Avian, left, had a close and enduring friendship with choreographer Michael Bennett. 'I just didn't have the emotional need to be a star, and I was very happy to push his star,' Avian said of their complementary relationship.

Both were gay but they were never lovers, he said. Nevertheless, they would work together all day and then speak on the phone nightly.

The critically acclaimed "A Chorus Line," which held the record as the longest-running musical in history, was the pair at their pinnacle. The musical, which began as a series of tape-recorded sessions in which Bennett asked dancers

about their lives, fundamentally altered the direction of the American musical. Suddenly, dancers were not accessories, an anonymous kinetic background set, but the singular focus. Avian writes that he and his colleagues created the celebrated "One" number in under an hour. "We just knocked it out, so quickly," Avian said. "We said 'this looks fine,' not thinking about it. Never ever changed

one step. The music was such that it lent itself so much to that style of dancing."

The New York Times' influential critic Frank Rich later wrote: "It was the stitching together of all its elements in that purest of theatrical areas, a deep and empty stage, by its director-choreographer that made 'A Chorus Line' so thrilling to its audience."

But the show's stunning success took its toll. Bennett, Avian writes, sometimes "succumbed to drugs, alcohol, and the bouts of paranoia that affect all of us." Ultimately, Avian writes, "A Chorus Line's" success was more difficult to deal with than the pair's flops.

"I missed the days of climbing the mountain," Avian writes, "when the journey itself was the reward, and the prospects and horizons seemed limitless."

In 1987, after Avian and Bennett had scored with the smash "Dreamgirls," Bennett died of AIDS. He had contracted the disease in 1985, and he and Avian scoured the nation for a cure. Hearing of a Tucson-based doctor then investigating new treatments, Bennett flew to Arizona, where his health continued to fail. In their last visit together, Avian mentioned the possibility of choreographing the London production of Steven Sondheim's "Follies." Bennett looked at Avian and said, "Do the show. You know it. It's time you went out on your own."

Avian was 49 years old.

"I really didn't want to do it," Avian said. "I thought, 'It's not going to be the original. Why do it?' Michael talked me into it."

In London, he met Cameron Mackintosh, who had just produced "Les Misérables" and "The Phantom of the Opera," and was set to take on the London production of "Follies."

"Who would have thought all those years with Michael and then I go to Cameron?" Avian said. "How lucky. There are advantages to being second banana. No one is afraid of you. No one thinks they are competing with you. No one thinks you're stealing their job."

In "Dancing Man," Avian, who worked on the London production of "Sunset Boulevard" with fellow Kent resident Patti Lupone, addresses the notorious controversy that emerged after Andrew Lloyd Webber replaced her with Glenn Close in the New York production. Close ultimately won a Tony for the role in 1995. "It was devastating for Patti," Avian said, adding, "No one has ever sung (the role of Norma Desmond) better than Patti."

In 1996, while in London, Avian, then 60, walked through Leicester Square and passed three of his shows lined up next to one another: "Miss Saigon," "Martin Guerre" and "Sunset Boulevard."

"My heart started pumping so loudly. I'd never put it all together until I saw it all in London," he said. "I almost started crying. I couldn't believe it. It wasn't pride, it was disbelief."

Learn more about Bob Avian and Tom Santopietro's book "Dancing Man" at bhavian.com