

TEACHING | Face to Face

by Katia Bachko

Donna McKechnie

The Broadway veteran adds published author to her list of accomplishments.

Donna McKechnie has been performing on stages in New York and around the world for the last 45 years and shows no signs of stopping. The Tony Award winner—for her iconic performance as Cassie in *A Chorus Line*—just published her memoir, *Time Steps* (Simon & Schuster, September 2006). And on November 15, she will open a new show, *Over Here*, in London. *DT* caught up with McKechnie to learn more about her recent and upcoming projects.

Dance Teacher: Why did you write *Time Steps*?

Donna McKechnie:

I always knew the story I wanted to tell. I didn't want it to be one of those show business books about people you've worked with and all the funny auditions you've had. I believe there's a higher purpose, and I wasn't interested in telling stories and dropping names.

All the dilemma, the struggle, all of the mistakes, of this girl growing up in the Midwest and her dreams of being a dancer—that was a wonderful thing to follow. I had to engage myself in the feelings of that time, which was the hardest thing. The important point in the book is to find the compassion, love and forgiveness—not just for other people, but for yourself. It was a great adventure for me, very exciting.



“Find the joy in your dancing and let it find expression.”

Photography courtesy of Donna McKechnie



Donna McKechnie in her Tony Award-winning performance as Cassie in *A Chorus Line*

DT: Tell us about *Over Here*.

DM: It's set to music by the Sherman Brothers. It's going to be thrilling—the big band sound, swing era and lots of dancing. I'm just thrilled, because it's an era of music that I love. And I'm still dancing. I first saw the show in 1974 at the Shubert and I just loved it. It's a spoof on the Andrews Sisters; they're trying to find a third sister and she turns out to be a Nazi spy. I'm going to be playing Patty Andrews.

Right now we're waiting to see which theater it lands. I'm almost afraid to celebrate it until everything is signed, sealed and delivered. But everything is cast. We're supposed to open on November 15. I can't wait.

DT: How do you feel about the new *Chorus Line* production opening on Broadway this month?

DM: I'm very excited that [composer] Marvin Hamlisch, [scenic designer] Robin Wagner and [director] Bob Avian—people from the original production will be protecting Michael [Bennett]'s work and enhancing it. It's going to be done the best way that

it could be. I would love to be there opening night, applauding them on, because I hear it's going to be fantastic.

DT: How have Broadway and musical theater changed over the years?

DM: The fundamental truth still exists: You have to get the audition, and you have to be good. But I think it's harder. I remember coming to New York, and you would have five auditions for five new musicals every week. Even then, they said Broadway was dying. When I do master classes, there's such talent out there it's phenomenal. There are schools that now respect musical theater, have actual courses in musical theater and bring in teachers who have had professional careers.

The economics have also affected everyone. I remember Bob Fosse would rehearse a scene minimum seven times—that's a lot of time to rent that studio. A Broadway rehearsal used to be five weeks at the minimum. And they can't do that any more because of the economics. Now if you rehearse a scene and you get to do it twice, you're really lucky.

What that imposes on young performers is that they have to really take

responsibility and do their own work. You have to do your homework. The tape recorder is a great invention, but there's something lost a little when you can't sit down with your peers and learn the score together, learn all the parts and rehearse it. That's part of the process.

DT: If you could give up-and-coming dancers some advice, what would it be?

DM: It was hard then and it's hard now, and the message of the book is, never abandon yourself. If you have that real passion and that real desire, you will do it. You will find a way; you will provide that with your desire. Bob Fosse gave us advice just before he died: "Ask yourself, 'How can I be a better person today—not just a better performer, but a better person?'" because he understood that everything comes from your personal integrity.

Find the joy in your dancing and let it find expression. I see too many kids coming to New York with inhibition; when they start dancing, their bodies are very expressive, but from the neck up, there's no feeling. Find a way to let the feelings flow and let the joy happen. Let the true spirit of dance always shine. **DT**