The Sum of Its Parts

Broadway moneyman Marvin Shulman keeps hope alive

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“Porno movies launched Michael Bennett’s career,” Marvin Shulman says with amusement. “He never denied it. He denied a lot of things, but he didn’t deny that.” The 62-year-old Canadian-born business manager who got his start by doing taxes for ballet dancers is referring to how he and Wakefield Poole, a young choreographer, financed the late Michael Bennett’s initial workshop of *A Chorus Line* to the tune of $100,000 by producing the classic gay erotic films *Boys in the Sand* and *Bijou.*

"The first week after *Bijou* opened, I bought a Mercedes convertible," Shulman says. And he muses fondly over the heady times when *A Chorus Line* was the biggest hit on Broadway. “We’d have a party, go to dinner. It was all magical, all a production, with limousines. And money was no problem. Money was falling from the ceiling.”

It was a dramatic change for both Shulman and Bennett. "When *A Chorus Line* was in rehearsal at The Public [Theater], Michael was making $100 a week, like everybody else,“ he says. ”Meanwhile, he has a housekeeper who he’s paying $150 a week."

Shulman revels in telling the stories collected over a lifetime of working behind the scenes in intimate relationships with Broadway luminaries such as Bennett and Tommy Tune. “I loved it,” he readily admits. “I was right into all their affairs, all their receipts. Who was going out with whom and who was going where -- Broadway gossip. I mean, I had no talent other than accounting and I was working in the theater.”

But working in the theater in the age of AIDS has also brought extreme sadness. Shulman remembers Bennett’s last days, living with the disease: “It was a nightmare, just awful. He hid it for so long. He’d gotten wild with coke, was very paranoid. He no longer had any relationship with his parents, his brother, me or any of the people he’d worked with.”

And beyond the personal loss, Shulman stresses Broadway’s loss. “Michael was a great talent as well as a great producer, a rare thing,” he says.

Shulman’s success brought him more time and a desire to do some sort of community service work. At the suggestion of a friend, he attended an ACT UP meeting, met young broker-turned-activist Peter Staley, and soon became treasurer. “You know it was a strange group, by the bylaws

and the attitudes. Everybody was welcome. There were no presidents. I think I was the only person there with a title. Everybody was equal and it just doesn't work. Everybody's not equal. We were surrounded by a fringe of crazies. So much time was taken up at the meetings because they had to have equal time on the floor."

Shulman stayed with ACT UP three years, but transferred his efforts to Treatment Action Group (TAG) when Staley established it in 1992. For several years, TAG held its meetings in Shulman's spacious Chelsea apartment.

Shulman also became involved in LIFEbeat, the recording industry's AIDS fundraising group, and Hearts & Voices at about this time -- again as treasurer. "I'm not a good caregiver," he says. "I'm not good with hospitals. Hearts & Voices goes to seven or eight hospitals every night in New York City. We literally have 2,000 cabaret people on our roster who come and do a show for half an hour. It's heartbreaking. For half an hour the patients don't have AIDS. Liza Minnelli singing at St. Luke's-Roosevelt [Hospital]. I'd be in the cracks for days. So I just do the books."

Shulman still maintains an office serving five prominent entertainers as business manager. Tommy Tune has remained a client and friend through the years. "[Tommy] has had a hard time of it because so many of his dancers and co-workers have died," Shulman says. "I said to him a few months ago that I'm always taking cards out of my Rolodex, people keep dying. He said, 'I never take them out; I leave them there so that I can remember them when I'm looking for a phone number.' I thought that was really touching."

Lost friends and associates are one reason why Shulman, who is HIV negative, devotes so much time to AIDS work. "There's a new book that's out about men who are negative and how ignored they are in this whole epidemic. And I think a lot of that bothered me. I mean, I never went to the baths for a whole weekend, but I was active. Why the differentiation, why am I negative? Subconsciously, that is very motivating."

Summing up, Shulman confesses, "I just hope I don't burn out. It's frightening when I see people planning their AIDS benefits two or three years in advance. It's become part of our fabric, like cancer," he says despairingly. But then he shrugs and smiles. "It's all about hope."

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