One Singular Sensation

A Chorus Line's Ron Dennis is back on the boards

January 1, 1998 By Charlotte Huff

Gimme the ball, gimme the ball, gimme the ball, yeah!" That's what fans of *A Chorus Line*'s cast album – and there must be millions, since the musical's 15-year run was one of the longest in Broadway history – think of when they hear Ron Dennis' name. Playing the character of Richie in the original production earned Dennis a permanent place in show-biz history, though the director, Michael Bennett, initially wanted a woman for the role. "He got the best of both worlds," says the openly gay Dennis, whose talent triumphed over gender *and* height; despite his *ACL* character's hoop dreams, Dennis is five foot four.

Fifteen years later, in 1990, Dennis was reunited with his *ACL* family on *The Phil Donahue Show.* By that time, Bennett had died of AIDS, as had three of the musical's four authors – not to mention cast members, hair-dressers and stagehands. Dennis had tested HIV positive in 1985, and on the day of *Donahue*, he was battling PCP. "I was sick as a dog," he says.

During the early '90s, Dennis got sicker, twice battling lymphoma. "I looked like a fudgesicle with nuts," he says, describing the dozens of lymph nodes that protruded from under his chocolate-colored skin. The wiry dancer whose frenetic energy in *ACL* brought the house down night after night grew too weak to walk to the corner. But last year, Dennis became a Crixivan success story, and now he gardens outside his two-bedroom home in Hollywood, wind chimes tinkling on the porch. His main complaint? "Now I have to pay off my death purchases!"

The 53-year-old Dennis started dancing at age five, so it's hardly surprising that getting back on his feet was soon followed by getting back onstage. This time Dennis wrote *and* starred, weaving his life as an actor, a gay man, an African-American and a PWA into a solo show entitled *Don't Grab the Gowns Until You See the Gurney*.

The title is taken from a piece of unsolicited advice he offered his Eve Harrington –like understudy during the national tour of *La Cage aux Folles.* After a night of raucous partying that ended with Dennis' drunken stumble, a hospital visit and several stitches, the understudy was certain Dennis would miss the matinee, but the closest he got was Dennis' campy maid costume – the star arrived before the curtain went up.

Gowns/Gurney recently hit big in Los Angeles, and Dennis hopes to bring it to New York City – the place he dreamed about during his years of ballet, tap and jazz dance classes in Dayton, Ohio. "I

would picture the New York skyline," he says, "and I would think, 'Ron, hold on.'"

Like Richie in *ACL*, restraint is uncharacteristic of Dennis, who calls it the way he sees it. "I've been everything that this country doesn't like," he says. "My color – I've gone from *colored* to *Negro* to *black* to *African American* in one short lifetime – my sexuality and, now, this disease." His release used to come through dancing. "I only allowed myself to be 100 percent of who I was onstage," he says. Forced by AIDS to spend time out of the spotlight, Dennis learned how to be himself, with or without an audience's approval. "I said to myself, 'No more. Enough.' This is who I am. Take it or leave it," he says, adding with enough attitude to stop an overeager understudy or an entire show, "Just don't cross me."

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