



## CAROUSEL

When I was 19 I was hired to perform in the musical, *Carousel*, my first professional job as a dancer. *Carousel* was my third musical, although the first two hardly counted as they were on the stage of my Saint Louis synagogue at age 11 mouthing the words to *Fiddler On The Roof* and *Milk And Honey*.

As I walked into the rehearsal hall, the elevator door opened, and someone pushed past me, knocking my dance bag to the floor. When I bent down to pick it up, I heard, "Maybe standing in front of the elevator isn't such a good idea." I looked up to see a heavysset man with messy gray hair and a white goatee. "Sorry," I stammered.

His eyes sparkled. "Don't worry about it," he chuckled, "you in the show?"

I stood up tall. "Yes I am. I'm a dancer. My name is Cheryl Movitz -- I mean Montelle, I just changed it." His eyes widened so I hurried on. "You never hear Jewish names in the chorus, and my grandfather, Sam Movitz, well, he wanted to be a tap dancer instead of a butcher, which he ended up being anyway, but he was going to call himself Ronnie Montelle -- so I guess it could be considered a family name." God I was nervous.

He grinned. "Nice to meet you Miss Montelle. My name is Monty Rosenstien, and I didn't change my name."

"Monty? Why that's my dad's name -- you know there's not too many Monty's around," I said delighted with the coincidence.

"That's true," he laughed and walked away, a thick bundle of music under his arm. I figured he was one of the character actors, but as we all gathered for the first read through of the show, he took a seat at the table beside the director, and during the introductions I learned that this Monty was our musical director. When he caught my look of surprise, he raised his eyebrows and winked -- my turn for a good laugh.

One day in early rehearsals, as I struggled to keep the alto line, constantly slipping back to the melody, Monty pulled me aside and whispered, "Look, kid, just sing the melody whenever you need to, but don't tell anyone I said so." And from that moment on, Monty looked out for me.

Monty and Shelly, one of the singers in the chorus, were newlyweds. She was a 40-something buxom blond who reminded me of a bubbly Mae West. I always sat beside her in the dressing room where she taught me how to apply stage makeup because, "God knows," as she put it, "I've slapped on enough of this shit!"

Shelly loved caring for Monty who was 20-something years her senior. She even converted to Judaism and called herself "the Jewish shiksa", and on tour they rented rooms with kitchens where she cooked Monty's favorites -- roasted chicken and potatoes, beet borscht and pot roast.

Although Shelly was his near-constant companion, sometimes during breaks Monty sat beside me and filled my head with stories. He talked of his desire to become a com-

poser and how he regretted never getting back to that initial dream. He told me how he first became a musical director in the Army under the tutelage of Irving Berlin, and how he continued that career on Broadway with stars like Streisand; “She was just a kid when she starred in *Funny Girl*, but I watched Barb bloom into a real talent. Her voice was pure; not like now, always sliding up to hit the notes, singing pop music no less. And let’s not forget Merman,” he worked with her on *Gypsy*, “what a gal, what a love of the theater that woman had -- never missed a show, no matter what.” Whenever I thanked Monty for sharing his stories, he’d shrug, “I gotta tell somebody, and I knew you’d get a kick out of ‘em. Besides, I like you, kid.”

Once, in Indiana, a couple of weeks into the tour, I was alone in the dressing room crying over a boyfriend who had just broken up with me. When I lifted my soggy face off folded arms to search for a tissue, I looked past my own reflection in the mirror and there was Monty’s. He was standing in the doorway, wearing a frown and a soiled T-shirt, his belly protruding over his trousers held up by red suspenders. His eyes were moist, and I wondered how long he’d been watching me cry.

“Boyfriend trouble?” he asked

I nodded, wondering how on earth he knew.

“Anything I can do?”

I shook my head.

For a moment he looked thoughtful, then brightened. “Cheer up kid,” he smiled. “It only gets worse,” and with that he disappeared laughing to himself as he trundled down the hallway. Somehow he managed to infect me with that same mirth and I forgot my troubles for the rest of the evening.

*Carousel* is a moving story of love and loss that ends on a hopeful note, but beneath its beautiful songs and dances it brims with darkness. I loved the show, but our star couldn’t remember his lines, and by the time we reached New Orleans, 4 weeks into the show, we’d been panned everywhere. Still, our mood was giddy as we moved into a run-down but festive motel called the *Vieux Carre`* on the edge of the French Quarter.

The lobby was tiny but opened onto a huge courtyard thick with blooming bougainvillea. Ancient oaks were strung with necklaces of white lights and an antique bar set up in the center of that courtyard became the meeting place for our cast after each show. Around the perimeter were our

rooms, two stories high with iron balconies -- very French. The whole place had the feel of another century. When I stood in that courtyard I felt, beneath the party atmosphere, an eerie sensation of past and present colliding, with the eyes of those who lived before us watching our every move, manipulating things just this side of dangerous.

I first felt that sensation the day we arrived as I checked into my room alone; my

roommate, Patty, was downstairs, and as I walked into the bathroom, I fell. But I hadn't slipped. Someone or something had pushed me from behind; I landed hard on my right elbow, benching my performance for the next two nights.

Three days into our stay, after the show we gathered at the bar and as usual ordered our first round of many drinks. Patty was complaining about abdominal pain. "Let me try something," Monty said, and he stepped forward and placed his fingertips on her belly. He closed his eyes.

Patty said she could feel heat emanating from Monty's fingers, and something deep inside her shifted; then just like that, the pain was gone.

Monty shook himself out of his trance and moved casually on to talk with the director, leaving the rest of us to wonder. We all knew Monty was a gifted musical director, but this was a side of him we'd never seen. I made a mental note to ask him about my elbow.

That night I slept badly. When I woke before dawn, I gave up on sleep and decided I would treat myself to a chicory coffee at the Café Du Monde and an order of their famous beignets, a new addiction.

When I walked into the lobby I was surprised to see Shelly at the front desk, crying, her bags clustered around her. She was wearing dark sunglasses, and a black and white scarf tied under her chin, Audrey Hepburn style. Beside her stood Marie, a tough redhead from the show. They looked exhausted. I began walking towards Shelly, but Marie put her hand on my shoulder. "Not now, Cheryl," she warned.

Suddenly our stage manager was there, swooping up Shelly's bags and pointing her outside towards a parked blue van. As he escorted her out the door she wiped her nose, looked back at us, and shook her head. That's when I realized her face was blotchy, her upper lip bruised blue.

I looked at Marie. "They had a fight. Monty hit her. He hit her a few times, the bastard."

Monty hit Shelly? In shock I watched the van drive away. Shelly was going back to New York, leaving the show, leaving Monty. Marie's hand still lay on my shoulder. I turned to her, "Now what? How do we face Monty?"

She frowned. "The real question is how the hell does he face us?" And with that she walked away.

I stepped outside into a misty Quarter. The streets were quiet and damp from a morning drizzle. The sun wasn't out, but humidity was already rising. I walked to the café and sat at one of the outdoor tables. As I drank my coffee and watched pigeons peck at crumbs, I tried to make sense of what I'd seen and heard. Shelly and Monty probably had stayed too long at the bar -- I'd seen both of them tie one on more than once. Was Monty a jealous man? Had he dragged Shelly back to their room, back to the

room where she prepared him chicken soup from scratch? Had he hit her because he thought she was flirting with another guy? Or had it been the other way around? Maybe that night Shelly had wanted Monty, but he wasn't interested. Maybe she taunted him, and he told her to knock it off and when she didn't, he shut her up with his fist.

This couldn't be the Monty I knew, the man who fed me stories of Broadway legends, and had healing hands. They were big, his hands. When he conducted, the baton looked small, yet he held it so delicately. Sometimes he didn't even use the baton but would instead caress the air, his right pinky raised to coax a note from a flute or a single horn. And on opening night, he'd put both of those hands on my shoulders and offered me a good luck squeeze. They were warm and reassuring. How could those hands blacken my friend Shelly's eye? What was it that filled those hands with so much rage? What stories had Monty left out? Was this what he meant when he said it only gets worse?

Backstage that evening, morale was low. I sat and stared at the empty makeup station beside mine. When the five-minute bell rang, we all took a long time moving into opening positions. We heard the overture begin -- that haunting melody had always been my favorite part, foretelling the tragedy to come. On that night the tragedy was ours.

Still, we were professionals, and when the curtain rose we gave one of our best performances, in honor of Shelly. Even our star remembered his lines, and when I stole a peek into the orchestra pit, I saw nothing different in Monty. Other than avoiding eye contact with everyone on stage, he conducted as gracefully as ever.

After that, outside of the theater, I didn't see much of Monty until three weeks later during our last stop in Vienna, Virginia. At the Greek diner across from our motel I was sipping soup for supper due to complaints from my dance partner on the effect of all those beignets. I watched the waitress loading plates up her arm, and I pictured myself doing the same thing soon if I didn't book another show. I was just beginning to spin into despair when Monty walked in. Relieved to see a friendly face, I smiled, and he sat down across from me. Then I remembered New Orleans.

"How's the soup?" he asked.

"Not bad," I said coolly. "What you'd expect from a Greek diner."

He scanned the menu, while I, keeping my distance, concentrated on the cakes and pies, like dancers, slowly rotating in their glass case on the counter.

Monty ordered a turkey sandwich to go, then placed both elbows on the table and leaned towards me. "So what's your plan of action when you get back to New York?"

I shrugged. "You know, auditioning...."

"Well, you've got something special." He pointed a finger at me. "Don't give up!"

I nodded. "Okay, Monty."

“Next up for me is *The Music Man* with Dick Van Dyke. Michael Kidd’s directing. I’ll mention you to him. You’d be perfect for that show.”

I felt my heart grow soft. “You’d do that for me?” I asked. He grinned. “Sure, why not? Come to the audition, and we’ll take it from there. Gotta run. Meeting with the big boys.” He rolled his eyes. “Thanks for letting me join you.”

“Monty?”

“Yes?”

“I . . . thanks”

For one moment he looked into my eyes as if he knew what I had wanted to say but couldn’t. Then he turned and walked out the revolving doors.

The week after we returned from the road, Monty, true to his word, singled me out at *The Music Man* auditions, but Mr. Kidd wasn’t interested. I blame the beignets. After that I didn’t see Monty much, until I auditioned for him for the part of Lisle in *The Sound Of Music*. He called me back, but I didn’t end up with that job, and about five years later I heard that he’d had a heart attack, had recovered and was conducting that season’s *Dance Theater of Harlem* at City Center.

I felt a strong need to see him, so one night I bought a ticket to see *Giselle*, and from the audience I watched Monty walk to his place in front of the orchestra, face us and bow. He looked weary, but I could still see the light in his eyes, and after the show I waited at the stage door.

The night was freezing cold. I was shivering and just about to leave when he exited the theater. I moved to give him a hug, but he put out his hands -- those hands -- and instead I gave them a squeeze and said, “I like *Giselle*, but I’m here because of you.”

He smiled.

“I heard you’ve been ill, how’re you feeling? You look a little thin.”

“I’m fine,” he said, “but what’s with your voice?”

How could he tell? I’d strained my vocal chords teaching aerobics “between jobs”, but it wasn’t that obvious. “It’s nothing,” I lied, “I’m just getting a cold.” I was embarrassed -- aerobics.

“Listen,” he said, “it’s bitter out here, and I’m tired. Here’s my number, call me and we’ll share a bite to eat sometime. I’d like to catch up.”

I took his card. He hailed me a cab, and we said goodnight.

I never called. Maybe I was ashamed that I hadn’t lived up to his expectations. In truth, though, I think I didn’t call because I couldn’t admit to myself how much I cared about a man who could hit his wife. And then, before I could resolve my feelings, it was too late. Monty died of another heart attack, and I mourned that man -- the man who once took me under his wing, who believed in me, encouraged me, and who, eventually, gave me my first glimpse into the dark side of a passionate heart.