



Tea for Two

I finished my morning coffee and decided, “why not?” So I got dressed. I pulled on my black fishnet stockings (the ones with the seams up the back), stuffed my bra with socks (one on each side), stepped into my shiny, hi-cut purple trunks, and topped off the confection with my black and white polka-dotted midriff, emphasizing my new cleavage by tightly gathering the material and plunging a safety pin into the middle. I slapped on twice as much make-up as usual -- heavy blush, thick black eyeliner, two coats of black mascara, purple eye shadow (to match those trunks), and a thick layer of ruby red lipstick. I set my stringy blonde hair with hot curlers, then teased it with enough hairspray and mousse to hold the look for a good decade. I threw jeans and a sweatshirt over my outfit, and a heavy parka over that. I yanked on rain boots, packed up my gold lamé character shoes, and hit the street. After eight years as a professional dancer, I was headed to my first Bob Fosse audition.

I’d never before bothered to audition for Fosse, because I wasn’t 5’8” with big tits and long legs. Even at 26, I usually landed little-girl roles in shows like *The Music Man* and *Carousel*. Today, for once, I decided I would stash the lollypop, and sashay into the audition strutting my sexuality. After all, I reasoned, I had long legs for my height, and in 2-inch heels I was 5’5”. Bob Fosse wasn’t going to be around forever and I wanted to audition for this giant -- at least once.

The wintry day was wet, and cold rain slapped my face as I raced from the chilly subway towards the theater. I followed the “CHORUS CALL, THIS WAY,” signs, into the dank lobby, down two flights of stairs to the theaters bowels, my eyes slowly adjusting to the dim, yellow light. I checked my watch. 8:45. I wrote my name on the audition list; I was 102. By 10 at least a 100 more girls would arrive. Everywhere I looked, in this musty basement full of tables and odd furniture cast off from old sets, I saw girls stretching long, defined limbs. Each one of us shivered with nerves and desire.

As I began to peel off layers, I counted the number of girls I recognized. Dozens. We’d all done this so many times. There was Spence, lean and muscular, like a panther ready to pounce; she was a Fosse dancer. Nearby stood Jane, a beautiful dancer, with legs up to her eyeballs, and always in a show. I waved to Gail who stood in a corner smoking a cigarette. No one I knew wore a white leotard like Gail did; no one ever tried. Not only did she have the perfect body, she never appeared to sweat.

I, on the other hand, began to perspire with the mere thought of the stiff competition. I reapplied my make-up that had been smudged in the rain, scrunched my sticky hair, and prayed my hair, makeup and spirits would survive the audition. I waved to Leigh, a friendly face in the crowd. She was short, too.

In my heels I began to warm-up. I took a wide second position, pliéd deeply, and stretched in that position for a while, feeling my muscles loosen. I stood and swung one leg back and forth, then the other. The blood began to flow through my body. I did a few upper body ripples, twisted my back right then left, pointed my feet, flexed ankles, and circled hips. All of us knew the dance combination Fosse gave in order to type dancers “in” or “out”. His was a simple soft-shoe routine Tea For Two. It was easy and didn’t require too much warm-up. I was ready. Now it was just a matter of waiting for the audition to begin.

Kathy, our union rep, finally moved us into groups of twelve, and I began to feel strangely excited. I knew the combination; I felt confident, sexy-- my socks evenly distributed, the seams of my fishnets straight, my hair holding. With all this effort in place, I just knew it wouldn’t be wasted—Bob Fosse would have to notice me!

After what seemed like an eternity, our group walked up to the side of the stage, and waited in the wings. We were next to audition. The stage was lit by five bare light bulbs; the rest of the cavernous theater was dark. The piano and the accompanist sat stage right, while Fosse and his svelte, long-legged assistant, Linda, stood downstage center, intently discussing a group of four girls.

I zeroed in on Fosse. He stood with his hands on his hips, a cigarette dangling from his mouth. I was shocked to see how decrepit he looked. Where was that vibrant young dancer from Kiss Me Kate and Damn Yankees? The man who stood only a dozen feet from me was thin, hunched, sallow. When he took the cigarette from his mouth, his mouth seemed to collapse, as if he had no teeth. Still, there the legend stood, and I inhaled deeply as he chose one girl, dismissing the rest with a wave of his hand.

I closed my eyes and rehearsed the combination in my head. I could barely move my legs—only inches separated me from the girls I stood between. Adrenaline pumped through my body. I had to dance well. I wanted Bob Fosse to choose me. I had been fine tuning jetes, battements and pirouettes, not to mention nuance and grace for over 15 years, awaiting a moment like this to prove how talented I was. Suddenly, Kathy

called out, “Next group.” As we walked to the center of the stage, I took a deep breath, and then another. I was nervous. I always got so nervous. His assistant showed us the number once, answered a question about the timing, then staggered the four of us into two lines. I stood in the back, primed.

The piano player played the intro, “da da daaa da,” and we began the soft-shoe routine. We finished, switched lines, and did the combination once again; this time I was in front. Miraculously, I relaxed and started having fun with the dance, allowing my limbs to take over, letting the music move me.

When we finished, Fosse began to walk toward our group. I felt my heart contract, and wondered if I was imagining things. He was walking directly towards me. I stood with my hands on my right hip, feigning nonchalance, hoping I still looked sexy. He took a drag off his cigarette, and motioned to me to step forward.

As if in a dream, I followed his directions, moving close.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“My name?” For a split second I wasn’t sure, but finally I answered, “Cheryl Montelle.”

“Well, Ms. Montelle, would you mind doing the combination for me one more time?”

“Not at all,” I whispered.

The music started, and there I was dancing all by myself on a Broadway stage for Bob Fosse. I gave it everything I had. I added a little more flare, accentuated a hip here and there, but I stayed calm, I didn’t push. I kept my movements fluid and subtle. I finished with a double pirouette, landed neatly on the beat, turned my head to the audience and snapped my fingers twice, as choreographed.

Then I looked up.

Fosse stood there staring at me, his left hand under his chin, his right arm across his chest as ashes from his neglected cigarette drifted to the floor around his feet. His assistant carried my card to him, he looked down, studied my credits. I had no Broadway shows listed, and as I waited in deep silence, I wished I could call out all the close calls; A Chorus Line and 42nd Street, the tour bound for New York that didn’t make it, the Broadway show I was hired to do that lost its financing. Almost-but-not-quite credits, my almost-but-not-quite Broadway career. My heart pounded, the sound echoed in my ears. I stood as still as I ever stood. Would I stay or go? My

future hung in the delicate balance of Bob Fosse's decision.

After an interminable amount of time, he looked up. "Cheryl Montelle -- pretty name." I smiled. He moved closer, put one of those slender arms around my shoulder, walked me forward, turned me toward him, looked right into my eyes, and said, "I'm very sorry that I don't have a place for you in my show. Thank you for coming." He squeezed my shoulder, then turned and cut the rest of my group, as the next four dancers started shuffling down stage.

I grabbed my bag and in a daze wandered offstage. Leigh grabbed my arm, "Cheryl, are you all right? You're walking like a zombie", she said.

"I don't know," I answered. "Bob Fosse just apologized for cutting me."

I felt numb, unsure about how I should feel. Elated? Depressed? I noticed nothing—not the temperature or time, not the feel of my damp winter clothes as I dressed and walked out the stage door. I barely felt the rain that was still falling. When I reached the subway station to catch the train that would take me the thirty blocks home, I passed it up and kept on walking. The rain began to feel good. Bob Fosse had singled me out, and that one thought kept me walking for a while.

Halfway to the Village, shivering and frozen, I passed a diner. I hadn't eaten anything all day and the scent of food lured me inside. The place was near empty so I sat down at a booth by the window, and ordered coffee and a toasted bran muffin.

Sipping the hot coffee, I began to think. I had given this career my all. I had worked hard. I took class every day--ballet, jazz, tap. I practiced my singing. I dieted. And I knew that every day young girls were arriving in New York City with a burning desire to make it. Meanwhile I was burning out. Suddenly I no longer cared if I ever danced on Broadway. In that moment, in that diner, coffee warming me, something changed.

Soon after the new show opened and quickly closed, Bob Fosse died. I heard the news as I was packing my belongings to move west. I felt deeply sad. He'd meant so much to Broadway. Not only was he a genius, but he touched people's lives. He'd touched mine. That day when he looked at me, his eyes full of respect and kindness, he seemed to know how much hard work, struggle and sacrifice went into each day as a dancer, and how much courage it took to keep coming back to each new audition.

"I'm sorry that I don't have a place for you in my show."

I believed him. I believe he meant it.