

MANJULA NEGI

A *CHORUS LINE*, perhaps the longest running Broadway production to date is going to hit town on August 4, for the first time since its creation in 1975. The play, though a musical, touches upon issues often reserved for straight and serious theatre, but not associated with as a musical's underlying content. Like Ashley Lobo, one of the co-directors of the play along with Vivek Mansukhani puts it: "The play was chosen because it has strong theatrical content. It's not just a musical that is entertaining, but has something to say." For *A Chorus Line* explores the trials, tribulations, struggle and pain experienced by those who aspire to the ultimate pinnacle, the name and fame synonymous with Broadway. Created, conceived and first directed by Michael Bennet, the play had evolved from a series of workshops conducted between Bennet and Broadway's chorus performers. As each went through his/her chat sessions recounting scars, frustrations, heartbreaks and fears, what emerged was the stark reality of a chorus performers' small-time existence. And though initially performed on the backstreets of Broadway, because none were forthcoming with funds, *A Chorus Line* has since become a legend in its 20 years of existence with 6,137 performances.

Now it has been adapted and Indianised by Lobo along with Mansukhani (artistic director, Scene Stealers) who is directing the acting portions while Lobo choreographs the show. Together they have made "several changes to the original script," according to Lobo. "Certain reference points like names and places of people like Anne Miller and Doris

PHOTOS: B. MATHUR



Top of the Line

A Chorus Line, one of the world's longest running plays, hits Delhi



Choreographer Ashley Lobo at the *A Chorus Line* rehearsals (left); Vivek Mansukhani guides actors (above)

Day have been changed to Barbara Streisand and Madonna "to suit a wider audience base, says Mansukhani. "While the actual script conforms to the original, the music has been completely rearranged by Babush (Santana). There is a dance script (detailing the steps) available," says Lobo "but none — not a single beat — has been touched. The choreography is entirely

mine." Changes have also been executed in stage lighting. "The whole play is an hour-and-a-quarter long and goes from the start to finish without an interval or stage blackouts for change of scenes. A lot of film techniques are being attempted. For instance, the dissolve is used constantly to move back and forth from reality to illusion and vice versa. It could be a light guy's (in this case Roysten Abel) dream or night-

mare," states Lobo. But there are other, deeper reasons for why the changes were necessary. Continues Lobo: "The play in its skeleton form has no sets at all, one has to create the usage of space and sets. Also, I don't believe in lifting. If I were to present any play scene for scene, where would my creativity lie?"

Finding all round performers — who could sing, act and dance — was crucial to the play. While most of them have been chosen from the Danceworx Academy (founded in December 1998 by Lobo), there are free lance performers too. Both Mansukhani and Lobo work independently of the other, taking the cast by turns.

The cast of 40 has been divided into working groups to make the affairs manageable. While there are 18 soloists, the others form the backup. "Working on this musical has been the most challenging task for me," states Lobo. "Its difficult managing a big cast and not everyone can be a star. And in our line, fortunately or unfortunately, there are a lot of fragile egos. And a certain degree of competitiveness does step in which makes a cast of this age group (late teens-early 20s) aggressive.

Mansukhani feels that "the feelings that these performers have gone through are very, very real and close to what the actual play deals with." He explains: "We started auditioning for this in April and because we were looking for all-round performers short-listing was inevitable. For those that made it, they have experienced it all. And one does hope that the feelings that they experienced during auditions would be conveyed to the audiences as well."

The expenses for a production such as this could mean anything between 10-15 lakhs and as of now, only Godfrey Philips of India has agreed for sponsorship. The hunt for others is still on and hopefully, the efforts will pay off.

The tickets have been priced at Rs 200, 100 and 50 and the plays opens at Kamani Auditorium on August 4-8. It is scheduled to perform in Mumbai as well in October.