

## Chita is back - and she can still do the splits



Photo: Gavin Smith

**Broadway great Chita Rivera starred in the original *Chicago*. At 66 she has a new role, she tells Ismene Brown**

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"I HAVE this uncontrollable bad-girl side to me," says Chita Rivera, throwing back her head and laughing throatily. One would expect no less from the original Anita in *West Side Story*, the original Velma in *Chicago* and the one and only Spider Woman. Broadway stars do not come brighter than Rivera - and I doubt many come more genuinely pleasant or lacking in vanity either.

Rivera is joining the cast of *Chicago* at the Adelphi Theatre in the West End next Monday. However, she will be playing not "her" role but the ingenuous, ever-hopeful Roxie Hart, the lead. Her wimpish husband will be played by the pasty-faced comedian Norman Pace. As I study the petite, exotic New Yorker, her long ballerina legs highlighted by a very short dress and very high heels, I reflect that this must be one of the oddest stage marriages ever devised.

It also cannot be denied that, at 66, Rivera is quite an age to play a girl who pretends to be pregnant to escape jail. But in the theatre it's artistry that counts, and as she points out the original Roxie, Gwen Verdon, was nearly 50. "That's why there's that line in there: 'I'm older than I ever intended to be'," she chuckles. "And I was 41 or 42 when I created Velma."

Rivera's last London appearance, in *The Kiss of the Spider Woman* seven years ago, proved that age has neither withered her nor staled her infinite variety. And variety is the right word for her journey, from Balanchine to Broadway.

She grew up in a large Puerto Rican family in Washington DC, and at 14 was awarded a scholarship by the master choreographer George Balanchine himself to his School of American Ballet. She dreamed only of ballet. But three years later, to support a friend, she went idly to an audition for *Call Me Madam*, and got the job. There weren't a lot of laughs in ballet, she'd found, and certainly no singing.

"Actually I still think ballet is the epitome of dance. But I found this audition had really stimulated me." When her mother tremulously told the SAB that the 17-year-old was leaving, "ooh, they were not happy. It was only after *West Side Story* that I got a note from Lincoln Kirstein [founder of New York City Ballet] saying that they were proud of me," Rivera squeaks, and suddenly starts crying. "Well, it meant *everything* to me."

The sensational opening of *West Side Story* in 1957 confirmed her as a big new star both in New York and London. She missed the 1961 film, though, because she was making yet another new musical, *Bye Bye Birdie*, and she then had to bear seeing her part in the 1963 *Birdie* movie taken by Janet Leigh.

"Well, she was a movie star, she was box-office. It is unfair but you just have to let it go by. I mean, when I saw Rita [Moreno] get her Oscar for Anita, you know the only thing that *really* got me was that in *West Side Story* she was wearing my purple dress."

What a courteous lady, I reflect. Nowadays to be Latin is the highest form of hip, but Rivera's successes (*Sweet Charity* on stage and film, *Zorba*, *Chicago*, *The Rink*, *Can-Can*, *Spider Woman*, and countless awards) were against the tide. She doesn't labour the point: "I am dark, I am Latin, and my ideal has always been Gwen Verdon! She was the one and only. There was nothing she could do that was lewd or rude; she could twist her hips and just make it look perfect - the red hair, the green eyes, the pink skin, that sweet-sounding voice."

BUT here Rivera is now, with her Latin roots and at her age, playing Verdon's part in *Chicago* in Las Vegas for the past four months and now in London for the next two.

The musical, created in 1975 by Fred Ebb, Bob Fosse and John Kander - who'd previously created *Cabaret* - is a story of media/justice collusion. Roxie Hart, like Velma Kelly and her fellow prisoners in 1920s Chicago, is a murderess attempting to manipulate the media to help her cuse. Rivera remembers it as sharp, good fun in the Seventies, but now it has a grim topicality, in the wake of the trials of O J Simpson, Louise Woodward and Manjit Basuta, the British Asian nanny whom the media currently finds so easy to ignore.

The London production is stripped down and compacted from the original, and she's not sold on the cropped costumes. "I'm bringing my own dress - it's short, but does cover a bit more than theirs," she says firmly.

The athleticism, though, is nothing new to her. She can still do the splits, and Roxie now is much easier than the original Velma.

"The time I came along was the best time in theatre because there were such great choreographers. A show like *Can-Can* was amazing. Those were the original gipsy chorus girls, with the cigarettes dangling out of their mouths. They were strong - you had to be. You'd be standing in arabesque, the guys would lift you and throw you, and you'd hit the floor and slide in splits all the way across. And the girls would do cartwheels inbetween. It was dangerous, yes, but we were trained for it.

"I have no right to wish for any changes in my life, no right at all, because I've had an amazing time. But I wish now I had done just one ballet. To prove something.

"But then I got this wonderful award from New York City Ballet four years ago for my career achievements. I just couldn't believe it. I was so sorry my mother couldn't see it. I was also chosen to speak at [choreographer] Jerry Robbins's memorial service - Baryshnikov, myself, about five other speakers.

"They chose *me*. These are the things that mean most, that prove to you you've done something right."

