



Kirkwood, James (1924-1989)

by Greg Varner

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Writer James Kirkwood reached the peak of his fame when *A Chorus Line*, the celebrated musical, opened at the Public Theater in 1975. Executing a concept by choreographer Michael Bennett, with music by Marvin Hamlisch and lyrics by Edward Kleban, Kirkwood joined with co-writer Nicholas Dante to develop a script based on the tape-recorded reminiscences of Broadway "gypsies," the young men and women who sing and dance in the chorus lines of musicals. In 1976, his contributions to the show brought Kirkwood a Tony Award and a Pulitzer Prize.

By this time, Kirkwood was well known in the world of theater through his work as an actor, playwright, and comedian. He could be amusing and suave, as suggested by press agent Bob Ullman, who commented, "Before *A Chorus Line* opened at the Public, I couldn't get any media interested. The only person the press was interested in was--not Marvin Hamlisch, who had already written music for Streisand--but Jimmy Kirkwood. Everybody adored Jimmy Kirkwood."

According to Samuel G. Freedman, a *New York Times* writer, "*A Chorus Line* enacts a communal myth, the myth of finding acceptance and identity in an alien place that feels ineffably like home." As theater critic Frank Rich noted, "*A Chorus Line* was also the first Broadway musical to deal matter-of-factly with homosexuality, and from an inside point-of-view that makes its gay men seem far more accessible than the martyrs and oddballs that typified stage homosexuals in mainstream American drama of the post-*Boys in the Band*, pre-AIDS era."

Kirkwood was born on August 22, 1924, in Hollywood; his parents were the silent film stars Lila Lee and James Kirkwood. After their divorce, Kirkwood was shunted between the two of them, making holiday times especially awkward and painful. He spent much of his time with his mother's family in Elyria, Ohio, a small town where he graduated from high school.

In its matter-of-fact treatment of homosexuality, *A Chorus Line* somewhat resembles Kirkwood's five novels. His first book, *There Must Be a Pony!*, was published in 1960, and later adapted for the stage and for television. Its hero is young Josh, who struggles for balance when his alcoholic mother, a movie star, is suspected of murdering her boyfriend.

Josh is consoled by an effeminate writer, a family friend said to resemble a "tropical bird." The character suggests a Truman Capote-like figure; though used for comic relief, he is allowed to keep his dignity. At the novel's climax, Josh's drunken mother accuses him of being her rival for the affections of the dead man. Josh is not clearly seen as gay, but his mother's accusation would have been familiar to at least a few readers.

Kirkwood's next novel, *Good Times / Bad Times*, published in 1968, presents two young men at a New England prep school who are threatened when the disturbed headmaster develops a homoerotic fixation on the narrator, Peter. His friend Jordan is the novel's voice of wisdom; he tells Peter that what makes the headmaster's attraction so dangerous is the fact that he cannot acknowledge it. "Guys who don't have a

problem, if they come into contact with anything homosexual, they can just shrug it off," Jordan explains. He also tells Peter, "Any man who says he wouldn't whack off with Cary Grant is either a liar or can't get it up."

Jordan calls Peter "baby," as in the following passage: "Baby, we're all animals! Animals is what we are. It's a wonder we're not all running around bare-ass, sniffing at one another and peeing on everything in sight!" The two boys go to an opera and sit in the audience holding hands with tears streaming down the narrator's face.

The novel is suffused with homoeroticism, but homosexuality is nervously (and unconvincingly) disavowed by the narrator, who says at one point, "We threw our arms around one another and we kissed. It was a real kiss, and no matter what anybody might think, a perfectly right and fitting expression of our friendship for that time and place and for us." (It was not until the late 1970s, when openly gay writers such as Edmund White, Andrew Holleran, and Larry Kramer all published novels with explicitly gay themes, that a daring novel such as *Good Times / Bad Times* would seem disingenuous and quaint because of its evasions.)

Kirkwood's next novel, *P.S. Your Cat Is Dead*, published in 1972, is a farce in which a straight man whose girlfriend has just dumped him ties a naked gay burglar to his kitchen table. This was followed by *Some Kind of Hero* (1975), in which a returned Vietnam veteran and POW, traumatized first by the death of a fellow prisoner (and lover) and then by his wife's abandonment, becomes a robber. This novel was made into a film starring Richard Pryor. *P.S. Your Cat Is Dead* became both a stage play and film.

Kirkwood's last novel, *Hit Me With a Rainbow*, published in 1980, presents the improbable love affair between a young man and an older movie star. Her entourage includes an openly gay servant.

Kirkwood was a capable writer of popular fiction. If his serviceable American English prose rarely rises to flights of eloquence, it only occasionally stoops to awkward, clumsy passages. In all of his books, Kirkwood displays a tragicomic vision of life marked by a rueful awareness that grace is momentary and accidental. He frequently portrays sexual love as a kind of miracle.

In two nonfiction books, Kirkwood tackled very different subjects. In *American Grotesque* (1970), he compares the prosecution by New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison of gay businessman and preservationist Clay Shaw for conspiracy to murder John F. Kennedy to the Spanish Inquisition. He writes, warningly, "I'm afraid I've come to the conclusion that, yes, it could happen to me. Or to you."

In *Diary of a Mad Playwright* (1989), Kirkwood recounts the hilarious and harrowing attempt to bring his comic play, *Legends*, starring Mary Martin and Carol Channing, to Broadway. Here, we may hear his voice at its most natural. Writing about auditioning actors for the part of a male stripper, he wryly observes, "I didn't know whether to laugh, cry, blush, shit, or go blind."

Another play by Kirkwood, *UTBU (Unhealthy To Be Unpleasant)*, opened on Broadway in 1966. Kirkwood also acted in various television shows and films, including Frank Perry's account of the life of Joan Crawford as seen through the eyes of her adopted daughter, *Mommie Dearest* (1981).

Kirkwood's primary residence was in Key West, Florida. *A Chorus Line* was still running when he died of AIDS-related cancer on April 21, 1989, in his apartment in New York City.

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About the Author

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