

Players Theater Musical Is a Turning Point for Pamela Blair

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Of all the characters who told their life stories in *A Chorus Line*, Val was perhaps the funniest. Long on talent, short on looks, she was the one who visited a plastic surgeon for curves forward and aft (or "t — and a —," as she sang about them).

The show that changed the course of Broadway musicals also changed the life of Pamela Blair, the spunky originator of Val. In the nearly two years since she left *A Chorus Line*, Blair has lost 10 pounds, switched from straight blonde hair to curly henna, fallen in love for keeps and wised up about the business.

THE TINY, waif-faced Blair will strut her singing and powerhouse dancing tonight at Coconut Grove Playhouse for the opening of Players State Theater's *Irma La Douce* in the Coconut Grove Playhouse. The musical is a favorite of Players State executive director Robert Kanter, who saw it done 20 years ago in London.

Irma La Douce was first present-



**Irma La Douce's Jeff Coopwood, Pamela Blair
... and Normand Beauregard, Robert Grossman**

ed in 1956 in Paris, where it ran for four years. Translated into English, it was produced on Broadway in 1960 for a 15-month run, followed by a national tour. A popular movie version was made, with Shirley MacLaine and Jack Lemmon. The title character, a warm-hearted prosti-

tute, is the only female role in this musical fable.

Kanter says that some members of Players' board of directors questioned his decision to do *Irma La Douce* as the company's final production of the season, on the theory that the show was too large. The

only musical of Players' second season in the Grove, it is also notable as a turning point in the career Blair almost abandoned.

"THE PRIMARY reason I'm doing *Irma La Douce* is to prove to myself that I could act," she says. "I love the theater and I wanted to have a good experience because I had come so close to quitting."

Blair is referring to a bad experience in the ill-fated show *King of Hearts*, which opened and closed on Broadway last fall. "I almost left show business after working for Ron Field [the show's director], who is a horrible man. I used to have a lot of guts, but he treated me so badly. We called him Caligula."

Wearing a flower-print burgundy dress, Blair appears to be a fragile-looking teenager. Her complexion is porcelain-perfect and unadorned by makeup or discernible lines. It's a surprise when she volunteers that she's 29. That candor, along with a knack for telling anecdotes with a comedian's deadpan look, makes her disarming.

She doesn't look at all like the brassy, ambitious chorine she

played in *A Chorus Line*. She liked being interviewed back then, until she realized that people were more interested in the show and in how true-to-life her character was, rather than in her as a person.

NOW SHE REGARDS the show with ambivalence. "I love Michael Bennett," she says. "He gave all of us so much." Yet *A Chorus Line* was hard on her. "You never knew when fantasy ended and reality began. You constantly felt you were being auditioned. It was too demanding emotionally, and I'd probably never go through it again."

When it came time to take the show to Los Angeles, Blair had dreams of being a movie star, like everyone else in the cast. She disregarded the good counsel of her New York acting teacher, Uta Hagen: "Don't want stardom. Just want to do good work."

Hollywood proved to be a big let-down. "I found myself going up for six lines on 'Alice' and not getting it. Film and television are very chauvinistic. I could not compete as

a beauty. I was considered a comedienne."

Briefly unemployed, Blair got the role of Amber in the Broadway musical *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*; she played that role for eight months before being signed to the *King of Hearts* debacle.

THE ONLY GOOD thing she got out of *King of Hearts* was Donny Scardino, her actor boyfriend. "He's the first person I've been with I know I'll be with forever," she says. "I tend to see the bad before the good. Donny sees the good in everything. He brings out the good in me. He's adorable and very talented."

Scardino recently saw her through the trauma of a tubal pregnancy and removal of a Fallopian tube, which left her wondering if she can ever have a child.

IRMA LA DOUCE plays through April 15 at Players State Theater in the Coconut Grove Playhouse, 3500 Main Hwy. Tickets range from \$8.25 to \$10.25. For reservations, call 442-4000. Showtimes are Tuesday through Saturday at 8:15 p.m., Sunday at 7:30 p.m., and Wednesday and Saturday at 2 p.m.