

# Still Kicking

With an irreverent sense of humor, Jennifer Jiles reveals what it was like to be a Rockette in the 1990s.

In 1990, Jennifer Jiles spent three grueling days competing with 1,000 aspiring Rockettes hoping to land one of only 12 openings. With the odds stacked heavily against her, the vivacious brunette with a brand-new degree from the SUNY Purchase Conservatory of Theatre Arts aced the auditions and was invited to join the iconic dance troupe. As it turned out, winning the role was the easy part; the real test was navigating the difficult and sometimes ruthless life on the chorus line.

Drawing from her experiences in an often tumultuous work environment full of fierce peer rivalries and mandatory body-weight check-ins, Jiles created a one-woman musical, *Kicking & Screaming*, in which she regales her audience with the hysterical and heartbreaking stories about being a Rockette from 1990 to 1996.

Jiles explains it was a particularly difficult time to be a Rockette. “At that time, this amazing man [producer Bruce Michael] decided to change the face of the Rockettes,” she says. “But there was a roster of seasoned dancers, most of whom had no intention of leaving. It’s not that the older dancers weren’t great at their job; they were great but they were also just kind of stale.”

Michael had a vision to transform his Rockettes back into a troupe of the hottest women and the hottest dancers in the world—who were Broadway-ready and equipped to perform across every major media platform. Jiles was exactly what Bruce Michael wanted in a dancer.

“As an infant, I came out of my mom dancing,” Jiles quips. “While growing up in Poughkeepsie, I danced everywhere I went. My mom finally gave up and signed me up to take classes with retired Principal for the American Ballet Theatre Tom Adair.” Young and classically trained with a passion for dancing, Jiles was exactly what Michael was looking for.

Right from the start, animosity ran deep between the old and new dancers. “There was one dancer who I stood next to, and she wouldn’t speak to me—wouldn’t look at me for weeks,” recalls Jiles, who concedes that the hostility ran both ways. “I came from the dance world where everyone was so young. The older Rockettes were amaz-



ing and gorgeous, but, they were my age now, and at 20 years old, I thought they were hacks—but there are two sides to every story.”

Telling both sides of that story in a way that made people laugh became both her coping mechanism for dealing with life on the chorus line and then her life’s work. “While I was working as a Rockette, I was writing everything out in extensive diaries, developing characters—not necessarily because I knew I would write my own show, but just because I was making the other Rockettes and stagehands laugh,” Jiles says. “For example, there was this one woman who had been on the line for years. She was one of those older people who had been smoking for 38 years. Actually, even longer than that, because she was on the line for 38 years, and smoking since she was a teenager and had the smoker’s voice to prove it!” she says. “Of course, she became part of my act.”

Eventually, Jiles realized her material could make people other than stagehands laugh. She first developed the anecdotes into a comedy skit, performing at the Gotham Comedy Club, and, in 2003, she launched a two-hour musical, *Kicking & Screaming*, a show

Jennifer Jiles turned her experiences as a Rockette into a one-woman show.

## Neighbor

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Jiles on the line with her fellow Rockettes (left) and in her Rockette costume (below)

she has performed around the country over the last decade.

In *Kicking & Screaming*, Jiles wears many hats, playing 21 characters including six Rockettes, her old ballet teacher, and herself at various ages. One of the funniest characters is an older Rockette named Thelma La Rue. “Thelma is a conglomeration of this really awesome dancer who was at least 25 years older than me, and one of the stagehands,” Jiles explains. “She is the heart of this show. I was a young Rockette on one side of the change, and Thelma La Rue was on the other side.”

In her play, Jiles also takes the time to retell some of her lighter moments as a Rockette, including a cringe-worthy meeting with a former US president. “I hadn’t heard Tricky Dick was out there, so when I’m headed out to Duane Reade for some Tums between shows, I come out of the elevator and, at the same time, out of the other elevator, there he is—I almost plutz! Former President Richard Nixon! I stick out my hand and say, ‘Excuse me, Mr. Nixon. Hi, I’m Jennifer Jiles and I’m a Rockette.’”

“He returns the handshake and says, ‘Oh, it’s so nice to meet you. I love the Rockettes. It is truly amazing what you Rockettes can do!’ And then I say, ‘Well, it’s nothing like what you did!’—Oh, shoot! Back-pedal, back-pedal, back-pedal—‘being president and all!’”

Today, Jiles lives in Croton-on-Hudson with her husband and their two young sons, where her life imitates her art, given all the roles she plays in both her personal and professional lives. Jiles is a devoted mom, often taking her sons with her to au-



ditions. She is a voiceover actress (most recently as the snotty shopkeeper in *Grand Theft Auto V*, as well as the narrator for an audiobook), and is currently auditioning for both TV and film roles, including a potential role in a docudrama (reality show) about being an ex-Rockette. She’s also a ballet instructor.

Perhaps her most surprising role, though, is that of boot camp instructor for her well-named fitness class: *Kicked Into Shape*. She began the class after some moms from her son’s nursery school asked her to help them get into shape. The class,

which she teaches at Croton Landing Park, has become a favorite of locals, including Ossining’s Shannon King. “My dream as a child was to be a Rockette, so, when I found that out that she was a Rockette, I was definitely excited,” King says. “Jen’s approach and self-deprecating humor help all of us just feel normal and we are all just trying to do the best we can and ideally be healthy while we’re at it! We laugh a lot during classes and all recognize that we have good days and bad days.”

What’s next for Jiles? “I’m working on a memoir,” Jiles says. In it, Jiles deviates from her normal funny-girl material, delving into a dark time in her life when she was in an abusive relationship. Still, readers can expect glimpses of her signature cheeky humor. “I like to make people laugh and cry at the same time,” she says. “I do the same thing in *Kicking & Screaming*—I guess that’s just the way I look at life.” **W**

*Ali Jackson-Jolley is a full-time freelance writer and theater enthusiast from Croton Falls.*

PHOTOS COURTESY OF JEN JILES