

PAUL

Paul San Marco. It's my stage name. My real name is Ephrain* Ramirez. I was born in Spanish Harlem – October 22, 1947. (* pronounced Efra-eeen, Spanish)

ZACH

What made you start dancing. Your parents?

PAUL

No, what do Puerto Ricans know about theatre? Now they have Channel forty-seven – but then they didn't have anything. But my father loved movies. And he'd take us all the time. He worked nights and he'd come home and he'd take us to Forty Second Street. And we'd come out of one movie and go to another and another movie – I don't know why – but I loved musicals.

ZACH

How old were you?

PAUL

Seven or eight.

ZACH

On Forty-Second Street?

PAUL

Yeah, it was a trip.

ZACH

Go on ...

PAUL

I'd have to move down front – 'cause I couldn't see – I wear contact lenses now – I'd move down front and these strange men would come and sit beside me and "play" with me. I never told anyone because – well, I guess it didn't matter ...

ZACH

Why didn't it matter?

PAUL

Why? Ah ... Well ...

ZACH

Look, Paul, if this is too rough for you, I have your picture and resume ...

PAUL

No. Ah Okay. From seeing all those movie musicals, I used to dance around on the street, and I'd get caught all the time. God, it was embarrassing. I was always being Cyd Charisse ... Always. Which I don't really understand, because I always wanted to be an actor. I mean, I really wanted to perform. Once my cousin said to me, "You'll never be an actor," and I knew she was telling me this because I was such a sissy. I mean, I was terribly effeminate. I always knew I was gay, but that didn't bother me. What bothered me was that I didn't know how to be a boy.

One day I looked at myself in the mirror and said: "You're fourteen years old and you're a faggot. What are you going to do with your life?" By that time I was in Cardinal Hayes High School. There were three thousand boys there. I had no protection any more. No homeroom where I could be charming and funny with the tough guys so they'd fight my battles for me. Like when I went to small schools. I liked school. But my grades got so bad. Even if I knew the answers to questions, I wouldn't raise my hand because I would be afraid they'd laugh at me. They'd even whistle at me in the halls. It was awful ...just awful. Finally, I went down to the Principal's office and said: "I'm a homosexual." Well, it was a Catholic high school in nineteen sixty-two and at the age of fifteen you just didn't say that. And he said: "I think you're very well adjusted for you age and I think you should quit school." So, I did. But I really didn't want to. I couldn't take it anymore.

See, when I quit school, what I was doing was trying to find out was who I was and how to be a man. You know, there are a lot of people in this world who don't know how to be men. And since then, I've found out that I am one. I was looking for the wrong thing. I was trying to learn how to be butch. Anyway, I started hanging around Seventy-Second Street, meeting all these really strange people. Just trying to make friends that were like me. So that I'd understand what it was that I was.

Somebody told me they were looking for male dancers for the Jewel Box Revue; you know, the drag show. So, I go down to audition. Now, from all those years of pretending I was Cyd Charisse, I had this fabulous extension. I mean, I could turn, anything, my first audition. And they said to me: "You're too short to be a boy, would you like to be a pony?" And I said: "What's that?" And they said, "A girl." "What do I have to do?" "Show us your legs." "But I have hair on my legs." "That's okay, come on upstairs." So I went and they hiked up my dungarees and they put on a pair of nylon stockings and high heels. It was freaky. It was incredible. And then they brought me back downstairs, and they said: "Oh, you have wonderful legs." I said: "Really? Terrific ... "

It's so strange thinking about this. It was a whole lifetime ago. I was just past sixteen. Anyway, then there was this thing of me trying to hide it from my parents. That was something. 'Cause I had to buy all this stuff. Like, ah, shoes to rehearse in, earrings, makeup. And I would hide it all and my mother would find it. I told her there was this girl in the show and she didn't want her mother to know what she was doing and I was holding the stuff for her. She believed me.

PAUL

Well, I was finally in show business. It was the asshole of show business – but it was a job... Nothing to brag about. I had friends. But after a while it was so demeaning. Nobody at the Jewel Box had any dignity, and most of them were ashamed of themselves and considered themselves freaks. I don't know, I think it was the lack of dignity that got to me, so I left. Oh, I muddled around for a while. I worked as an office boy, a waiter – but without an education, you can't get a good job. So, when the Jewel Box called and asked if I'd come back, I went.

We were working the Apollo Theatre on a Hundred and Twenty-Fifth Street. Doing four shows a day with a movie. It was really tacky. The show was going to go to Chicago. My parents wanted to say goodbye and they were going to bring my luggage to the theatre after the show. Well, we were doing this oriental number and I looked like Anna May Wong. I had these two great big chrysanthemums on either side of my head and a huge headdress with gold balls hanging all over it. I was going on for the finale and going down the stairs and who should I see standing by the stage door .. my parents. They got there too early. I freaked. I didn't know what to do. I thought to myself: "I know, I'll just walk quickly past them like all the others and they'll never recognize me." So I took a deep breath and started down the stairs and just as I passed my mother I heard her say: "Oh, my god." Well ... I died. But what could I do? I had to go for the finale so I just kept going.

After the show I went back to my dressing room and after I'd finished dressing and taking my makeup off, I went back downstairs. And there they were standing in the middle of all these ... And all they said to me was please write, make sure you eat and take care of yourself. And just before my parents left, my father turned to the producer and he said: "Take care of my son ..." that was the first time he ever called me that ... I ... ah I ah ...

(PAUL breaks down)