

## Rhinestone Christmas Angels



Sitting in the center section of Radio City Music Hall on worn vermillion theater seats glazed threadbare by the butts of a thousand bums, I was one of a gaggle of eight-year-old girls scattered like little dandelions in an audience of old weeds and dirt clods.

An ancient tourist nearby complained about the temperature as he adjusted a donut-shaped hemorrhoid pillow. Hobos, a few years before they would be granted the status of homeless, staggered into the theater to sleep off a drunk. Women with sharp east coast accents delivered shocking open-handed slaps to subdue restless children. We were all wiggling in our chairs in anticipation of the Rockettes Christmas Spectacular (or because of boozy nightmares and flaring hemorrhoids).

The New York of 1979 was at its criminal peak. In a few short hours, an entire sex education had been completed. I had witnessed my first trench-coated pervert open his jacket to reveal the disappointing mystery of man parts, toddled behind the brazen swagger of street prostitutes, and caught fleshy flashes of pornography from between my mother's fingers cupped over my eyes.

There was a grainy film covering Midtown Manhattan that gave the city the same hue seen in movies like *Taxi Driver* and *Midnight Cowboy*. A wash of grey and brown created a colorless landscape even within the mustard and gold theater.

And then they came out kicking!

The Rockettes were glittery and otherworldly; Technicolor. Their velvet Mrs. Santa minidresses, ruby lips, and gleaming white smiles invoked the wholesome splendor of a fifties chorus line.

Each dancer was perfectly timed. They linked arms as if they were the best of friends, lifted legs in unison, and executed a series of intricate steps with precision. Nude hose with a touch of shimmer created flawless legs free of bruises and spider veins. Tightly corseted sequined swimsuits cinched stomachs into flawless silhouettes. Everything seemed smoothed over, tucked in, and coated with a fine sheen of glamour.

The Rockettes of the coke-fueled seventies were as lovely as the original 1932 dream of creator Russell Market who once remarked, "I had seen the Jon Tiller girls in the Zeigfeld Follies of 1922. If I ever got a chance to get a group of American girls who would be taller and have longer legs and could do really complicated tap routines and eye-high kicks...they'd knock your socks off!"

Every week, Radio City offered a dance performance followed by a feature film (when I went, a movie called *The Promise* designed my expectations of adult relationships: Poor girl meets rich boy, mother-in-law disapproves, girl is disfigured in tragic accident, mother-in-law offers surgery to reconstruct her mangled face with the caveat that she never see rich boy again, years later her beautiful new visage doesn't fool rich boy because destiny, as manifested by the gleam in a soul mate's eyes, tells a timeless truth...love never dies).

The entire mood of the movie was heightened by women with legs that started just beneath their earlobes and extended for a mile to trim ankles offset by Empire State Building heels.

Hours after the show, I found myself hiking up my coltish knock-knees in a perverse can-can parody of these Amazonian enchantresses.

Now I can relive memories of latency as the Radio City Rockettes embark upon an 18-city arena tour. The Big Apple experience will make its way to the Little Crabapples of Green Bay and Milwaukee and wow holiday revelers with a Christmas spectacular that takes 175 peons to produce, 24 dazzling Rockettes to execute, 1 Santa to spellbind, 18 cast members to lurk, 8 tots fully compliant within child labor laws, and a manger scene starring Wendy the Camel and Sarah the Donkey.

My favorite behind-the-scenes detail is the diet of the theatrical beasts which includes bottled water, premium hay, and loaves of 7-grain bread!

**SPOILER ALERT:** There will be an ice rink made of Teflon, the high anxiety of Santa suspended and flying though the audience, 2, 500 pounds of fake snow falling upon the crowd, and ten live animals that may or may not poop on stage to the delight of little children everywhere.

The performance will also include ladies posing as Reindeer, The Nutcracker (please scold junior high boys as they attempt to make crude double-entendres during this selection), a Rockettes retrospective, a parade of wooden soldiers (again, double-entendres are not necessary), the living nativity, and at some point silver confetti will

explode over diamond-encrusted Rockettes to the spine-tingling pleasure of little girls and creepy old guys alike.

Adding to the homespun folksiness of it all will be the return of Melissa Hillmer, a local Manitowoc, Wisconsin gal who is a breakout star of the Rockettes chorus line. Looking like the product of a girl fight between Deborah Kara Unger, Gillian Anderson, and Rebecca De Mornay, the lovely Ms. Hillmer has modeled for *Glamour*, *Self*, and was voted one of New York's 50 most beautiful people.

In an interview for *Scene*, I poked and prodded for tales of bulimia, backstage treachery, and *Showgirls*-style sleaze. Luckily, the Rockettes school their dancers on media etiquette and this classy lass fielded my every intrusive question with the vague spunky agility of a ninja practiced in the ancient art of avoidance.

Ms. Hillmer was polite and pleasant with a warm friendly voice. She saw Santa where I saw seasonal affective disorder. My cynical prying and inherent nosiness was met with pert professionalism, which is why she embodies the giving spirit of Christmas as she throws up jazz-hands under the radiant halo of stage lights and I just write about it.



**SCENE: I saw the Rockettes in New York when I was eight and for weeks I was high kicking. Did any show or performer inspire you to start dancing? (I am hoping the interview immediately dissolves into a forty-five minute homage to Olivia Newton John.)**

MELISSA HILLMER: I was inspired by Jean Wolfmeyer in Manitowoc. She's been in the business 60 years and has taught and produced many dancers. She paved the way for dance as a career, teaching discipline and balance. I always enjoyed ballet and musical theater. In fact, I saw the Rockettes during the Macy's Thanksgiving Parade and again at Radio City Music Hall. Sitting in the third mezzanine I said, "I want to do that!"

**SCENE: You are a cover girl and a Rockette. Did you ever have a gawky geeky stage growing up? (Regale me with horror stories of being slammed against lockers and withstanding wedgies as you suffered through years of braces, nose jobs, and corrective eye-patches that transformed you into the raging beauty you are today.)**

MH: No, not really. When I stop dancing I put on a little weight. At 5 feet 8 and a half, I am not the ideal ballerina size, which is somewhat shorter. I've experienced anxiety during professional weigh-ins, but musical theater is somewhat forgiving with more character roles. I am a Wisconsin girl though, and I do like my cheese!

**SCENE: You've gone from Manitowoc to a more cosmopolitan urban existence. Do you feel happy to have escaped or are there aspects you miss about small town life? (Describe your searing hatred of being trapped in fly-over country and all the self-destructive means with which you sought solace: the cutting, the shoplifting, smashing 40s behind the Taco Bell dumpster with your knuckleheaded boyfriend as you screamed, "I can't wait to get out of this HELL HOLE!")**

MH: I'm gradually coming back. What used to make me crazy about returning now makes me happy. It's what I live for. I have the best of both worlds: the big city and then coming home; racing around and then the quiet life.

**SCENE: I see that you are majoring in communications. What would you like to do in the future? (Do you see yourself inexplicably experiencing a downward slide where you give up dance, take up drink, and resort to a life of petty crime?)**

MH: I see myself staying with the arts. I am passionate about what I do. I'd like to work in TV or radio. I'm fortunate in all the things I've tried.

**SCENE: Because of the history and high visibility, is there a Rockettes code of conduct? (How does the organization feel about members posing for Hustler or dating OJ?)**

MH: Yes. 500 girls audition each year and the organization is good with the screening process. There are high standards. You need pride in yourself. They choose talented smart women. There are mothers, business owners, and students. We are doing the same moves in the chorus line but we are all individuals.

**SCENE: What would get you kicked off the Rockettes squad? (...besides an unwillingness to participate in the many worthy charities the organization supports and a fat ass?)**

MH: Bad behavior. It's the same as any other job, doing things your mom wouldn't like to see. We practice six days a week for six hours a day. Afterwards, you just want to ice your feet. There's not much time to get into trouble.

**SCENE: The press release indicated the ideal Rockette is blessed with height, talent, and “radiant energy”. What is that something extra that gives you “radiant energy”? (*Please say cocaine!*)**

MH: We are all well-rounded and confident but not arrogant. It is a confidence that comes from discipline.

**SCENE: I am also a tall girl and experienced the requisite height trauma as an adolescent. Did you deal with any tall-girl drama when you were younger? (*I flash to my own tortured youth tripping over big puppy feet and having so little control over my lanky legs that when I ran observant peers informed me that it looked like I had a corkscrew up my butt.*)**

MH: No. I experienced a gradual height increase over time. In the Rockettes line, the taller girls are in the center and the shorter girls are placed towards the end.

**SCENE: Describe your typical workout routine and diet. (*I’m cloying for insider information on sheep cell injections, back-alley fat redistribution, kooky Eastern workouts with sex swamis, scientifically engineered pills not yet approved by the FDA that substitute a tiny capsule for an entire meal, and running on a treadmill for thirteen hours wired on crank.*)**

MH: My routine is yoga, Pilates, going to the gym, and dance classes for adults. Whatever makes you happy as long as you’re moving. I eat healthy and walk the dog. Like most athletes, during the season I eat anything I want, but off season I have to be more careful. Rest is the most important thing.

**SCENE: Are there a lot of dancers with eating disorders? (*Can you name names and point them out in the promo photo?*)**

MH: No, we really have to eat. People with eating disorders probably have underlying issues. Every American woman worries about these things. We promote a healthy active lifestyle.

**SCENE: Have you ever had an embarrassing moment on stage? (*An embittered ex-boyfriend heckling from the audience, a Fergie-style pee incident, or an identity crisis meltdown where you stop dancing, look down at your hands, and scream “Who am I?”*)**

MH: No, thankfully not with the Rockettes. There’s always a count early or a count late. The worst is a “kick out”. Someone kicks out of time on the kick line. It rarely happens, but you are in trouble if you don’t keep time. If your head isn’t in it, half a count different can mess up the whole line.

**SCENE: There are so many spicy plays and films about dancers like *A Chorus Line*, *The Turning Point*, and *Showgirls*. There is always some young struggling ingénue**

**trying to upstage the pro. As a veteran Rockette, have you ever had trouble with a newbie? (My favorite moment in Showgirls is when the antihero breaks her necklace and scatters the pearls on the steps so her rival will slip and break a leg!)**

MH: It's so competitive like sports, but competition is good and makes you work harder. It's exaggerated for the movies, but I'm glad they're making films about dance and musical theater. In the Rockettes there are no stars. It's a troupe. Everyone does the same thing, so there are no cat fights. People don't want to believe you're chipper all the time, but it's Christmas, you're with your best friends, you get to see family, and you're doing what you love!

**SCENE: I read you will be studying in Scotland to be closer to your boyfriend. Does this mean you'll no longer be a Rockette? (I am probing for the tragic tale of a talented performer who gives up her hopes and dreams to straggle along with a ne'er-do-well who makes her choose-"It's me or the theater, Babe!"- as seen in the film The Promise.)**

MH: No, I'll just be there during the off season while he is coaching and playing hockey. I'm at the University of Milwaukee and my boyfriend was a Green Bay Gambler, so no matter where we are, we can talk Packers and Brewers together.

**SCENE: How long can you be a Rockette? (Do you count crow's-feet and falsify documentation to appear younger? Is this your third 29<sup>th</sup> birthday?)**

MH: As long as you can high kick! You must be at least eighteen to try out, but as long as you can keep kicking, you can dance.

**SCENE: Did you ever get any wisdom from retired Rockettes? ("Your only hope is to marry rich!")**

MH: We have an alumni association with the motto "Once a Rockette, always a Rockette." There's a legacy. I've been told, "Enjoy it, it goes by so quickly."

**SCENE: The big Christmas spectacle is coming to town. Do you have a favorite number in the show? (Please don't say anything heartwarming like "I love when the little children gather 'round the nativity." I want just a little shallow flash, cha-cha, sparkle, and glitter!)**

MH: The final number is from the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary Rockettes retrospective. The costumes are made of Swarovski crystals. It's very glamorous! It's like a swimsuit with 3000 dangling crystals. Oh, it looks like my ride is here...

**Bingo!**

With that, my girlish dream of transcendent Rockettes mythology was complete. I was hoping for grim accounts of an ugly-duckling past, sordid stories of binging on laxative

brownies, and tabloid tales of harlots in golden gowns sabotaging each other behind the velvet curtains. Instead, I talked to a woman who has always been pretty, doesn't have to worry about weight due to the discipline of dance, and her job is to shimmy in diamonds. Our conversation ended when her ride, a Pegasus with rainbow wings, arrived to fly her off into the starry night.