



REVIEW: Cast provides sterling recreation of Broadway classic

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It ain't all kicks, even high ones, or moves, even smooth, or looks, even glittering. "A Chorus Line" comprises individuals who step out of sync, confused, conflicted and complicated, and move toward unity.

From this clamor of disparate tales must evolve one singular sensation of sounds and motions, like melding mangoes with clairvoyance, tsunamis, melancholy and duct tape to cobble together an unsullied simile. Through aches and breaks, dead affairs, through drilled repetition, kinetic mimicry, and sweat, these idiosyncrasies must gel into the line, a support group without the luxurious freedom of individuality.

Stacy Alley's production -- the University of Alabama Department of Theatre and Dance's show, but as choreographer and director, Alley's queen bee -- hews closely to productions cemented by decades, the set spare as most rehearsal spaces, a tabula rasa for unsparing stories, some hilarious, a few tragic, most swerving through extremes. Despite tweaks to fit the young -- all but the MFA student playing Zach are undergraduates -- cast, it's a sterling recreation of long-ago Broadway gypsies who smoked, drank, danced and talked in taped sessions that became a show, a peek behind curtains.

Poignancy multiplies knowing these kids will soon be pounding pavement between dingy rehearsal halls, getting shot down, shut out and excluded, often through no faults of their own, but the simple math of show biz: Only so many can be hired.

Alley, herself a pro dancer since pre-teen years, carves a sharp but sympathetic feel, evidenced in Green's Zach. Tall, dark, with a commanding voice, Green could easily come off dictatorial and terrifying -- as he still sometimes does, with Cassie -- but also reveals unexpected warmth in a role often played in fewer notes. Green's queries derive from concern, from aesthetic vision, not prurience. While the process still feels harrowing, it comes across less as a terse boot-camp stripping of the soul, and more a struggle among comrades, grown-ups. This Zach wants a true company, not just manipulable skill-puppets. It's a testament to Green that both his embracing of Paul, and the dressing down of Cassie, feel organic, in character. He's not on stage much -- Rex Glover as Zach's assistant Larry handles much of the on-stage physical work -- putting the audience on Zach's side, joining him in curiosity, in evaluation.

Graduating senior Craig First, as Paul, and freshman Melaina Rairamo, as Cassie, bear heavy baggage capably. First doesn't belabor moments, so Paul's final reveal, and fate's intervention, hit extra hard. Despite having still been in high school this time last year, Rairamo uncovers the it's-all-slipping-away despair of Cassie with grace equivalent to her dance steps.

Confidence shows when UA's performers must be intentionally off, if not plain bad. As Cassie draws closer to making the cut, Zach rants because she keeps popping her head -- breaking the line -- still dancing like a star. The early cut dancers kick off with joyous shtick. Parker Reeves, Jack Skeeane, Emma Cooper, Catherine Bradwell, Marissa Swanner and Maggie McCown offer forewarning of the comic-tragic melding: While laughing at obvious flaws, we also get that these are people, seriously striving, seriously failing. Another stark life-art reminder: Those six are also understudying leads, because anyone in this demanding show could pull a muscle, tear cartilage or break a leg, and not in the good way.

Sweet-funny moments resound, like Jonathan Bryant's cocky Mike, proving the Namath adage that it ain't bragging if you can do it; Daniel Fobes and Blair Ely as a charmingly supportive married couple, hubby Al coaching tone-deaf wife Kristine; in the comic coming-of-age tales of Mark (Desmond Montoya), Connie (Allie Stewart), Richie (Victor Castro) and Greg (Chip Keebaugh); with Don (Peyton Davis), unfazed by his stripper work; and Megan Kelly's Judy, the goofy, possibly not all there, but irrepressibly sweet kid. Without checking the program, you'd probably not guess Grace Arnold, sassily sauntering through comic highlight "Dance Ten, Looks Three" is another of

those preternaturally mature freshmen. Carli Hardon steps out of line with muscular assurance as Diana, leading disparate pieces, the darkly comic “Nothing,” and the closing ballad, the melodic melancholy of “What I Did For Love.”

In a show about triple threats -- dancer, singer, actor -- seniors Daniel Hulsizer and Bailey Blaise Mariea speak volumes without a word. From first glance, you know Bobby and Sheila: pros, not yet burned out, but approaching it. Hulsizer’s insouciant turn offers Bobby a fallback as writer or standup comic. For overtly flirtatious Sheila, Mariea finessed nuances, showing us the wounded romantic beneath the rogue. Her almost-mended heart beats through curves and curls, smirks and innuendo. Mariea’s lead in to the “At the Ballet” trio is a balanced tragic-comic knockout, letting enough light in to show why Sheila needs escape. It’s completed and complemented by amiable kid Bebe (Sandra Gates) who feels beautiful only when dancing, and sweet Maggie (Callie Walker), whose sad dream of dance would draw her father in: “Raise your arms and someone’s always there.”

Spoiler alert, for a 42-year-old production that ran 15 years on Broadway: It finishes splashy and flashy, happy, at least for the moment, as even cut dancers high-step back out in top hats and silver razzle-dazzle -- costumers Molly Akin-McKinley and Aharon Thomas otherwise followed mid-70s rehearsal gear -- to become “One,” the kicking set piece that wouldn’t be out of place in oldies such as “Mame” or “Hello Dolly.”

Though you can’t see him, off stage leading the band, Raphael Crystal deserves loud cheers. He and wife Cynthia Martin are returning to New York at the end of summer. When Crystal came to UA in 2003, it was to create the musical theater track. Now recent graduates star in Broadway hits from “Hamilton” to “Kinky Boots” to “Something Rotten,” and the department’s capable of shining on tough shows like “A Chorus Line.” Just as kids from three or four years ago are becoming stars, some in this “Chorus Line” will glow soon in that wider sky. Crystal hit the lights, ran the paces, and counted ’em down: 5-6-7-8. The show will go on, because that’s what shows do, but established, sculpted and made beautiful by his direction.

