

chaoticpen

Words in their manyfold forms.

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Breaking The Leg – “Chicago” By UATD

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Before today, I had never once seen any production of “Chicago,” be it on stage or film. I’ve listened to some of the soundtrack, but mostly the rather well known songs, such as “All That Jazz,” “Razzle Dazzle” and “Cell Block Tango.” It is not one of my favorite musicals. It’s not a bad one, it’s just never sat as one of my favorites. Catchy songs and the like, but nothing really stuck with me.

But the version produced by The University of Alabama’s Department of Theatre and Dance was, perhaps, one of the best musicals I’ve ever seen at the school, and certainly one of the best concentrations of talent I’ve ever seen. Sure, there have been fabulous musicals with talented as heck people in the past at UA. Many of them. I’ve even had the privilege of being in one of them. But this musical was just astounding.

“Chicago” is a musical about murder, greed and the seedier, more unfortunate sides of humanity. The one (possible two if you count the Hungarian woman, Hunyak, who claims “Not Guilty” the entire time) person that is actually a well-to-do, good person is so completely ignored, he even has a song about it. Set in 1920s Chicago, the musical starts with Roxie Hart (Caroline Schmidt) committing murder, killing her lover (who is not her husband, just so you know) for trying to walk out on her. Then we have the famous “Cell Block Tango,” introducing us to the other gruesome stories of murder, particularly one by Velma Kelly (Emmett Smith), who has apparently committed a popularly followed crime, the “Crime of the Century” as they say. But Roxie’s crime takes away the glamor of Velma’s, especially once Roxie, via her husband Amos Hart (Drew Singleton), enlists the help of slightly skeezy but extremely effective defense lawyer Billy Flynn (Stephen Brunson). Flynn makes a celebrity of his clients in order to sway public opinion and garner sympathy, and this newest case pushes Velma out of the spotlight. After struggles from both Velma and Roxie to regain and/or keep their popularity, they’re both declared innocent and begin their vaudeville double act to stay in the spotlight any way they can.

The musical is set up like a series of vaudevillian acts, with different people randomly announcing the next “performance” from the characters. Being that the original production was choreographed by the famous Bob Fosse, well known for having a signature (and rather difficult) style, the musical almost doubles as a dance show. Which means it makes sense why dance instructor Stacy Alley was both the choreographer and the director for the show. And for what is I believe her first ever

theatre production with UA, she did a fabulous job.

The set, designed by Leanna Scotten, was extremely minimalist, which strongly benefited the show and allowed people to focus on the action from the characters and the dancers, action which was at times almost exhausting to watch. I mentioned that Fosse's style is rather difficult... well, while Alley created her own choreography, it still held a lot of influence from Fosse and took a lot of talent to pull off. The actors did amazingly well with the dancing and showed some major chops, chops that made me realize I will probably never ever ever be in a production of "Chicago." (I should really learn to dance more than a waltz, huh?) The two leads, Smith and Schmidt, were packing a huge amount of talent in the dancing (and singing) categories, causing the audience to break into applause multiple times during their dance numbers. And the singing was also spectacularly well done. The chorus melded together well, and the solos were done with spectacular ability. Brunson, in particular, had some rather shining moments as Flynn, belting out some long, high notes. He wasn't the only standout, of course. The always amazingly talented Zacchaeus Kimbrell portrayed Mary Sunshine with wonderful vocal techniques and a fabulous humor. And Erika Evans, who portrayed Mama Morton, just had a beautiful voice that, strangely enough, seemed even more amazing during her duet with Smith, "Class."

One of the things that made this musical so great was the focus on the talents of each individual actor and actress. Their dancing, their singing, their penchant for comedy... it was all amazing. Plus, the relatively small cast, 18 members strong, for such a big, well known musical allowed that talent to be showcased even more strongly. And I shouldn't be pointing out the talent of just the cast. The orchestra had some stand-up moments (as well as one literal stand-up moment), and conductor Raphe Crystal, talented as always, managed to milk a few laughs during his moments in the show. Perhaps the best moment was when Amos, not too long after singing about how no one ever notices him in "Mr. Cellophane," tries to follow Billy's lead and asks for his exit music... getting a simple look of confusion and a shrug from Crystal. And, as previously mentioned with the set design, the design staff also put together an amazingly well-done show technically speaking. All in all, a marvelous performance.

Every single person in the cast of this show deserves some strong praise. This was one of the most talented groups of both principals and backups I've seen, and I'm glad to know we'll see several of these people many more times (while saddened that the seniors involved with the project will be soon leaving UA, but what an amazing final show).

This was a show to make you laugh at murder and be amazed at talent. There have been musicals at UA that have punched me in the gut and made me weep openly, that have had me rolling in the floor with laughter, that have had me singing along (once because I was in the show)... but "Chicago" is probably my favorite musical just for the sheer concentration of powerful, awe-inspiring talent. If they didn't get a standing ovation every night, I would be shocked. And if you were in town and missed the show? You've missed out on an amazing experience. Too bad for you, and all that jazz.

Note: Edited because I found my program. Makes naming people much easier.

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