

'Chicago' shows how high UA theater can soar

By Mark Hughes Cobb
Staff Writer

THEATER REVIEW

The phrase "rock 'n' roll" derived from "rocking and rolling," a euphemism for sex. Jazz stems from the same salacious background. That's the "Chicago" way.

The hot ticket — it sold out quickly, but check the box office for standbys — production of Kander and Ebb's murderous musical "Chicago" rocks, and it rolls, and doesn't skimp on the ex. Without it, the show would be about 15 minutes long.

Practically every song could be called a show-stopper. Even quieter pieces, such as Velma and Mama's "Class," or the first half of Roxie's "Nowadays," have such lovely text and melody, delivered with such nicely blended voices as those of Emmett Smith (Velma), Erika Evans (Mama) and Caroline Schmidt (Roxie), that they resonate like the splashier numbers.

It's really a superior, lovingly constructed musical, built with class, style, wit, pathos and, yeah, all that jazz. The Univer-

sity of Alabama Department of Theatre and Dance production more than does justice to this saucy satire of a justice system gone nuts.

Dancer-actor-singer Stacy Alley was the right choice to head it up, shaping it as director and choreographer, just as Bob Fosse did with the 1975 original. UA's version resembles more the '96 Broadway revival, with its lean, pared-down set, so beautifully lit by Brian Elliott that you don't notice the starkness and you don't notice that there's little in the way of costume change. Elliott's light creates all the dressing it needs.

That simple presentation works with the style: Scenes are announced as numbers, by a musician or cast member, and presented as if the story were unfolding as a night at the vaudeville theater. And of course it dazzles and razzles in service of a tale mourning how the glitzy glare of celebrity outglows common sense and decency.

Alley's cast is sharp and surprisingly small for such a big show, neatly contained, with a lot of triple-threat performers: The third dancer-singer-actor from the left seems capable of stepping up to center spotlight and does, in pieces such as the sizzling "Cell Block Tango," but then fits with the chorus to create the kind of theatrical pictures that sold long before falling chandeliers and back-screen projections.

Credit crew and a terrific jazz band atop the scaffolding of the set, led by musical director Raphael Crystal, for a taut, fat-free show. It rips from set piece to set piece, tumbling with a narrative surety matched by the fleet feet of the dancers. To say this is a crowd-pleaser would be to say the sun is warm.

Of course it's an ensemble piece, and all the offstage folks, Alley, Crystal, Elliott, costume designer Jerrilyn Lanier and hair and makeup designer Tiffany Harris — if an actor needs crazy eyes, she gets crazy eyes — worked in concert. And if you know "Chicago," you know it's an ensemble piece, but high-

"CHICAGO"

■ **What:** Kander and Ebb/Bob Fosse musical performed by the UA Department of Theatre and Dance

■ **Where:** Marian Galloway Theatre, Rowand-Johnson Hall, UA campus

■ **When:** Performances continue at 7:30 p.m. today, ending with a 2 p.m. matinee Sunday.

■ **Cost:** \$18 general, \$15 for seniors and UA faculty and staff, \$12 for students and children.

■ **More:** Tickets are reportedly sold out, but check the box office in Rowand-Johnson for standby tickets, in case of last-minute cancellations or no-shows: 205-348-3400. www.theatre.ua.edu.

lighted by the duel between murderin' dolls Velma and Roxie, salted with hot Mama, slick Billy Flynn (Stephen Brunson), sad Amos Hart (Drew Singleton) and hilariously melodramatic Mary Sunshine (Zacchaeus Kimbrell). Everyone delivers.

But at the end of the night, this "Chicago" belongs to Roxie. Schmidt has had an intriguing senior year, a terrific turn as Harpo in "Animal Crackers" in the fall, and now playing the somewhat insane, star-struck (by her own stardom, that is) Roxie. Schmidt is on fire. It's one of the most diverse and interesting Roxies you may be privileged to see, including Renee Zellweger's Oscar-nominated turn in the 2002 film. Schmidt finds a lot of shadings in her Roxie: the frenzy, the sadness, the ignorance, the sluttiness, the wide-eyed goof. She makes Roxie so richly human, you'd root for her even knowing she was guilty as hell. It's kind of a scary power, when the show's message is that charisma and a staged dose of BS can let you get away with murder. Schmidt lives that.

With Smith, her frequent stage partner, they not only really knock those last numbers out, but do it in such move-perfect synchronization that you just know Alley drilled them to weariness. For a show blessed with so many stoppers, that fi-

nal duet is a fine place to end. Take the time to enjoy Brunson, too, a third-year graduate student who'll be moving on after May graduation. He revels in Billy, hamming it up with tuneful charm from "All I Care About" to "We Both Reached for the Gun" to "Razzle Dazzle." Like Velma and Roxie, he creates the lovable stuff that makes a rogue earn cheers instead of hisses. When Billy announces "that's the last you'll see of me," it's a moment of real regret.

Kimbrell belts Mary's "A Little Bit of Good" out through the rafters and somewhere up near the moon; not surprising given Kimbrell's voice, though something of that performance is a twist. Singleton warms and wins with a gentle "Mr. Cellophane," and Evans lights up an already hot night with her earthy "When You're Good to Mama."

This is not just a robust production of one of the best musicals out there, but a terrific showcase for how high and far UA's musical theater program can soar. Get in if you can.