

~ Snapshots of Theatre

It's a Circus!

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Chicago has been hot on the lips of theatre-goers since its Tony Award-winning stage revival (1996) and subsequent Academy Award-winning film version (2002). The name alone invokes visions of voluptuous vaudevillians and violence even in those who haven't seen it. Bob Fosse's musical adaptation of Maurine Dallas Watkins's play (of the same name) is a fixture in the American cultural consciousness, which means audiences for subsequent productions will inevitably bring their expectations with them to the theatre.



I can confidently say The University of Alabama’s production has the potential to exceed these expectations.

Tit for tat, *Chicago*, directed and choreographed by Stacy Alley, is a razzle-dazzle, legs-open hit. From curtain to curtain, the energy (and the sexual tension) is palpable. Your eyes are constantly dancing back and forth across the stage along with the actors, moving quickly from one musical number to the next. Audience members may find it difficult to imagine how the actors (especially Caroline Schmidt as Roxie Hart and Emmett Smith as Velma Kelly) are able to keep their breath while singing, dancing, and scaling the center stage staircase which leads to the orchestra. Yet, the cast does not seem fazed by the rapid movement of the production and is able to make performing 22 musical numbers seem as easy as covering up a homicide in Chicago.

The music of *Chicago* is obviously integral to the performance, and UA’s interpretation doesn’t disappoint. The vocal and orchestral performances are strong throughout the production. Emmett Smith sets the mantle high for the subsequent musical numbers with her throaty yet commanding voice in the sensual opening bars of “All That Jazz.” In true vaudevillian fashion, the band is center stage for the entirety of the performance, and actors frequently ascend the staircase to interact with pianist and Musical Director Raphael Crystal. The musicians even steal the show in a few instances as when Amos (Drew Singleton) leaves the stage and requests his own exit music, only to receive a shoulder shrug from Raphael. This interaction between band and vocalists is a perfect symbol of the musical harmony that is achieved on stage between both parties.

As mentioned above, the cast does a masterful job of maintaining control of their voices while performing Alley’s complex choreography. The “Cell Block Tango” scene is especially fantastic. I found myself filled with awe and a touch of envy as I watched Liz (Miranda Rivas), Annie (Kiley Gipson), June (Darian Hill), Hunyak (Renee Reinecke), Mona (Tara Lynn Steele) and Velma perform spread-eagles on flimsy black chairs with complete confidence. “We Both Reached for the Gun” is another example of Alley’s eye for entertaining choreography. In this song, Caroline Schmidt as Roxie is able to make use of the many facial expressions she recently affected as the Professor in UA’s *Animal Crackers* as she is turned into lawyer Billy Flynn’s (Stephen Brunson) puppet, jostling and gesturing atop his knee.

The costuming and makeup, designed by Jerrilyn Lanier and Tiffany Harris, respectively, are somehow both glitzy, yet simple. Most of the female cast is dressed in black, which gestures towards the idea that they are inmates wearing a shared uniform. Yet, each costume is also tailored to the body and personality of each character. The men, excepting Billy Flynn and Amos (Drew Singleton) (I’m not sure if I should count Mary Sunshine (Z. Kimbrell) here or in the previous list), are dressed in identical black slacks, shirts and ties which makes the variation in the female costumes more apparent.

In a similar fashion, the simplicity of Leanna Scotten's set and Brian Elliott's lighting designs allows audiences to more fully appreciate the choreography and staging taking place. The stage is, for the most part, black with wisps of red smoke escaping from the sides intermittently. The interplay between the lighting and stage construction gives the scenes an air of Hollywood glitz which is brought to the forefront when the giant "CHICAGO" and "ROXIE" flashbulb signs are illuminated behind the orchestra.

Both Emmett Smith and Caroline Schmidt deliver exquisite performances that are at once humorous, scintillating and, inevitably, impressive. Their closing duet "Keep it Hot" showcases how both Velma and Roxie are filled with a similar mix of desperation and humor. Stephen Brunson does an excellent job bringing to life the slimy yet sophisticated Billy Flynn with his facial expressions and comedic timing. Erika Evans lives up to the expectations of the role of the incomparable Mama Morton while also adding a touch of sincerity that is sometimes forgotten in this role. I also feel compelled to mention the fantastic, gender-bending performance of Z. Kimbrell as Mary Sunshine which elicited roars of laughter from the audience multiple times. But the break out performance for me was that of Drew Singleton as Amos. Several times during the course of *Chicago* I felt myself suppressing audible sighs because Singleton was able to make me feel so much sympathy for his pitiful character.

In short, Stacy Alley's production of *Chicago* (now showing on the University of Alabama's Marian Gallaway stage) is sure to impress both long-time *Chicago* fans as well as newcomers.

-lsstripling

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