

"Chicago"

Currently playing at the  
AdelphiTheatre

Reviewed November 2002

Still running with renewed cast

Direction: Walter Bobbie

Music, Book & Lyrics: John Kander and Fred Ebb

Choreography: Ann Reinking (based on Bob Fosse's original choreography)

Cast Reviewed: Patrick Wilson, John Ellison Conlee, Andre De Shields, Jason  
Danieley, Romain

Fruge, Marcus Neville, Kathleen Freeman and Emily Skinner

If you can't get to the Westend this year to see the sassy musical Chicago you  
needn't worry.

Come next year. It will still be here! This crowd-pleaser already has the quotes  
from the critics on

its side. Now, eight times a week 1480 people in the AdelphiTheatre go out  
singing both its praises

and its songs - or at least the hummable melody of one the last songs, "Razzle  
Dazzle".

The book is by John Kander and Fred Ebb (authors of New York, New York, Cabaret  
and Kiss of

the Spiderwoman) and originally co-written with Bob Fosse. The musical is based  
on the original

play by Maurine Dallas Watkins. These writers know how to structure an evening  
with dramatic arc,

smooth flow, narrative clarity, logical progression and strong theatrical images.  
All of those are

evident in Chicago. But more importantly, they know that a musical must have  
heart and wear that

heart on its sleeve. There is a deep-seated, salt-of-the-earth sentimentality to  
the piece that makes

any of its comic excesses, its occasional vulgarity and the ridiculousness of  
some of its situations

completely acceptable and even enjoyable.

Kander and Ebb start with the basic story of "Murder, greed, corruption,  
violence, exploitation,

adultery, treachery..." and the essential characteristics of Velma Kelly, Roxie  
Hart and the other

characters. They create fully defined individuals, giving clear presentations of  
the motivation of each.

Kander and Ebb's script moves beautifully into 'All That Jazz' and Velma sings  
while we see the

story of Roxie Hart.

As crucial to the success of a musical as the book is, it is the score that  
draws most attention and

here Chicago has Kander and Ebb, experienced veterans.

Kander and Ebb deliver a sure touch in both the music and lyrics departments.

They can reach for a

tortured rhyme with the best of them: he rhymes "cojones" with "testosterone is"  
and lipo (as in

liposuction) with "hypo." He can use references that establish character and  
time with a drop of a

name: Buddy Grecko and Stan Kenton figure in the lyric of a character of just  
the right age and

background to drop those names. He can build an entire song on a concept: his  
opener is "Scrap"

as unemployed steelworkers describe the corrosion of the soul of prolonged joblessness.

While not all of the numbers work equally well, some are wonderful indeed. The aforementioned

"Scrap," "Man" and "Breeze Off The River" are particularly satisfying. "Yazbek has strong, jazzy

music for strip routines, sharply repetitive motifs for reinforcing patter and some very pleasant

melodies, although it is always difficult to assess these on a single hearing. I look forward to the

release of the Original Broadway Cast album which RCA Victor is to release. Some of the lyrics use

language that might result in the album being Broadway's first with a parental advisory label (Hedwig

and the Angry Inch had a label but that was an off-Broadway show.) It should be a very spirited

recording of a very skillful score.

The two primary men's roles, the ringleader and his overweight buddy are brought cleanly to life by

Patrick Wilson and John Ellisson Conlee. Two supporting characters will probably stick longest in

memory, however. One is Andre De Shields whose transformation from wobbly, stumbly old man to

gaily gyrating dance man known as "Horse" is about as entertaining and enervating a performance

as could be wished. The other is that of Kathleen Freeman, veteran of hundreds of movies and

television shows and whose face you will instantly recognize. She has a role not included in the

movie version of the story: she is the rehearsal pianist for the would-be strippers. It is a role that

looks for all the world as if it was constructed for Dorothy Loudon (the original, Tony-winning Miss

Hannigan in Annie) but she makes the most of it, strutting and wisecracking all the while.

With all it has going for it The Full Monty really has one thing to set it apart from other attempts to

stage a film as a musical, McNally's clear understanding that musical plays, even musical

comedies, need to have a strong, clear, consistent and acceptable sense of sentimentality. Sure,

you can lampoon popular culture. Yes, you can titillate with a strip-tease that emphasizes the

tease. All of that is acceptable if, and only if, it is in the telling of a story that tugs at the heart and

asks the audience to care about characters who are worthy of the concern. The Full Monty has that

and all the rest as well. It should run for quite a while