

A Chorus Line @ Stages St. Louis

Music by Marvin Hamlisch

Lyrics by Edward Kleban

Book by James Kirkwood and Nicholas Dante

Conceived by Michael Bennett

Ran September 9 - October 9, 2022 @ The Kirkwood Performing Arts Center

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2022 has been a gigantic shakeup year for Stages St. Louis. They've moved from the Robert G. Reim Theater to the Kirkwood Performing Arts Center – a venue that was specifically tailored to them – and they are now under new management; Michael Hamilton and Jack Lane have retired from their positions as Artistic Director and Executive Producer, respectively, and have been replaced by Broadway veteran Gayle Seay as Artistic Director and local theatre artist Andrew Kuhlman as Executive Producer. As is tradition for Stages, Seay has been put in the director's chair for the grand finale of their 36th season, *A Chorus Line*.

In her Director's Notes, Seay writes that she programmed Stages' 36th season with musicals about characters questioning what "home" means to them. In *The Karate Kid*, home is the place where you discover your hidden potential; for *In the Heights*, home is literally the place where you come from; and finally, in *A Chorus Line*, home is the very art form we are choosing to engage with at this very moment: musical theatre. Seay writes that the theatre is "a place where you can go and be accepted for who you are, a place that pushes you to be better than you ever thought you could be. It is a place to dream and a place to live in the moment, where you sing 'Won't forget, can't regret, what I did for love,' and mean every single word." Before Stages, Seay was a triple-threat performer who was in several productions of *A Chorus Line* all over the country. It's pretty clear that Seay knows this show inside and out, so it makes perfect sense for her to direct this production, and her passion for it really shines through.

Much like how Stages produced *In the Heights*, their version of *A Chorus Line* is an homage to the original Broadway production from 1975, which was directed and choreographed by the show's creator, Michael Bennett. Seay works with choreographer Dena DiGiacinto to recreate the original staging and do so in a way that feels totally natural rather than robotic (something that too many productions of *A Chorus Line* are guilty of). The first time I saw *A Chorus Line* live was the Muni's 2017 production, and even they had to create brand new, never-before-seen staging and choreography to make the show fit their massive stage. Stages does have one big edge over the Muni: an intimate venue that is a tad more fitting for a story that is so introspective.

A Chorus Line is one of a subgenre of musicals that I like to call the "bottle musical," shows that take place in one location and play out in real-time. Other musicals of this type include *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, *Man of La Mancha*, *Godspell*, *Million Dollar Quartet*, *Ride the Cyclone* and many others. The bottle within which *A Chorus Line* is contained is the chorus

audition for a Broadway musical, starting at the dance call and ending at the final casting decision. I guess I should also call *A Chorus Line* a meta-musical because it takes place inside the theater where we are watching it, and we are seeing these actors audition for the show this theater will eventually produce – it's a bizarre Mobius strip.

The scenic design by James Wolk consists of a bare stage backed by a wall of mirrors with a long strip of white tape in the front. The mirrors reflect not just the actors on stage, but the audience as well, highlighting the meta-musical aspect of the show while symbolizing how the actors are really just regular people. The costume design by Brad Musgrove consists of dance leotards and athletic wear that places the show squarely in 1975. But what really completes the show is the lighting, designed here by Sean M. Savoie, which serves to distinguish between the flat concrete world of the physical audition space and the dazzling fantasy world of the dancers' inner thoughts.

A Chorus Line is a deep dive into the dreams, secrets, passions, and drives of ordinary people trying to stay employed. It's an unflinchingly honest, emotionally resonant look into the lives of the nameless extras in the business we call show; it takes people who would normally be the background players of a musical and gives them a voice and dignity. In 1975, *A Chorus Line* was a game-changer – it was one of the first musicals to say that just by your very existence, you are a complex tapestry of unique life experiences that are worthy of being shared with the world, and you feel that from this production.

Every actor in this production is an unstoppable triple-threat performer under the graces of Seay, DiGiacinto, and musical director John Samorian, with enhancements by sound designer Bethany “Beef” Gratz. Danny McHugh plays Zach, the director and choreographer running the audition, and Nic Thompson plays Larry, the associate choreographer; both do an excellent job of alternating between curt and caring. Lauralyn McClelland plays Cassie, Zach's ex-girlfriend who was a featured dancer in his shows for years. After breaking up with Zach, she tried to make it in Hollywood, only to earn a role on a TV Movie of the Week and not much else. With her movie star dreams stymied, Cassie decides to start over by auditioning for Zach to be in the chorus again, much to his consternation. McClelland and McHugh's chemistry together is believable in its tension, and McClelland wonderfully executes the passionate solo dance number “The Music and the Mirror.”

Victor Carillo Tracey plays Mike, a haughty showoff; Caleb James Grochalski plays Bobby, an eccentric who wants to be the next Troy Donahue; Dana Winkle plays Sheila, a prima donna who has worked with Zach before; Kelsey Cheaney and Abby Church play Bebe and Maggie, two performers who started dancing to escape from their unhappy family lives; Ashley Klinger and Daniel Scott Walton play the half-tone-deaf husband and wife team Kristine and Al; Ronan Ryan plays Mark, the youngest person in the audition; Sarah Chiu plays Connie, a petite Asian woman who is constantly typecast; Megan Elyse Fulmer plays Diana, a dancer who tried to be a serious actor but got burned out after taking a toxic acting class; Robbie Serrano plays Don, a family man; Leah Hofmann plays Judy, the most nervous dancer at the audition; Hayden Clifton plays Greg, an out-and-proud gay man; Bryson Jacobi Jackson plays Richie, a teacher who

became a dancer after he lost his passion for education; Emilee Hassanzadeh plays Val, a dancer who secures her jobs with surgical enhancements; finally, there's Omar Garibay as Paul, a shy former drag artist who slowly comes out of his shell to deliver one of the most emotionally naked monologues in the history of musical theatre.

There are very few musicals that I consider to be absolutely perfect on a technical level – shows where the plot, the score, the dialogue, the characters, and the themes are as close to flawless as humanly possible. *A Chorus Line* is one of those shows; to keep this review under a millennium long, it is a goddamned masterpiece, and at Stages St. Louis, it's a great bookend to a great season.