

Chess @ The Muny

Music by Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus

Lyrics and Book by Tim Rice

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Chess is a very rarely produced musical, and after seeing the Muny's production, I can kind of see why. *Chess* is an intense story with an epic pop-symphonic score and incredibly demanding production values; it's a textbook example of a 1980s megamusical. But the common hangup theatre companies have with mounting *Chess* is its plot is needlessly complicated and extremely problematic. It pains me to say all of this because the Muny's production of the show features some of the best acting, the best directing, and the best visuals that they have ever done. I guess you could say that with *Chess*, I'm in check.

Chess is a fictionalized version of the 1972 World Chess Championship Match between American grandmaster Bobby Fischer and Soviet grandmaster Boris Spassky. The story is moved to take place in 1982, the height of the Cold War, a time when computer graphics, keyboard synthesizers, and casual bigotry ruled the earth. In this version, the grandmasters competing in this year's WCC are Freddie Trumper of the United States and Anatoly Sergievsky of the Soviet Union. In the center of this competition is Florence Vassy, Freddie's second who becomes romantically involved with Anatoly, who is in turn trying to distance himself from his estranged wife Svetlana. This cube of complications receives even more dimensions when the American and Soviet ambassadors of the International Chess Federation begin to manipulate our leads as politics are exploited, loyalties are challenged, and personalities become explosive. This is just the very basic outline of the plot. This is one of those musicals where every aspect of it needs to be analyzed with a fine-toothed comb, but you end up coming out of the other side more disgusted than satisfied.

I feel like I'm going to be really hard on *Chess* because, in my head, I'm comparing it to other megamusicals that I really enjoy like *Les Miserables*, *Cats*, and even the last show I reviewed, *Beauty and the Beast*. What makes those musicals great are their streamlined stories, timeless writing, and economical scores. *Chess*, on the other hand, has a story that is very muddled and kind of cluttered; the writing is ripe with story tropes, dialogue, and lyrics that are all very dated to the point of being offensive; and a good chunk of the score could have been cut from the show entirely and replaced with either dialogue or even just better songs.

The story is supposed to be an allegory for the Cold War itself and how the USA and the USSR were being played like pawns in a game of chess. It's a great concept to bounce off of, but the problem with *Chess* is that its focus was in the wrong areas. Most of its time is spent on the romance between the characters, all of whom are very unlikeable. Freddie is a narcissistic, bloviating dirtbag who's also sexist, racist, transphobic, xenophobic, and jingoistic – all in ways that are not fun to watch. Anatoly is a two-faced, two-timing wimp who is terrible at saying what

he really means. Florence and Svetlana are the closest to being at least tolerable, but they're still nothing more than prizes for the men to win over. They are woefully underdeveloped, Svetlana especially; she could have been a brilliant allegory for how the Russian people felt betrayed by the Soviet Union, but she didn't get introduced until Act 2 so fuck me I guess. I also neglected to mention that Florence is a Hungarian refugee that was separated from her family at a young age; one of the machinations in the ICF's schemes comes from them withholding evidence that Florence's father is still alive. That plotline alone is so much more interesting than any of the other three leads – hell, it could've been its own musical. If there was more of a focus on the intrigue concocted by the ICF rather than the romance, the story would have been much more satisfying.

As much as my problems with the story and characters hinder me from enjoying *Chess*, the Muny's production is incredibly good. Songs like "The Story of Chess," "Where I Want to Be," "The Arbiter," "Nobody's Side," "Pity the Child," "Anthem," and "I Know Him So Well" are absolute bangers to listen to thanks to musical director Jason DeBord and the Muny Orchestra. (However, controversial opinion time, I strongly dislike the song "One Night in Bangkok" and I think it should've been cut from the show entirely. You're gonna have to talk to me in person if you want to know why.) Because of the rock concert vibes embedded into the show, the Muny has given director and choreographer Josh Rhodes the freedom to stage it in such a way that is incredibly striking and quite innovative, in no small part thanks to the insanely talented cast and creative team.

As much as I don't like any of the characters, the actors crafted excellent performances all-round. In fact, if their performances weren't as good as they were, I wouldn't have such deep feelings about their roles. The lead actors are absolutely stacked: Jessica Vosk as Florence, Jarrod Spector as Freddie, John Riddle as Anatoly, and Taylor Louderman as Svetlana. One word: *wow!* Phillip Johnson Richardson plays the Arbiter, the head of the International Chess Federation (who can surprisingly pull off some killer dance moves). Rodney Hicks and Tally Sessions play Walter de Courcey and Alexander Molokov, respectively – the American and Soviet ambassadors of the ICF whose roles as antagonists I wish had more focus. The work from the leads and the ensemble to create such captivating stage tableaux under Josh Rhodes's direction is wonderful.

The production design, as stated in the intro, is some of the Muny's best. The set by Edward E. Haynes, Jr. consists of a giant rotating chessboard with multi-level platforms, raked in such a way that it creates the illusion of one flat board. Several giant chessboards hang from the rafters, flanking the set on three sides, providing a frame for some mind-blowing video design by Alex Basco Koch. The use of stock footage and computer graphics is really cool to see; there was even a brilliant use of live video early in the show to give the audience a close-up of Freddie and Anatoly's first game together. I only wish the live video could've been used more often in the show than just that one instance. Emily Rebholz's costumes and Tommy Kurzman's hair and makeup are great evocations of the 1980s. Aiding in the rock concert aesthetic are Rob Denton's lights and John Shivers and David Patridges's sound.

Apparently, the Muny has only given us the original version of the show; it has since been revised to rather mixed results. I hear the revised version is closer to the perfect show I envision in my head, in terms of structure. It's concerning, then, that the less problematic version is also the less well-received. As it stands, *Chess* is one of the most conflicting musicals I've ever seen. It's a show I would recommend seeing at least once just to hear some legit bops and marvel at some really creative visuals. But the story and characters are just too frustrating to want to see it again.

By far, the best thing to come out of the Muny's production is the fact that they teamed up with the St. Louis Chess Club and the World Chess Hall of Fame to mount the show. Usually, each show at the Muny would be supported by corporate sponsors. *Chess*, however, was completely supported by these two local organizations that have become pillars in St. Louis. Along with New York City and New Orleans, St. Louis was one of the locations of the first Chess World Championship in 1886. Since then, St. Louis has exploded into becoming the Chess Capital of America, which makes the Muny's production of the musical extra special (and highly anticipated). The St. Louis Chess Club and the World Chess Hall of Fame are both incredible organizations devoted to not only preserving the history of the game but also to giving the people of St. Louis the resources they need to become better chess players. Whether it's for casual pick-up games or competitive tournaments, their work reaches everywhere in St. Louis: schools, museums, corporations, etc. Their partnership with the Muny, as much as it is for a musical I'm not terribly fond of, is going to mean so much for the chess community at large. I am very much looking forward to seeing what happens from here. I'm going to leave links to both of their websites for you to check out and see the incredible work that they do. Maybe if you live in St. Louis, you might even join them. It's your move...

[The Saint Louis Chess Club](#)

[The World Chess Hall of Fame](#)