

## **Chicago @ The Muny**

Music by John Kander

Lyrics by Fred Ebb

Book by Fred Ebb and Bob Fosse

Based on the play by Maurine Dallas Watkins

Ran June 13 – 19, 2022 @ The Muny

### **Review Published June 20, 2022**

It's summer in St. Louis, and that means it's Muny Season! I have been attending every single show at the Muny since 2012, never missing a single one. That's an entire decade of devotion to a single theatre. If you didn't believe me when I told you the first time that I'm a fanboy, this is my case in point. This is my third time seeing *Chicago* at the Muny: the first was their 2012 production, and the second was in 2021 – as part of the Muny's truncated 103rd season. Unfortunately, the 2021 production had to be canceled halfway through the run due to the cast suffering a COVID-19 outbreak.

However, the pandemic did not deter the production from breaking the records at the 2022 St. Louis Theater Circle Awards, earning 11 nominations and winning 7 – the most a single production has earned in the history of the Theater Circle: Outstanding Production of a Musical, Best Director of a Musical (Denis Jones), Outstanding Supporting Performer in a Musical (Adam Heller), Outstanding Costume Design of a Musical (Emily Rebholz), Outstanding Ensemble in a Musical, Outstanding Musical Director (Charlie Alterman), and Outstanding Choreography (Denis Jones).

After all of this positive press, there was only one thing the Muny could possibly do: finish what they started. The Muny opened its 104th season with an absolutely splendid revival of their award-winning production and finally gave *Chicago* its due.

*Chicago* takes place in the titular city circa 1928. Velma Kelly is an established vaudeville performer, and Roxie Hart is a flirty, vixenish chorus girl. Both women have just been convicted of murder: Velma shoots her own husband and sister after she caught them doing “the spread eagle”; Roxie cheats on her husband Amos, and when her lover tries to walk out on her, she shoots him in cold blood. While in jail, Velma and Roxie immediately begin to compete with one another to see who can be the most famous vaudevillian murderess, constantly going back and forth between stealing each other's lawyers, court dates, and performance opportunities – all while desperately vying for sympathy from the general public.

To fit the story's content, John Kander, Fred Ebb, and Bob Fosse wrote *Chicago* in the style of a vaudeville show. The characters are reminiscent of such performers as Helen Morgan, Ted Lewis, Sophie Tucker, and Texas Guinan (who also served as the inspiration for Cole Porter's Reno Sweeney from *Anything Goes*). The musical numbers are modeled after various vaudeville acts: the torch singer, the tango, the tap number, the clown, the ventriloquist, the

magician, etc. Even the story follows the structure of a classic underdog story (in this case, we follow two underdogs). All of this serves to emphasize the social issues that *Chicago* is satirizing: the dark side of celebrity culture in America, our country's bad habit of treating criminals as celebrities, the sensationalizing of criminal acts, and the transformation of criminal justice into show business. In the wake of the recent Johnny Depp vs. Amber Heard trial, as well as America's reckoning with how the media sensationalized both parties during the trial itself, *Chicago* is a story that really hits you where it hurts. But you're too busy enjoying the vaudeville numbers to actually think about this, which is the entire point of why *Chicago* was written.

Director and choreographer Denis Jones also staged the Muny's 2012 production, so he knows *Chicago* inside and out; he knows this is a show that is supposed to mess with our brains, that it's supposed to dazzle us and rattle us at the same time. His direction for this production is absolutely superb, setting the action in a vintage 1920s vaudeville club, complete with title cards and artwork for each musical number, as well as assembling a cast of accomplished performers that fill the massive outdoor Muny stage with Jones's exceptional vaudevillian choreography.

J. Harrison Ghee and Sarah Bowden play Velma and Roxie, respectively, and they are pitch-perfect; their chemistry together is on point, their physical comedy is fully expressive, and they simply command the stage with their mere presence. Ghee is a male drag performer playing a traditionally female role, a casting move that I hope the Muny continues to practice in the future because Ghee totally slays the audience as Velma. From the very second that Velma makes her first entrance, Ghee exudes an aura of sheer power that never backs down, not even for a second. Bowden's interpretation of Roxie is extremely well-acted; hers is a performance that really keeps us guessing whether her sympathy-mongering from the public is real or fake, and her execution of the choreography is particularly remarkable.

James T. Lane is captivating as the arrogant, smooth-talking lawyer Billy Flynn. Adam Heller takes the sad sack of a human being that is Amos Hart and makes him totally sympathetic. Emily Skinner is appropriately cunning, manipulative, and sassy as Mama Morton. Ali Ewoldt brings a soaring soprano and excellent physical comedy as the sob sister news reporter Mary Sunshine. The ensemble, led by Michael James Reed as the Stage Manager, performs the vaudeville numbers with exhilarating energy.

The Muny Orchestra, under the direction of Muny veteran Charlie Alterman, performs Kander and Ebb's classic jazz score with beautiful aplomb. Tim Mackabee's versatile unit set is flanked by an abstracted version of the Chicago skyline, and Shawn Duan's projections serve as both elegant scene setters and beautiful backgrounds for the songs. Rob Denton's lights, Emily Rebholz's period costumes, Tommy Kurzman's hair and makeup, and John Shivers and David Patridge's sound design are impeccably atmospheric.

This production's biggest strength is the number of surprises, twists, and turns that it takes when interpreting specific moments. These are the moments when it takes popular songs and scenes that we all know and throws an extra element to the staging that completely puts the audience off guard. The Muny's 2022 production of *Chicago* is truly brilliant, innovative, and unforgettable.

I'm so happy that *Chicago*, a musical that is such a relevant commentary on today's celebrity culture, is getting the treatment that it deserves from an institution that is as respected as the Muny. This production is one that warrants every accolade it has received.