



Adelaide Theatre Guide

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Supporting live theatre in South Australia

PO Box 738
MODBURY SA 5092

info@theatreguide.com.au
ABN : 93 297 960 525

CHICAGO

Emma Knights Productions

[Secret Venue]

Until 28 May 2017

Review by Anthony Vawser

It would appear that "Chicago" was a piece of musical theatre ahead of its time. Despite being a Roaring Twenties-set show devised in the 1970s by a creative team looking back at the Prohibition Era in America – specifically the crimes that were being committed by certain notorious women – not only has it avoided the fate of any mere 'period piece', it has steadily grown in stature and acclaim since its premiere (this current production uses a script adaptation by David Thompson).

Some have speculated that only in a post-O.J. Simpson world does the public fully grasp – and recognise – the inherent truth of the themes (celebrity criminals, legal corruption, the justice system as a sick kind of show business) that playwright/reporter Maurine Dallas Watkins originally articulated, and which were transplanted to a show that – in a decade when rock/pop influences seemed to be making their presence overwhelmingly felt on the Broadway stage – had composers Kander & Ebb looking back musically to the idioms of vaudeville, cabaret, and Dixieland jazz.

As someone who has enjoyed the movie without ever quite loving it to bits, this reviewer figured he was secure in his status as a "Chicago" sceptic. Well, strike that theory; this musical has just gained another convert! Emma Knights' production succeeds, sparkles, excels, on virtually every level. Though it cannot help but raise questions, along the way, about the fundamental traditions behind the staging of "Chicago", this only makes the experience all the more richly engaging and thought-provoking.

From the moment that the incomparable Michael Coumi makes his first appearance – fitting the role of 'debonair Master of Ceremonies' to a T – it's clear that this is "Chicago" as done by theatre practitioners who know their stuff and have the means to entertain our socks off. Director Adrian Barnes never allows the pacing to go slack, but the show is still allowed to breathe whenever needed. A front-stage staircase is dazzlingly deployed for feats that look exceptionally difficult and risky, and the catwalk extension is an absolutely perfect touch. Rob Marshall's movie may have used editing to generate unique cinematic thrills on the screen, but it takes a production like this to remind you that there's nothing quite as delicious – or fulfilling – as experiencing a set piece that juggles multiple elements at once, playing out in real time, live in front of you, with the freedom to choose what part to focus on.

Every musical number is marked by a level of confidence and exuberance that sells it to us superbly. From go to whoa, the ensemble of performers demonstrate that they have been expertly and precisely drilled to meet the slinky demands of the singular Bob Fosse style, while managing to keep it all looking – and feeling – spontaneous and vital. Hats off to the typically formidable work of choreographers Kerreane Sarti and Shenayde Wilkinson-Sarti.

Fiona Aitken has a most radiant and appealing presence as Roxie Hart; combining Missy Higgins looks with a Carol Channing voice, and without either dumbing it down or hamming it up, she projects the sense of having the time of her life in this role. Of course, Roxie, for so much of the show, is playing a role herself, and all the lead actors in this production bring gusto and relish to their interpretations of characters who act, either for a living, or literally for their lives.



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Stefanie Rossi's Velma Kelly simply smoulders; the performer's flowing curly locks bring a 'lion on the prowl' look to the part which is sensationally effective, and her voice is the powerhouse that it needs to be for such iconic tunes as "All That Jazz". Jeff Lang has the perfect vocal tone for Billy Flynn, sounding like he's been transported directly from the era in which the show is set. His shyster attorney is hard-edged, ruthless, and charmless in just the right way. Mark Delaine is the perfect empathic embodiment of cuckolded, clueless, heartbreakingly loyal Amos Hart; his final exit is the stuff of quintessential commedia dell'arte.

Melanie Smith's solid work as Mama Morton – including a stunner of a voice – can't quite fully flesh out what feels like a thinly conceived character, but sheer vocal power takes her easily into the winners' circle. Zak Vasiliou's reporter is a most unexpected and quirky component of "Chicago", one which can seem, on one level, a bit mystifying, but kudos to the performer for bringing a quite remarkable voice to the role, not to mention an unpredictable sense of humour. Buddy Dawson's ill-fated Fred Caseley certainly impresses in the first act with his stamina for push-ups (as do the tireless ensemble), then threatens to delightfully steal the second act away, despite being technically deceased!

The band are a crucial asset to any production of "Chicago", needing to master a very specific and potentially challenging idiom; these musicians – including producer/MD Emma Knights on piano - display impressively supple skill throughout. The lighting design superbly runs the gamut from bright white spotlight to richly saturated colour to a perfectly modulated blend. The costuming has been executed with utter brilliance. Only the sound provided an occasional disruptive disappointment due to microphone mishaps (bearing in mind the performance reviewed was a final dress rehearsal), but this was basically confined to one number, and certainly could not dampen anyone's enthusiasm, either on stage or in the audience.

The implication of this smart, sly show – that some people would rather die young, and be remembered for it, than have to live a long life while feeling the sting of their own unimportance every single day – is a theme that, in today's world, feels more horrifyingly resonant than ever. That "Chicago" can confront us with chilling truths while managing to be so damned entertaining and so scintillatingly sexy is some kind of major achievement for sure!

The only significant doubt occasioned by this reviewer was generated by reflecting on the way that "Chicago" seems always to have presented the majority of its female characters as scantily clad - about as often as is practical or possible – without any of the men having the equivalent demanded of them. This is a tradition that one cannot help but question at this point in theatre's evolution. Can this seeming imbalance be justified thematically in the text, by the time and place and context in which the show is set – or is it a representation that should, at the very least, be reconsidered? This reviewer cannot offer an answer, though the question cannot help but stick in one's mind.

If you can cast all qualms of this nature aside, you are in for a rollicking ride that is sure to send the blood racing. Rare are the occasions when this reviewer finds himself sitting in a theatre and thinking "this is one fantastically fabulous firecracker of a show! I want to rewind and relive it right away!" It is to be sincerely hoped that you still have time to grab a ticket and to share in this experience yourself.