

# TBTS's Chicago Is Another Stunner



Bill Hanney and crew wrap up Theatre By The Sea's record-breaking 85<sup>th</sup> season with a tight, highly enjoyable read on Kander and Ebb (and Fosse)'s darkly delicious dance showcase, *Chicago*. Broad characterizations, on-point jazz-age sensibilities and award-worthy performances from an array of talented women all make *Chicago* a hit that more than equals the sum of its parts. Returning to TBTS to direct and choreograph are Bob Richard and Diane Laurenson (*West Side Story*, *Beauty and the Beast*) who emphasize the Fosse, but allow for some stellar acting from their lead, Jessica Wockenfluss. As the complicated anti-heroine, Roxie Hart, Wockenfluss delivers an acting performance that transcends the usual musical theater tropes and gives us a Roxie for the ages. As the standout in a cast of standouts, Wockenfluss is reason alone to snap up any remaining tickets before they close for the season on September 9.

The now-familiar story of Roxie Hart's fall from tarnished showgirl grace (and her subsequent, devious redemption) is well-known by now, and *Chicago* is often just an excuse to string together the series of showstoppers that have now become musical theater lore. And, this production is not much different in that respect, as each number feels like a finale, one blistering, well-crafted song and dance after another making anyone unfamiliar with the script wonder if this isn't just a greatest-hits revue. However, Richard and Laurenson, along with a crack production team, have managed to craft a cohesive storyline and find the peaks and valleys often missing in other versions of this show. The opening, "All That Jazz," comes out of the gate understated and quiet, then slowly builds to a rousing, blockbuster conclusion. Michelle Alves' Velma Kelly (Roxie's criminal alter ego and rival) is crisp and

commanding, and dares anyone to challenge her on that stage. A perfect foil for Wockenfuss, Alves' performance is another standout, especially when "Cell Block Tango" introduces the rest of the core cast of women. By the second act, her solo, "I Know A Girl," has one looking for a thesaurus to find different ways to describe her other than the tired "force of nature." It is her struggle to maintain favored-inmate status and win her trial that drives this play, with Wockenfuss' alternating vulnerability and viciousness upping the ante.

Other notable performances include Tara Conner Jones (who stunned audiences in TBTS' season opener, *Ain't Misbehavin'*) as the kingpin prison matron, "Mama" Morton. The obvious crowdpleaser, "When You're Good To Mama" has more than the appropriate bluesy lasciviousness to it, but Jones' chops really shine in her duet with Alves, "Class," in the second act (an odd prop note for this number was that a shared bottle of booze had no liquid in it, requiring the two to mime their shots over the course of the song. This may have been an opening night issue, but a curious one as TBTS is normally spot-on in these matters). Of the men, Kevin Loreque's delightfully suffering Amos, Roxie's cuckolded husband, is a delight. Again, the direction here allows for subtlety, and the often clownish interpretations of Amos are gone here, in favor of a muted resignation that turns the classic "Mr. Cellophane" into more than just a charming solo, but an exercise in pathos that earned a more than justified applause break. Matthew J. Taylor's celebrity lawyer, Billy Flynn, is brash, cocky and on point (although he has an odd fascination with his wrists, adjusting cuffs and watch to the point of distraction, mostly when trying to signify arrogance) and we'll leave audiences to discover the joy of reporter Mary Sunshine for themselves.

The ensemble here is cherry-picked and formidable. Many of the male members are clearly more weighted on the dance end of the spectrum, but none of that detracts from group numbers that come off with clockwork precision and comic timing. "Razzle Dazzle," Flynn's ode to courtroom deception, bursts from the stage with everyone firing on all cylinders, and Roxie's courtroom scene is a tour de force from all involved.

Kyle Dixon wins again on the scenic design front, with a metal-based set, evoking, both literally and figuratively, the prison ambiance and a proscenium that gives the illusion of lead-lined stained glass when the curtains are drawn. The aforementioned courtroom carries his signature look, all angles and detail, and his use of levels throughout gives the stage a depth that is deceiving. Paula Peasley-Ninestein's costumes are eye-catching and designed for movement. Flynn's suits and (with help from wig designer Emily Christoffersen) Mary Sunshine's ensemble stand out as characters of their own. Peter Leigh-Nilsen's musical direction (aided by Mike Hyde's sound design) is sharp and allows the performers to express themselves within a tight framework without coming across as too loud or overbearing.

*Chicago* is a fitting close to another fine season by Theatre by the Sea, another example of ending with something for the adults (although there were many children in the audience, seemingly nonplussed by some of the more salacious bits). Next year's lineup will feature *Saturday Night Fever* in this slot, but there is no sense in wondering if that show will wrap things up as triumphantly as *Chicago* has. This one stands out in too many ways to allow comparisons, either with stunners like this year's *Mamma Mia!* or with the potential of next year's *Newsies*. With a week left, see for yourself what it really means to be dazzled. These chances don't come around all that often.

*Bill Hanney's Theatre By The Sea presents Chicago through September 9. Performances are scheduled for Tuesday through Saturday evenings at 8pm, Thursdays at 2pm, Saturdays at 3pm and Sundays at*

5pm, The theater is located at 364 Cards Pond Road, Wakefield. Discount tickets are available for groups of 10 or more by calling (401) 782-TKTS (8587). Tickets are on sale at the box office Monday through Saturday from 11am - 6pm, Sundays from noon - 5pm and performance days until curtain, online 24-hours-a-day at [theatrebythesea.com](http://theatrebythesea.com) and via telephone during normal box office hours by calling 866-811-4111 or 401-782-TKTS (8587).