

Sucked Into the Windy City

Chicago jazzes up Cottage Theatre

Hello, suckers! Once again, that bawdy, boozin' era of gin joints and jazz, flapper girls and burlesque honeys with their spirit fingers and jazz hands, and all the razzle dazzle of 1920s Chicago returns to the stage in Cottage Theatre's production of *Chicago: A Musical Vaudeville*.

Chicago — in case you missed the Oscar-winning movie — is the story of wannabe nightclub singer Roxie Hart (Kate Castel), who shoots her lover for dumping her. In jail, she meets Velma Kelly (Pamela Lehan-Siegel), a cabaret entertainer and murderess who reigns as the city's current celebrity criminal, thanks to her sycophantic attorney, Billy Flynn (Rob Rudeen). But when Flynn agrees to take Roxie's case, Velma is suddenly old news as Roxie moves into the limelight as the most famous murderess in town and the latest darling of the fickle media. Nonetheless, Velma has a few surprises in store for Roxie, and tensions rise as the two women stop at nothing to outdo each other in their pursuit of fame and notoriety.

An indictment of contemporary society over the media's and the public's obsession with the celebrity criminal (much like today's titillating tabloids), *Chicago* is based on a true story by Maurine Dallas Watkins, a journalist who had been assigned to cover the 1924 trials of two accused murderers, Beulah Annan and Belva Gaertner, for the *Chicago Tribune*. Annan was the inspiration for the Roxie Hart character and Gaertner, a cabaret singer, for Velma Kelly. Both were acquitted with the help of their respective lawyers, whom Watkins used as a composite model for the Billy Flynn character.

Despite Cottage Theatre's relatively smallish thrust stage and a large cast, the set designers make great use of the space even with a live band occupying the same stage. To accommodate this arrangement and still have room for the actors, the band is situated on a raised platform facing the audience, which really makes the music the centerpiece of the show.

Leading the cast are Castel and Lehan-Siegel. Castel is terrific as the hard-edged cabaret singer Velma Kelly, and Lehan-Siegel's Roxie is a jagged combination of sweetness and ruthlessness. Both are dynamic balls of interminable energy, dancing and singing through one lively number after another, and it's great that director Peg Major was able to find two

women with voices that complement each other so splendidly. Dancing and singing at the same time isn't an easy thing to do, but Castel in "I Can't Do It Alone," and Lehan-Siegel in "Baby My Baby" make it seem effortless. As Matron Mama Morton, Nikki Pagniano shows off her strong vocals in "When You're Good to Mama," and her formidable comedic side in the very funny duet "Class" with Castel.

Because the male roles in *Chicago* take a backseat to the women's roles, the men really need to shine during their time onstage. Regrettably, the performances of the two lead male roles opening night were lacking. As Billy Flynn, Bob Rudeen looks the part and has a genuinely good singing voice, but the wooden delivery of his lines hindered his performance (although he did seem to loosen up more toward the end). Likewise, as Roxie's hapless husband Amos, Daniel Borson was a bit too buffoonish to be as sympathetic as he should be. His one solo, the sad and soulful "Mister Cellophane," lost a good deal of its impact because Borson seemed to be rushing through it rather than letting the song build slowly to its poignant climax.

Still, the energy of the cast, the chorus, the dancers, the music and the fabulous jazz orchestra makes *Chicago* a lot of fun ... and all that jazz.

Chicago continues Apr. 11-13, 18-20 and 25 and 26. Tix at www.cottage theatre.org or 942-9195. **EW**

opening nights

Breaking Up Is Hard to Do
Opens at Actors Cabaret of Eugene Friday, April 11.

We didn't know that Neil Sedaka was so beloved. Wow, a whole musical — like last summer's *All Shook Up* and this season's *Ring of Fire* — with a thin plot that serves as a kind of window dressing for the real appeal: "Calendar Girl!" "Happy Birthday, Sweet Sixteen!" And, of course, the title song. With familiar faces and voices and the kind of campy, jazz-handy energy we all know and love about ACE, *Breaking Up* won't be hard to watch. Show dates are April 11-12, 18-19 & 25-27 and May 2-4 at ACE and May 9-10 in Soreng at the Hult. Tix at www.actorscabaret.org or 683-4368.

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