

## BWW Review: Nashville Rep's Jazz-Age Triumph CHICAGO



Chicago is one of my favorite cities on the planet, so naturally it goes that *Chicago*, the Tony Award- and Oscar-winning musical by [John Kander](#) and [Fred Ebb](#), is also one of my favorite stage musicals. Brash, sassy, laugh-out-loud funny at one moment, and heart-tuggingly and sweetly sentimental at the next - with a musical score that's memorable and pitch-perfect in the skillful way it tells the story of wannabe vaudeville superstars Roxie Hart and Velma Kelly - *Chicago* has been a part of the musical theater vernacular for almost 40 years.

So I am always surprised when I witness people reacting, as if for the first time, to something that transpires onstage in *Chicago*, yet those responses represent the show's still-current appeal, validating what we've all come to love about it since the last century. And after all the myriad productions that have followed its Broadway premiere - national tours, regional theater offerings, community theater renditions - it's still somewhat shocking when someone delivers a *Chicago* that's full of surprises and unexpected delights, even while hewing close to the original product.

But that's exactly what Rene Copeland and Nashville Repertory Theatre serve up with their own special take on *Chicago, the Musical*, now onstage at [Andrew Johnson Theatre](#) at the Tennessee Performing Arts Center. Nashville Rep's *Chicago* is sumptuously appointed: [Gary Hoff](#), the Rep's resident scenic designer,



transforms the Johnson Theatre into an eye-popping gorgeous, 1920s-era nightclub, a beautiful, make-believe Art Deco shrine of sin and gin that immediately transports its audiences to the razzmatazz of the jazz age.

Musical director Jason Tucker conducts the production's swell orchestra with a confidence and consistency that ensures the fine Kander and Ebb score is performed winningly, providing the ideal balance to the actors' efforts. Additionally, his interactions with the audience - via his fun-loving introductions to certain musical numbers - helps to underscore the importance of the musicians in the success of any musical theater offering.

The production's design aesthetic typified by Hoff's imagination and is exquisitely realized, with Trish Clark's fashionable costumes clothing the various characters with exuberant style (aided in her efforts to achieve greatness by Colleen Garatoni's terrific hair and wig design); Phillip Franck's evocative lighting design illuminating the whole of the proceedings with his expected flair; and Evelyn Thornhill providing the nifty properties design that aid in suspension of disbelief to take audiences back to 1928.



And praise be to God, or to whomever we are left owing, for the best sound design we may have ever heard on a Nashville stage: Jeff Ent, you are my hero. In the wake of show-after-show, season-after-season of poorly designed sound, finally we have a production in which every note sung is clearly heard, where every stage whisper lands softly upon

the ear, and where everything comes together to create the perfect ambient sounds of the big-shouldered, rough-and-tumble world of Chicago, Illinois, and *Chicago, the Musical*.

Filled with gamine chorines and femmes fatales, randy fourflushers and charming roués, disarming furniture salesmen and in flagrante delicto Jacks and Jills just itching to push the envelope of good taste and general decorum - the world of *Chicago* is filled with all sorts of intriguing personalities who are brought to life by some of Music City's finest actors (just how much they're really acting is up to you, gentle readers...) in what is most assuredly one of 2016's - nay, the whole 21st century, to date - finest productions.

Copeland teams up with choreographer [Pam Atha](#) to breathe new life into *Chicago* (the two women together have produced some of Nashville's most memorable musicals of the past quarter century and they are largely responsible for cementing Music City's reputation for being, in all honesty, better known as "Musical City" and how lucky



am I to have borne witness to the evolution of their work together?) with their shared passion for musical theater and for their knowledge of what will leave audiences clamoring for more and, perhaps more importantly, who they most want to see onstage performing their favorite show tunes. More often than not, that means [Martha Wilkinson](#), Nashville's undisputed queen of musical theater, who has been Copeland and Atha's co-conspirator in creating the shows people still talk about, years after the final curtain has rung down. *Chicago* is just their latest onstage success.

Together, the three - Copeland, Atha and Wilkinson - form a triad of musical theater superheroines: If, going in, you know they are on the ticket then you can rest assured that you're going to be entertained, your mind enlightened and your spirit sent soaring by the result of their collaboration. While each woman is truly startling in her talents and particular skill set, when you put them together they pretty much define the notion of "being more than the sum of their parts." That's why *Chicago* has been so eagerly awaited by local audiences and why the theaterati and the chattering classes have been working overtime in spreading the word about Nashville theater's imminent return to the ever-so-roaring 1920s.



Corrie Maxwell as Velma Kelly

Wilkinson, who has taken on virtually every role in the canon of legendary women in musical theater (save for Mama Rose - someone needs to get right on that sooner rather than later), returns to the role of Roxie Hart (with more than a little trepidation, I suspect, knowing her as I do) after a nine-year sojourn to deliver a performance that would be revelatory if we didn't already know what everyone else should be aware of by now: She interprets every musical theater heroine, with whom she is entrusted, with ferocity and honesty. Make no mistake about it: Martha becomes Roxie for two-and-one-half hours every night in the darkened confines of the Johnson Theatre.

"I am older than I ever intended to be," the raucous, self-absorbed Mrs. Hart tells her audience in a dream-fever imagined vaudeville act, in which she out-Sophies even the original [Miss Tucker](#), the ribald and robust vaudevillian who paved the way for every outspoken woman who has followed in her wake. When that line is delivered by Wilkinson, the pathos and humor in the statement become even more pronounced and allows Wilkinson to deliver a startlingly fresh take on Roxie.



Wilkinson never phones in a performance - and while we're on the subject, I'd watch her read the telephone book anytime, anyplace - and with Roxie Hart, she creates another onstage portrayal that will be talked about for years to come. Her comic timing is remarkable, her ability to change her emotional output on the turn of a dime is impressively unique, and the zeal with which she approaches every role provides a master class for every young actor in her presence. Quite frankly, after seeing her on opening night, we're hard-pressed to consider anyone else in the role (who the hell is Ann Rienking, anyway?).

One of the biggest selling points about *Chicago* - other than the memorable musical score; the intelligently drawn, yet larger-than-lifesized characters; and its ridiculously timely plotlines - is how adroitly the show's supporting characters are given their opportunities to shine, to claim their places in the spotlight. It's here that Copeland's superb ability to cast the right actor in the right role comes through most portentously.

Corrie Maxwell makes her Nashville Rep debut with a scintillating turn as Velma Kelly, Roxie's more experienced and initially more jaded jailmate and competitor who ultimately becomes her partner-in-crime on the vaudeville circuit. Maxwell's show-opening "All That Jazz" is jaw-droppingly impressive and she seizes the moment to show audiences who may not be familiar with her tremendous talent exactly what she is made of: like Wilkinson, she's the quintessential musical theater star who is consistent and constant throughout the show. Maxwell's Velma is so watchable and is performed with such vitality that your eyes are riveted to her; may I please watch "I Can't Do It Alone" at least once more (it's playing on an eternal loop in my brain already)? Further, Maxwell's show-closing duet with Wilkinson on "Nowadays" is delightfully over-the-top and showcases each of the two women at her very best and most entertaining.



By that same token, I'd watch [Geoff Davin](#) strut his way across the stage as the conniving, underhanded and completely charming shyster Billy Flynn any day! Davin takes on Flynn's well-fitting, beautifully tailored suits with effortless ease, exuding enough sex appeal and confidence to win over even the most hard-bitten merry murderesses in the Cook County Jail and his musical performances are especially noteworthy: "All I Care About," in which he is surrounded by the comely women of the ensemble, is arrogant and appealing; "Razzle Dazzle" is over-the-top theatricality sprung to life; and "We Both Reached for the Gun," in which he uses Roxie as a ventriloquist's dummy is as fine a rendition of that particular number that we've ever encountered (and we've seen *Chicago* done all over this fine land since 1978 - which is 38 years for those of you without a quick mathematical bent).

Among Copeland's amazing ensemble of players, [Jennifer Whitcomb-Oliva](#), [Shawn Knight](#) and J. London deliver performances that when described as scene-stealing only downplays their significance. In short order, each prove their musical mettle, delivering performances that are distinctively on a par with the leading players. Whitcomb-Oliva, as the meddling matron of the Cook County Jail *aka* "Mama" Morton, is spectacular; her performance of "When You're Good to Mama" is unparalleled and almost heart-stoppingly exhilarating, while her duet with Maxwell on "Class" is as good as musical theater gets. Knight plays Roxie's dull and somewhat dimwitted cuckold of a husband Amos with so much warmth and sincerity that he fairly breaks your heart with his version of "Mr. Cellophane," one of musical theater's best second-banana anthems; and London offers up a tremendous Mary Sunshine, who's full of melodramatic cheek and saccharine charm to create a stunning build-up to the climax of the yellow journalist's personal onstage dramatic arc.

The remaining members of the ensemble, including some of our favorite Nashville performers/entertainers/actors seamlessly become a host of characters who exemplify the wildly varied population of Chicago, the city, onstage, in a variety of guises: DeVon Buchanan, Wesley Carpenter, Jess Darnell, [Billy Ditty](#), [Rosemary Fosse](#), [Mia](#)



[Rose](#) Lynne, Mallory Mundy, Neely Scott and Everett Tarlton take on every challenge presented them in this high-powered, always in motion, production and they respond with electrically charged performances that result in the overall magnificence of this wonderful musical revival. They sing their hearts out and they bring Atha's spirited choreography to life with athletic grace and [Bob Fosse](#)-inspired sensuality. To put in succinctly: a good time is had by all.



[Shawn Knight](#) as Amos Hart

My advice: fill your flask with some hooch, pick up some aspirin from the corner drugstore, abandon all your cares and leave your worries behind. Nashville Rep's *Chicago* - the ever-loving musical that has been breaking the rules for nigh on 40 years now (and you can trace its lineage back to the late 1920s, when a movie of the same name bowed) - is good for what ail's you. And all that jazz.

- ***Chicago*. Music by Joohn Kander. Lyrics by [Fred Ebb](#). Book by [Fred Ebb](#) and [Bob Fosse](#). Directed by Rene D. Copeland. Music direction by Jason Tucker. Choreography by [Pam Atha](#). Stage design by Teresa Driver. Presented by Nashville Repertory Theatre at TPAC's [Andrew Johnson](#) Theatre, Nashville. Running through April 16. For details, go to [www.nashvillerep.org](http://www.nashvillerep.org). Running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes (with one 15-minute intermission).**

PHOTOS BY MICHAEL SCOTT EVANS, PHOTOGRAPHER