

Sin City: "Chicago," at the Clinton Area Showboat Theatre through August 17

Written by Mike Schulz

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All things considered, Friday night's presentation of *Chicago* at the Clinton Area Showboat Theatre was pretty darned impressive.

Co-directed by co-stars Meghan Hakes (who also choreographed) and Craig A. Miller (who also designed the sound), this production of the legendary musical provided sterling vocals and terrifically saucy dance moves, and Sonia Elizabeth Lerner's costumes were practically an evening's entertainment in themselves; there was enough leather, mesh, and décolletage on display to give Fosse himself the shakes. It was a great-looking and - with the gifted pianist Adam Wiggins conducting the on-stage band - oftentimes great-sounding achievement, and the Showboat crowd appeared to gobble up every mean-spirited morsel of it.

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However (and you knew there'd be a "however," didn't you?), if pressed for my favorite bit on Friday, I'd have to choose the accidental one that occurred near the very end, when Wiggins' bandleader turned to us, began to introduce the climactic "Nowadays" number, and promptly forgot what he was going to say. It was a moment of pure charm that the audience adored - Wiggins stopped speaking, paused, started again, stopped again, and finally smiled, shook his head, and returned his attentions to his musicians - and for a brief instant, the show's onus of perfection was happily ignored.

I love *Chicago*, as does most everyone I know. But the process of staging it - at least in the Bob Fosse via Ann Reinking via Rob Marshall manner - has to be incredibly intimidating; given the slithery seductiveness and angular precision of the movements, and the rhythmic and lyric scrupulousness of Kander & Ebb's score, if you're not going to do the show exceptionally well, you really shouldn't bother doing it at all. (*Chicago* seems rather like a diamond: brilliant, a little cold, and harder than hell.)

It's clear that the Showboat ensemble is striving to produce its version exceptionally well, and in such numbers as "Razzle Dazzle" and "We Both Reached for the Gun," they succeed. But for better or worse, exactitude is built into this musical's DNA. The show is so meticulous and Fosse-cool that every little imperfection reads as bigger than it would in a more traditional book musical, where personality can overcome performance flaws - perfection *is Chicago's* personality. And so, on the rare occasions here when band members hit clunker notes, or when the leads were off-time with the music or jumbled their lyrics, or when the chorus' dancing wasn't totally in sync, you couldn't help but be pulled out of the moment. (Although the show's technical elements, including Gary C. Echelmeyer's marvelous lighting effects, were generally topnotch, Zach Borja's game turn as transsexual reporter Mary Sunshine was almost completely undone by the muddled amplification of the back-stage soprano he was lip-synching to.)

Was it fear of imperfection that made several talented performers here look like they weren't having much fun? Lori Dansby comes through with a sensationally vibrant Roxie, dripping with entitlement and outrage, and delivers her character's eponymous solo with pizzazz and a shit-eating grin; the actress is thrilling to watch. But Hakes, despite being an excellent dancer and fine singer, seems vaguely uncomfortable about portraying Velma with the necessary energy and venom - she's too recessive in the part - and while that stunning vocalist Christina Stroup kills on her "When You're Good to Mama" solo, you wish some of that fire was evident in her book scenes; like Hakes, she frequently fades into the background.

Joshua Estrada gives an honest, unaffected portrayal of shyster lawyer Billy Flynn. Yet based

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on the eight shows I've seen Estrada in, his actorly instinct - and it's an admirable one - is to not commandeer the stage, and if ever a role demanded a domineering presence, it's Billy Flynn; Estrada is sharp, assured, and more than a little miscast. (The actor has shown impressive range at the Showboat, but I saw Estrada give this same performance in last summer's *Guys & Dolls* .)

Beyond Dansby, this

Chicago

's most noteworthy lead is Miller, who lends considerable depth and panache to his sad-sack Amos, and who has been blessed with an absolutely priceless curtain call. (I wish, though, that Friday's audience had resisted the urge to moan "

Aw-w-w-w

" after Amos' every setback, as though he were a three-legged puppy.)

All this might sound like I didn't enjoy the Showboat's latest, and I *did*. But *Chicago* is that rare musical-theatre title that sets up unreasonably high expectations from the outset, and while the theatre handily met them with

Sweeney Todd

, this one falls a tad short. By all means see it, though, and while Wiggins probably won't drop that line again, pay particular attention to the magnificently unpredictable bursts of humanity that manage to pop through: the divinely eccentric readings of Monica Bradley; the heartfelt desperation of Jen Lucy; the uncontained anger of Simone Renault; the witty, one-woman-jury courtroom antics of Alison Luff; and the happily gonzo weirdness of Nick Divarco's Fred Casely.

I've visited Chicago, and

Chicago

, before, but I've never encountered anyone quite like him.

For tickets, call (563) 242-6760.