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All That Jazz!

Big Band Sparks "Chicago"

By Brad Hathaway

Thursday, March 04, 2010

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The rocking jazz sound of one of the best community theater bands in recent memory kicks off the Little Theatre of Alexandria's new production of Kander and Ebb's fabulously entertaining musical "Chicago" when they launch into the flashy opening number, "All That Jazz." The band, however, is only one of the pleasures this superb production offers.

There is a fine pair of performances by the leading ladies. Bethany Blakey is a super-sexy hardened murderess awaiting trial in Chicago's women's detention center under the extortionist supervision of "Matron Mama Morton" (Jennifer Strand). Jordan Hougham is wonderfully flighty on the surface but with a devious plotting brain underneath as the fame-intoxicated new arrival on murderer's row. Both sing and dance well either separately or as a team in the up-tempo finale "Nowadays/R.S.V.P./Keep It Hot."

The show also offers an equally fine pair of principal supporting actor performances. Andy Izquierdo is just as flashy and flamboyant as you could want as the defense attorney who believes he can win any defendant an acquittal through pure razzle-dazzle and he's in fine voice for the smarmy "All I Care About" (is love) and, aided by Hougham, handles the faux-ventriloquism of "We Both Reached for the Gun" with high humor. Jon Keeling pulls off the sometimes difficult trick of drawing comic attention to his character's principal characteristic as the wronged husband who is such a miquetoast as to be practically invisible. His droll delivery of "Mr. Cellophane" is a kick and he gets a great laugh when requesting his "exit music."

But it is the band — the 13 enthusiastic as well as skilled musicians under the baton of music director Paul Nasto — that is the real star of the show. Nasto is making his Little Theatre of Alexandria debut. It is a debut that makes me hope he'll handle music direction duties for more musicals both here and at other community theaters in the area.

"Chicago" is a piece that requires this kind of quality performance by a band. It is a musical that tells its story in individual scenes that are each a type of vaudeville act in the style of the revues and variety shows of the early part of the 20th century. The script by the original director/choreographer, Bob Fosse, and lyricist, Fred Ebb is about as fast-paced as a Broadway show's can be, and Ebb's lyrics are both witty and revealing of the character of the person singing. Thus, each scene is a potential show stopper with a full-out, sell-the-number performance by the vocalists and a loud, brassy accompaniment from the band.

John Kander composed music that ran the gamut of early variety styles and the great Ralph Burns orchestrated it all for 13 musicians. The show was a solid hit in 1975 and would be remembered as a smash if it weren't for the fact that is was the year that "A Chorus Line" opened to such rapturous reviews and word of mouth that "Chicago" was all but lost in the shuffle. But in 1996 a revival was staged, putting all the action on and around an on-stage bandstand. Again using Burn's charts, the band was very much a part of every scene — even the conductor got into the act, announcing some of the scenes. Nasto handles these duties with aplomb while leading the band with solid rhythms, a good sense of tempo and drawing a real sense of musical excitement from his crew.

True to the staging of the 1996 revival which is still running on Broadway after over 5,000 performances, the entire show takes place on the black bandstand outlined with proscenium lights until the final moments when a silver tinsel curtain picks up on Ken and Patti Crowley's multi-colored lights for "Keep it Hot." Throughout the night, the cast does a capable job with the choreography that Amy Carson has adapted from the unmistakable work of Ann Reinking for the revival, which was, itself, billed as "in the style of Bob Fosse."

The finale is followed by the curtain calls, but there is still a bit of joy to be had for those smart enough to hang back after the lights go up. The band lets loose with the exit music that in many shows just accompanies the rush to the exits. With this band and with Burns' orchestration of Kander's great melodies, many of the audience members who attended the opening night stayed in the hall until the last note had sounded.

Brad Hathaway reviews theater in Virginia, Washington and Maryland as well as Broadway and writes about theater for a number of national magazines. He can be reached at Brad@PotomacStages.com.



Andy Izquierdo (Billy Flynn) and the ensemble of "Chicago," which plays through March 20 at The Little Theatre Alexandria.

Where and When
"Chicago" plays through March 20 at the Theatre of Alexandria, 600 Wolfe Stree Performances are Wednesday - Saturday p.m. and Sunday at 3 p.m. Tickets are \$21. Call 703-683-0496 or log on to www.thelittletheatre.com.

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