

Performances make Little Theatre's 'Chicago' a killer

By Michael J. Toscano
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Little Theatre of Alexandria has an audience-pleaser with its high-energy production of "Chicago." The show's dynamic score shakes the theater's chandeliers, three lead performers pack a wallop with vibrant, larger-than-life presentations and the outlandish story is flamboyantly told.

This is the 1997, Tony Award-winning version of "Chicago" that's still running on Broadway. Itself a remake of a 1975 version, adapted in turn from a 1926 comedy, "Chicago" is perhaps most familiar because of the Academy Award-winning film it spawned. Still, even this strong pedigree doesn't guarantee a success.

But director Susan Devine concentrates on the show's essential elements: John Kander's delightful music and its flippant, highly ironic attitude. The result is pure joy.

Set in Chicago's Roaring Twenties, the show parodies early media tumult, as newspaper readers are whipped into frenzies by sensationalized crime coverage of two women charged in separate murder cases. Fred Ebb and choreographer Bob Fosse's script is pointed and silly, and this production beautifully tells the story.

Fosse's iconic choreography is usually slavishly re-created whenever any of his shows are staged. The bowler hats, the "jazz hands," the elegant moves, undulating shoulders and streamlined thrusts have become stale with overuse. But choreographer Amy Carson adds her own imprint, while paying suitable homage to Fosse. Angularity is smoothed out, and motion is simplified. Although the dance remains highly athletic, it seems sleeker, fresh and every bit as sexy.

Paul Nasto conducts a large orchestra pumping out the jazz and the bluesy melodies that have made this Broadway musical so popular. The band, which sits on a multilevel platform that dominates the stage, thrills from the start with "All That Jazz," "Cell Block Tango" and "When You're Good to Mama."

Andy Izquierdo anchors the show as cynical lawyer Billy Flynn, a master manipulator who massages the law and the media. Izquierdo has performed this role before, and his comfort level shows in the ease with which he oozes reptilian charm in the show's key moments. In "We Both Reached for the Gun," Flynn coaches man-killer Roxie Hart (Jordan Hougham) through a jury-friendly version of her crime. Izquierdo and Hougham spark exquisitely timed moves as Flynn literally turns the killer into his puppet. The mocking "Razzle Dazzle" allows Izquierdo to command the ensemble.

Bethany Blakey is extraordinary as murderess Velma Kelly. Tall and with a tangle of red hair, Blakey is a striking presence. Her ability to continue singing while executing strenuous, complex dance moves is impressive. She and pixyish Hougham delightfully play off each other's personas and skillfully mesh their movements for their challenging dance duets at the finale. Where Blakey is sharp and commanding, Hougham provides warmth and vulnerability.

There are no sets, the drab costumes are mostly plain black, and the lighting is flat and boring. The emphasis is totally on performance and an attitude of sassy cynicism, brilliantly mixed into a thoroughly entertaining event.

"Chicago" runs through March 20 at Little Theatre of Alexandria, 600 Wolfe St. Showtimes are 8 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays and 3 p.m. Sundays. For tickets or information, call the box office at 703-683-0496 or visit <http://www.thelittletheatre.com>.