'Chicago' gets stripped down to emphasize dance

"Chicago – The Musical" continues at Detroit's Fisher Theatre, 8 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays, 7:30 p.m. Sundays and 2 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays through Oct. 11. Tickets are $62 to $35. Call (248)645-6666.

"Come on babe, I know a whoopee spot
Where the gin is cold and the piano's hot
And all that jazz!"

Kander and Ebb

BY HUGH GALLAGHER
STAFF WRITER

"Chicago -- The Musical" is a bitterly cynical and highly entertaining concoction.

"Chicago" is a stripped down musical revue that spotlights music, dance and performance in the raw, framed around a musical comedy plot that is almost irrelevant.

Director Walter Bobbie, who originally revived the Bob Fosse, Kander-Ebb musical as a concert piece for New York's Encores series, has created a production in stark black and gold. Though the story of two murderesses and their lawyer takes place in the 1920s, the set is 1998 backstage with an ersatz on-stage jazz band, ladders and simple chairs. The women are dressed in sexy black lingerie meant to display lots of leg and the men, mostly, in vests and tight dance pants.

The songs are introduced and staged as vaudeville routines. John Kander's music borrows from the variety of musical styles in the 1920s from Dixieland to tangos to crooning to Jeanette MacDonald trilling. The Fred Ebb lyrics are about as deep-down nasty as recent news reports. The Ann Reinking choreography, in the style of her mentor Fosse, is energetic, sinuous and sensual.

This touring production at the Fisher has the talent.

At the top of the list is Stephanie Pope as Velma Kelly. Pope is a long-limbed dancer with a contortionist's flexibility. She is an insinuating singer, equal parts cynical and sexy. Her facial expressions are as fluid as her dance steps. She sets the attitude with her oh-so naughty "All That Jazz."

Belle Calaway is less successful as the more comic and pitiful Roxie Hart. The part was custom made for Gwen Verdon, whose style is hard for others to avoid. Calaway does a fine version of "Roxie" but seems to hurry through some of her other numbers and is less sure footed than Pope.

Alan Thicke, often referred to as "the TV actor," is actually a pretty good musical comedy performer. He plays slickster lawyer, con man and charmer Billy Flynn, complete with the frozen-faced mock sincerity of a TV newsman. Whether crooning the sappy "All I Care About" or playing ventriloquist for Roxie in the rapid-fire "We Both Reached for the Gun," he commands the attention of the audience and oozes oiliness.

But the surprising show stopper is Michael Tucci's rendition of the Bert Williams' style "Mister Cellophane," complete with white gloves and soft shoe footwork. Tucci makes a wonderful schlemiel.

Carol Woods as Mama the Matron struts her stuff with authority and, thankfully, doesn't oversell the part. R. Bean is a sweet Mary Sunshine, who warbles like Jeanette MacDonald through a wicked send-up of Rodgers and Hammerstein at their shlockiest.

But in a Bob Fosse show, it's the chorus that provides the punch, and here the "boys and girls" work up a good sweat through Reinking's imaginative dance numbers and such Kander vocal routines as "Cell Block Tango."

Of course, the recent news out of Washington helps give new meaning to Fred Ebb's lyrics, drawing howls of recognition from the audience.

The more things change, the *more they ... and all that jazz!*

CAROL ROSEGG

Broadway musical: *Jack Hayes (left), Belle Calaway and Gary Kilmer in "Chicago."*

'Nerd' characters well played

The Plymouth Theatre Guild presents "The Nerd," 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday, and 6 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 4, at the Water Tower Theatre, 41001 W. Seven Mile, west of I-275 between Haggerty and Northville Roads, Northville. Tickets are $8 in advance, $9 at door, and available by calling (248) 349-7110.

BY SUE SUCHYTA
SPECIAL WRITER

The Plymouth Theatre Guild's opening show of the season, "The Nerd" has some hysterically funny moments, but it's way too long, the dialogue drags, and many comic bits are underappreciated due to the actors' lack of comic timing during the exposition.

"The Nerd" chronicles the plight of Willum Cubbert, whose life was saved during the Vietnam War by a "hero" he has never met. When his rescuer, Rick Steadman, shows up he's not at all what Willum expected– in fact, he's his worst nightmare. How to get rid of someone to whom you owe your life becomes the story's comic focus.

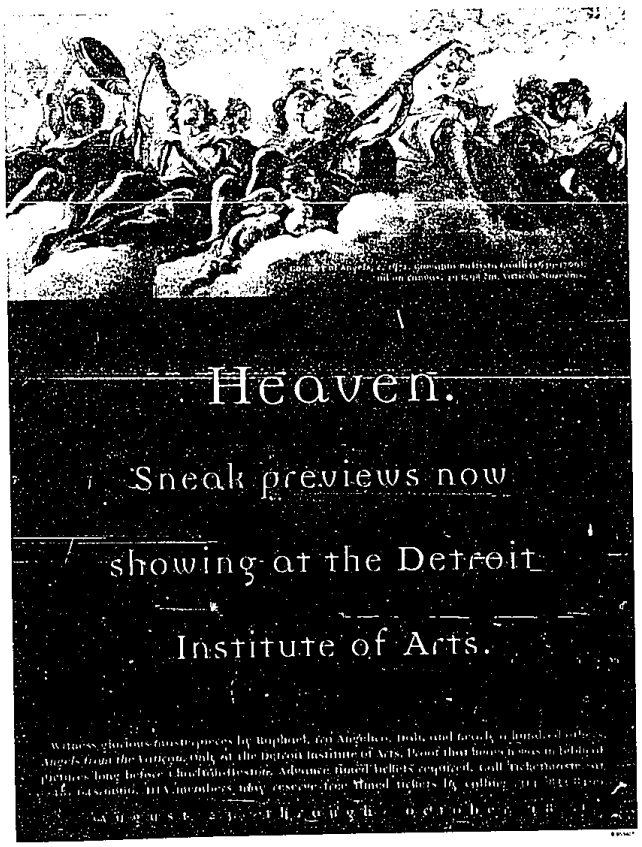
The dialogue leading up to "the nerd's" arrival is tediously long, and much of the humor is missed because the actors' comic timing is off. Indeed, throughout the play, when the humor was cerebral the pace suffered.

Which is not to say that individual performances weren't good. Although the director didn't always create believable or funny interactions, the actors themselves created some likable, humorous characterizations. And the physical comedy, though at times overdone, brought out the greatest laughter.

Tony Lawry of Garden City played Willum, the beleaguered host. After a rough start, in which his character appeared more sarcastic than sad, he settled into a likable and sympathetic character. Lawry's strength lies in his likability and his energetic physical humor. Tiffany Bedwell of Garden City portrayed Tansy McGinnis, Willum's love interest and ambitious weather girl, with talent and enthusiasm. She plans to leave both Terre Haute, Ind., and Willum to take a promising job offer in Washington, D.C., which hasn't set very well with Willum.

Cindy Gontko, as Axel Hammond, had some good comic moments, but threw away too many funny lines with rattled off recitations. She has potential, but needs to develop a better feel for comic delivery.

James Roth of Northville was delightful as "the nerd," Rick Steadman. Nine year old Daniel Berryman of Canton provoked much laughter as Thor, a spoiled, tantrum-throwing brat. Jason Birkby of Novi and Lindy Spears of Canton as Warnock and Clelia Waldgrave both had their funny moments but showed little chemistry as a couple.



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