

Chicago Review

By Callum Haigh

Chicago. 1926. A time, where criminals became the celebrity highlights of the year. Where corruption ran everywhere, even in the justice system. And where fame was everything, and how far people went to achieve it, no matter what the cost. Such themes are though provoking, yet the musical *Chicago* sets out to portray this.

Bought about by Sheffield University Performing Arts Society, *Chicago* focuses on a new prison inmate named Roxie Hart. Imprisoned for murder, she instigates a fake sob-story, lavishing in all the media attention that follows, something that she will fight to hold on to. This is such an ambitious and enormous musical to ever be put on the stage, which I had the honour of seeing on opening night. Not only does it work, but it is, in my opinion, one of the greatest productions I have ever seen.

From the grand Overture, linked with the seductive tones of *All That Jazz*, to the dark and heart-pounding *Cell Block Tango*, and then following through to the mournful tones of *Class*, *Chicago* is a show that dazzles its audience non-stop. As a first-time viewer, I was gobsmacked by how amazing the musical was excellently conveyed, through its songs and deeply satirical story, all of which is superbly put together by the society.

Kendall Knight portrays Roxie Hart with great ferocity, whilst also putting on a false, angelic appearance that fits the character perfectly. This is a woman who's clearly out to be noticed, and even though she is the main lead, there was a part of me that wanted to see this character be given a reality check. Knight gives her all in the performance, showing us a character that we love to hate (And emphasise with at times), as well as telling us a cautionary tale about how fame can be really destructive and whether the price is truly worth it. A nice twist on the usual musical protagonist, if you ask me.

Velma Kelly is played by Cesca Cornell, who easily remains one of the highlights of my viewing. Cornell gives the feisty and sexy prison inmate such personality that I found myself instantly bopping along with her introduction in the song *All That Jazz*. Her sleek movements as she dances across the stage during her songs, *I Can't Do It Alone* and *When Velma takes the Stand* are just outstanding, and Cornell's singing voice, whilst admittedly being a little quiet at times, makes you emphasise with the character a lot more than Roxie, as we learn enough hints about her dark past. That's something rare that I've never seen in a musical, and I feel that Cornell is going to be a fantastic actress someday.

Josh Warburton plays Billy Flynn, the sleazy lawyer that helps Roxie fabricate a false story to ensure her release. Warburton depicts the character of Flynn as a man who just oozes with corruption from the moment he steps onto the stage with his debut song *All I Care About*, easily another highlight for me, with its charming and showman like tone that truly sells the image of corruption in 1920s America. Much like Roxie, Flynn is a character that you simply love to hate, but his charming and crooked nature wins you over despite him having no conscience when it comes to justice.

Another character highpoint for me were two cast members; Nathan Sloane as Amos Hart and Megan Armson as Mary Sunshine. Both Sloane and Armson give their characters so many hilarious moments in this musical, Armson in particular being a bright contrast to the dark themes of the show. Whenever she appeared on stage and belted out in her soprano voice, I was literally in stitches. Sloane also does the same for Amos, and at the same time, made me feel a teensy bit of sympathy for the character and his situation of being ignored by Roxie, in the mournful and funny song number, *Mr Cellophane*. Every other cast member, especially Maria MacAninch as Matron Mama Morton and the cast ensemble really shine in my opinion, each one dominating the stage and sucking us into the drama.

In terms of staging, SUPAS easily transports the audience back to the 1920s without breaking a sweat. Being a huge musical, it would normally be difficult for a theatre company to put the show on, but SUPAS does succeed. The lack of actual props and limited setting doesn't matter, for with the use of costume and a jazz band, it felt to me like I was living in the show, laughing and cheering at every character. Each and every cast member uses all the corners of the stage in the dancing and acting scenes, giving us a story that feels so large and universal. The mix of lighting helped out as well, prompting different reactions from the audience and setting the mood of each scene, so I must give credit to the production team for pulling this off with ease, proving that small theatre companies can be just as effective as a massive, extravagant showcase.

Continuing on from staging, one of the best moments in the show was the song number, *Cell Block Tango*. If there was ever a song number that basically said "Hell Hath no fury than a woman scorned", then this is it. With the excellent use of red and white lighting, no props and fantastic choreography, I was blown away by how out of control this song is, with each woman telling their own, murderous tale of how they landed in prison, whilst at the same time doing it in a fashion that really felt like an actual stage show. Dark, seductive and terrifying, it's easily the best song in the show, with every woman owning the stage.

There are loads of other moments that I wish I could write about, but if I had to choose one more, it would have to be *Class*, a song sung near the end of the second act by Velma and Mama Morton. There isn't a dance or much going on in this scene apart from the two characters reminiscing about how America used to be a fair country, but that's besides the point. The sombre tones of both women sell the song in my opinion, reminding the audience that not only is life unfair, but corruption is an issue that is still ongoing to this very day and fame doesn't always last. It's powerful storytelling through the method of song.

Ultimately, when it comes down to it, everything about *Chicago* is just brilliant, and I walked away from the show feeling lost for words at how deep the show was. The staging, the music, the acting and the themes that the musical shows us is impressive, raising issues that leave us questioning what it means to be a celebrity. Is the price of fame worth it? To lie and break the system just to be noticed? It's a powerhouse of emotions, and I must thank the cast and crew in SUPAS for giving their all in this show.