

The Wire

Razzle dazzle 'em

Seacoast Rep presents 'Chicago' in Portsmouth

The 1920s are notorious for the gangster crime, speakeasys and iconic fashion that took America by storm during prohibition. Add femme fatale characters and a storyline fit for vaudeville, and it's easy to get lost in the Broadway musical "Chicago." But a difficulty of producing the play is finding a way to illuminate its risqué content tastefully, without compromising its rawness and authenticity.

The Seacoast Repertory Theatre's production of "Chicago," which runs through Aug. 26 in Portsmouth, contains all the sass and sultriness the script requires, but also achieves a level of classiness that is appropriate for viewers of all ages.

"Chicago" is set in a world where lawlessness meets power and corruption in the criminal justice system. Most prominently, the play follows Roxie Hart, who kills a man named Fred Casely after having an affair with him. The murderess is subsequently sent to jail, where she and her under-appreciated husband Amos hire suave and slimy lawyer Billy Flynn to prove—or invent—her innocence. In prison, Roxie encounters Velma Kelly, a personal idol of hers and a vaudeville celebrity accused of murdering her own sister and husband.

Despite its relatively small space, the Rep's production of the Broadway classic is big and bold. The set includes ladders, a speakeasy-style piano and, of course, the infamous light-up "Chicago" sign that has become a recognizable symbol of the musical. The Rep's rendition even includes a fire-eating performance during the circus-like "Razzle Dazzle" number.

Emphasized by a live band that booms with brassy and jazzy riffs, the stage is transformed into the city of Chicago, and the actors into corrupt criminals clinging to cell blocks and made-up alibis. The live music seems appropriate to the period and adds an element of excitement and anticipation to the production. The six-piece band incorporates swing and jazz instruments, including a trumpet, trombone, and snare drum.

The play is driven by Roxie, played by Jessi Trauth, whose neurotic demeanor keeps audience members enthralled as she tumbles about the stage, battling inner conflicts and tussling with other characters while pleading her innocence and dreaming up a career in vaudeville. A quirky, distraught portrayal by Trauth adds a layer of instability to the already over-anxious and naïve character, and the audience is able to watch Roxie grow from a coy, child-like criminal into a provocative temptress, swollen with desperation for fame and fortune. Trauth's talents as an actress and dancer captivate the audience during such numbers as "We Both Reached for the Gun" and "Roxie," but her counterparts often outshine her vocally.

Among those counterparts is the vicarious Velma, played by Christine Dulong. Her belting vocals on songs like "All That Jazz" stand out and accentuate her character's sour disposition after Roxie begins to gain more publicity than her. Dulong's portrayal of Velma is vibrant and strong, but at times inconsistent, as she struggles at times to maintain the abrasive, fists-up attitude her character calls for.

Together, though, Trauth and Dulong create a pair of entertaining characters who elegantly lead the audience through the tumultuous twists of the plotline.

Other notable performances include Ashley Kelley's portrayal of Matron "Mama" Morton, whose ear-catching vocals demand the audience's attention. Michael Karraker offers a sleek performance as the luxurious Billy Flynn, and Jamie Bradley heart-wrenchingly and humorously portrays the undermined Amos.

The production features many group numbers that electrify the stage and entice audience members. With a cast of 15, choral numbers like "Cell Block Tango" are strong and thick with sound, and the choreography fills the entire stage. Frequently using popular '20s dances like the Charleston, director and choreographer Brian Swasey's efforts to stay true to the play's era is apparent and appreciated.

The cast members mesh together well and send the play to a powerful conclusion, where Roxie and Velma—once enemies—find themselves to be more alike than they thought. With a sparkling set and glitzy fringe costumes, the Rep brings audience members along on a tastefully entertaining, razzle-dazzling trip back into the 1920s.