

Review: Chicago

By Sara Lamerton

Chicago, Theatre Royal Plymouth

Almost 100 years since the real-life story that inspired the original play, and half a century since the first Broadway show Razzle Dazzled audiences, Chicago's rebellious rascallions high kick and shimmy their way onto Plymouth's centre stage for a week of raucously scintillating fun.

Chicago is a big hitter. As Broadway's second longest running show, its reputation precedes it, and for good reason. Although the days of gangsters and dolls, speakeasies and mob bosses are long gone, it regularly rebirths an extraordinary slither of 20th Century history which many of us would love to visit, if only for the night.

Centring around Roxie Hart (Billie Hardy, understudy for Faye Brookes), a fame obsessed murderess, hungry for the limelight yet desperate to avoid the noose, who's always seeking more: a better life, more attention, more fame, another man. And Velma Kelly (Djalenga Scott), a washed-up vaudeville star craving to reignite a failed career after murdering her husband. We follow the pair as they compete for court dates and attention under the fickle, easily distracted public eye.

Chicago's unrepenting criminal duo are certainly the standout performances of the show. Reprehensible, but incredibly likeable, Chicago's stars superbly highlight how scandal hungry this parallel universe was. Roxie, swept along for the ride, milks the situation for all its worth. Torn between men that don't want her, or want her too much, she manipulates, deceives and downright lies her way to freedom; only to find she's washed up and dismissed once her 15 minutes of notoriety have waned.

The talented cast includes some well-known faces: Lee Mead as Billy Flynn, the unscrupulous, money grabbing, corrupt lawyer who'll get anyone off; Sinitta Malone as Mama Morton, and Jamie Baughan as Roxie's downtrodden, long suffering, terrible in bed husband, Amos Hart.

With nowhere to hide, the simplicity of Chicago's set puts performers centre stage. No surprises, Bob Fosse's exceptional choreography doesn't disappoint. Precisely timed, finely tuned, slick and captivating, the performers, accompanied by their washboard abs, bulging muscles, svelte limbs and gleaming teeth, light up the stage.

What's more, it's wonderful to see the band smack bang at the centre of it all and utilised throughout the show. They're clearly highly valued, intrinsic to the production, and add a layer which wouldn't be possible without them so visible.

Even if, like myself, you've never seen any other production of Chicago, you'll be able to sing along, tap your toes, and jiggle those jazz-hands to the classics All That Jazz and Razzle Dazzle. However, the highlight for me was We Both Reached For The Gun. With a perfect puppet-like Roxie controlled by Flynn in front of the press, the number pinpoints the sheer absurdity, the circus, and facade of criminal trials in showbiz which rings true to this day.

There's even a 'happy ever after'. Although, true justice would have the narcissistic queens get the punishment they deserve, instead we happily see them avoid a life in the slammer, or the end of the hangman's noose, to forge an unlikely, symbiotic alliance as they desperately clammer to keep their names in lights.

Captivating from start to finish, Chicago, on until Saturday 18th June, is a must see for musical theatre lovers.