

# Sound 'n' Stage: Players pulls off remarkable 'Chicago'

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The musical "Chicago" first appeared on Broadway in June 1975 and ran for about two years but was not a big success, one critic calling it "cynical and subversive." It's likely that its criminal-as-celebrity theme did not go over that well.

Yet over time, the number of notorious, high profile legal cases helped the show become more palatable. Since it was revived on Broadway in 1996, it has become one of the stage's most successful and long-running musicals.

Now running at Peninsula Players, "Chicago" follows two murderesses, Roxie and Velma, who did away with their unfaithful lovers. It's set in Chicago during the 1920s and depicts its jazz-laden, morally bankrupt decadence.

Its two imprisoned heroines hope to manipulate the press and courts so they will be seen as heroes rather than villains and become exonerated. They also believe that because they are such great dancers and singers, nobody would want to keep them behind bars.

The show's style of dancing and theatrics are classic Bob Fosse, who choreographed the original show and co-wrote the book. He was a showman but wanted to create theater that has a message. Here, he and his collaborators put together entertainment that has nonstop, show-stopping production numbers while telling its message through a clever array of gags and theatrical devices. It's a one-of-a-kind show that never fails to entertain.

One actor humorously reminds us that the musical is wonderful and well-acted by saying, "Watch me ... what I'm about to do is going to be terrific and you are going to love every second of it." Truer words were never spoken.

The show's success hinges on the talents of its leads. Respectively, Roxie and Velma are played by Jennifer Knox and Ericka Mac, who are Players newcomers. I say without hesitation that both are absolutely phenomenal.

Knox has remarkable charm and presence. When she first started to sing, she reminded me of Bernadette Peters. Knox's acting also suggests Marilyn Monroe's coy mannerisms. She is wonderful and a joy to watch.

Erica Mac also delivers a knockout performance as Velma. Like Knox, she holds your attention and commands the stage. Some of her dance moves and acrobatics are absolutely amazing.

Sean Fortunato plays Billy Flynn, a money-hungry, press-manipulating lawyer. He allegedly is trying to help Velma and Roxy but is only interested in himself and the money he gets from clients. Fortunato's sense of comic timing is great and his singing is superb. He even does a little juggling.

Paul Slade Smith has a nice turn playing Roxy's beleaguered husband, Amos. Smith really makes you feel sorry for the guy when he sings "Cellophane Man."

The show's supporting ensemble is huge. Under Greg Vinkler's direction, their collective sense of ensemble is exceptional. They clearly love the show and give it their all. Music director Margaret James somehow made her small band sound bigger than they are.

I have seen many of the Players musicals over recent years. All have been wonderful, but I have to say that the Players have outdone themselves. Their version of "Chicago" is fun, joyous, full of life and an unforgettable experience. This is musical theater at its very best.

"Chicago" runs through Aug. 12 at Peninsula Players Theatre, 4351 Peninsula Players Road, west of Wisconsin 42, Fish Creek. Curtain times are at 8 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays and 7:30 p.m. Sundays, except for a 4 p.m. matinee Aug. 12. Individual ticket prices are \$36 to \$42; group rates and season tickets are available. The show has mature themes and may not be suitable for young children or more sensitive viewers. For tickets or more information, call (920) 868-3287 or visit [www.peninsulaplayers.com](http://www.peninsulaplayers.com).

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