

# Cynical 'Chicago' is my kind of town

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When "Chicago" premiered on Broadway in 1975, Richard Nixon had recently made his humiliating exit from Washington.

During the 1996 revival, Bill Clinton was turning the White House into a hot-pillow motel.

A fresh national tour began Tuesday night in Charlotte, exactly one week after the last sleazy exchanges of the nastiest political season in recent memory.

Whatever the bizarre link between "Chicago" and politics may be, the musical's sardonic outlook always seems to be timely. The new touring version, which is shiny and hard as a diamond, seems even colder and less sentimental than the New York productions I've seen.

Maybe the bleak world view of composer John Kander and lyricist Fred Ebb (who wrote the book with original director Bob Fosse) applies even more to the 21st century, where we seek tawdrier titillation in the media to avoid the harsh realities of life. The show seems more than ever about us, the gullible and easily diverted public, than the connivers who are misleading us rubes.

If you, too, have long been familiar with the show, what will surprise you about the Charlotte run is the importance of the ensemble. Glittering stars Chita Rivera, Gwen Verdon and Jerry Orbach dominated the '70s production. But strong as the leads are in this show, it's the crackling precision of the chorus that immediately shifts you to the edge of the seat. Fosse's hip-thrusting, pelvic-locking, derby-snapping choreography, now in its third generation, comes at us with the fast, clean sweep of a slicing razor.

That praise also applies to the crisp, robust, 13-piece orchestra, mounted on a stage platform like a band in a 1920s speakeasy. (And how satisfying it is to hear a stage orchestra with no synthesizer in it!) The musicians cluster around a set of steps that lead down and out of sight, possibly to a smoky basement where all illicit desires will be fulfilled.

From out of that darkness come Velma Kelly (throaty Terra MacLeod), the veteran murderess expecting to claim the attention of the Windy City with her upcoming trial; Roxie Hart (pert Bianca Marroquín), the newcomer who steals the attention of the press; Mama Morton (growly Roz Ryan), the warden who manages publicity campaigns for inmates; and Billy Flynn (genial Tom Wopat), the attorney who can't be a shyster because there's nothing shy about him. Oops – I almost forgot Amos, Roxie's forgettable

husband (played by Ben Elledge, who's worth remembering for his one big number, "Mr. Cellophane").

Old elements of the show still look fresh. Rock Hill native William Ivey Long got one of his 11 Tony nominations for the sexy costumes, and they always knock the eyes out. John Lee Beatty's simple set, surrounded at the proscenium by a frame – justice is all a frame-up, right? – still raises a smile.

The tour needs tweaking in small ways. That fine orchestra occasionally covers the singers; the women cut through it, but Wopat's agreeable baritone can get lost. The interaction between the stars and the conductor onstage seems a bit hokey, like something added to bring extra smiles to the provinces. (On the other hand, Ryan's confident ogling of the audience in "When You're Good to Mama" seems right.)

Overall, though, the show seems tuned up and ready to charge around America for many a year. Both sides of the political divide may have voted with fresh hope in this month's election, but the nation's deep-rooted vein of cynicism should survive for decades to come.