

Chicago: A Dazzling Film with a Killer Story

Chicago, a dazzling play full of murdering girls, contriving lawyers and a city that is always up for a little bloody entertainment. The 2002 film version of *Chicago*, directed by Rob Marshall and based on the 1926 play written by Maurine Dallas Watkins, is two hours full of a twisting murder story intermixed with catchy songs, witty humor and spectacular dance numbers. The story begins with a sensual dance number performed by Velma Kelly (Catherine Zeta-Jones) at a Chicago theater. In the audience is Roxie Hart (Renee Zellweger), a young married woman who fantasizes about having the stage all to herself one day. She falls in with a man who says he has connections at a popular theater, but in reality he is only interested in Roxie for her body. After uncovering his deception she blows him away with her husband's gun in a fit of rage. Roxie ends up in jail where she learns she will face the death sentence if she can't convince the court of her innocence. To this end she gets in touch with Billy Flynn (Richard Gere) a wealthy lawyer who knows how to manipulate the press and people's perceptions in order to get his clients out of the big house without a rope around their necks. The rest of the movie focuses on Roxie's sudden stardom within the public eye as the cutest killer in Chicago (Marshall, *Chicago*). Roxie becomes addicted to the spotlight and even turns down Velma Kelly (who is also in prison for murder), when she offers her a theater partnership when they get out. The film ends with Roxie's trial verdict coming up as

innocent. As soon as the hammer falls the press storms on to a new murder case that just happened the day of the trial. Roxie is not relieved, but devastated by her loss of stardom. However, she and Velma come together to form their own act. A pair of killer women who all of Chicago comes out to see in the end (Marshall, *Chicago*).

The movie has a wonderfully entertaining atmosphere. The real life plot of the movie continuously marches on, but it is intertwined with musical numbers that are only visible to certain members of the film and sometimes only visible to the audience. The musical numbers reflect what is happening within the reality of the play and often give us insight into the psyche of the different characters.

One of the song performances that stand out most is “We Both Reached for the Gun.” This number occurs during a press interview with Roxie. Billy Flynn stands at her side and has coached her in what to say to the press and manipulates the situation and what is said within the interview. By the end the press has taken away only what Billy wanted them to and he has set in motion an idea that will help to ensure Roxie’s release. During the musical number corresponding to the press conference Flynn sits on a stage with Roxie sitting on his lap wearing make up that makes her look like a ventriloquist’s dummy. The members of the press are seated behind them and are wearing similar make up. In this montage of marionettes, Flynn is shown as the puppet master, controlling everything that is said and heard by Roxie and the press. The juxtaposition of the reality of the press conference with the puppeteering musical performance makes for a very unique and memorable scene.

Another scene that contains a very interesting comparison between reality and song is “A Tap Dance.” During this scene Roxie is on trial and the prosecution has brought up unexpected incriminating evidence against Roxie. Here Billy Flynn comes into his own as he intelligently, intricately, and furiously defends Roxie in the courtroom while performing a flamingly fast tap dance in the musical portion. The speed and passion of Flynn’s arguments are matched perfectly by his flying feet. The whole scene is infused with a speed that makes you feel as if Flynn will burst from the situation in glorious triumph or run himself into the ground in a flaming fury. The scene is nothing if not electric to watch.

The plot of *Chicago* takes many unexpected twists and turns, but is always understandable and keeps the audience on the edge of their seats up until its dazzling conclusion. There are many different characters within the film, but they do not overcrowd the story. The director is able to explore the different positions and mindsets of the characters without taking away from the central plot. A good example of this would be Amos Hart’s (John C. Rielly) role in the movie. Amos is a somewhat simple minded, devoted husband who is crushed to learn that his wife cheated on him, but does all he can to keep her from the death penalty. Amos is portrayed as being painfully dull and this leads to him being constantly ignored by most of the other members of the film. Amos is a fading ember, constantly outshined by the overpowering star-like personalities of Billy, Velma and Roxie. This feeling of being invisible is given voice in the song, “Mister Cellophane.” Thus, the director is able to juggle the smaller lives and stories of other characters while still keeping Roxie’s story at the center.

The movie has a comedic feel to it at times, but the director is able to remind the audience of the seriousness of the situation when the time calls for it. One of these times is after Roxie has fired Billy as her lawyer because she believes that she has no need of him anymore. However, she is scared straight, along with the audience, upon seeing a fellow inmate hung. This specific character always stated that she was innocent; in stark contrast to many of the inmates accused of murder that say their victim “had it comin’” (Marshall, *Chicago*). After the woman’s hanging Roxie and the audience are left to wonder if the inmate’s punishment was deserved or whether she was executed for a crime she didn’t commit. This brings an edge of seriousness back into the movie just when the director needed it for the next scene of the story: Roxie’s Trial.

The costumes for the actors were spot on in this film. The film is set in the early 1920’s and the clothing, make up and hair choices for the actors reflect that. The costumes don’t only create a stronger sense of realism however, they elevate the actor’s performances and the scenes that they are in. A great example of this is during Roxie’s musical number “Funny Honey.” During this scene Mr. Hart is explaining to the police what happened that night when Roxie murdered a man. During this scene Roxie fantasizes about the situation and sees herself performing a song and dance dedicated to her husband. Roxie is wearing typical 1920’s housewife garb in the reality of the film while in her musical fantasy she is wearing a dazzling and revealing show dress. The choice of clothing here elevates the scene immensely. Roxie’s drab housewife attire reflects her feelings toward her current life: bland, ordinary and excruciatingly dull. However, her show dress flowing

voluptuously and sending sparkles of light all about the stage provides a direct and striking contrast to her real clothes. In her fantasy Roxie's life is sensual, exciting and full of possibilities. The choice of clothing here elevates the scene by providing the audience with a visual representation of how Roxie sees her life verses her dreams. We also get an early peek into how much Roxie craves the spotlight.

One of the best uses of set design and special effects comes at the very end. Roxie and Velma are performing the final part of their killer final number, "Nowadays / Hot Honey Rag," and they both come onstage with silver tommy guns. They turn away from the audience toward a wall full of lit light bulbs and seem to let loose a barrage of bullets. After the effect is through the only lights left spell their names on the wall and the audience roars their praise of the show. This scene provides a dazzling ending to a highly charged movie and the set and special effects of this scene are to thank for the big bang of the final scene.

Chicago is a definite thumbs up. The plot was intricately woven together, the song and dance numbers were spectacular and the acting was superb. The interesting mix of reality and dance/song fantasy of the movie added an element that one does not find in most films. This element elevated *Chicago* and made it that much more fun to watch. In the end, all that I have left to say is this: Go see *Chicago*, I promise you it's a killer.

Works Cited

Chicago. Dir. Rob. Marshall. Perf. Renee Zellweger, Catherine Zeta-Jones and Richard

Gere. Miramax Films, 2002. DVD.