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Me and My Baby: Directing & Designing "Chicago" at the High School Level

Leo Arteche Arencibia
University of Central Florida

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ME AND MY BABY: 
DIRECTING & DESIGNING “CHICAGO” AT THE HIGH SCHOOL LEVEL

by

LEO ARTECHE ARENCBIA
B.A. New York University, 2011

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts with a concentration in Musical Theatre
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ABSTRACT

Directing a musical production in a high school setting under normal circumstances is a challenging undertaking – doing so in the throes and aftermath of a global pandemic, with its school closures, quarantines and general chaos, was an exercise in patience and creativity. For my Master’s Thesis, I directed and designed a production of Chicago at Miami Arts Charter School, a performing arts high school in the Wynwood arts district, where I have taught for twelve years and served as the Theatre Director for the past eight years.

Chicago made perfect sense as the first “post-pandemic” production. First, it is one of Broadway’s most beloved and well-known shows, and one of a handful of musicals that’s a household name. Secondly, it is the kind of show that is versatile enough to be done in many types of performance spaces and budgets. Finally, it is an ensemble-heavy show, which meant that it is a great opportunity to train a large group of students.

Most of our audience’s familiarity with the piece is connected to either the 1996 Broadway revival or to the 2002 movie, both of which have very distinct visions and aesthetics. My challenge was in coming up with a coherent concept for the show that remained unique without feeling gimmicky; I also had to straddle the line between what the audience expects to see from a show like Chicago while giving them a fresh version of the source material. This thesis explores our production’s development process from material selection to closing night, and focuses on casting, musical direction, choreography and staging, and production design.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION OF PROGRAM & SHOW SELECTION

I have had the privilege of teaching at a visual and performing arts school in Miami since 2011. For my first few years, I taught in the English department while co-sponsoring the high school Thespian Honor Society. As the school and the theatre department grew, I was offered a full-time theatre position in 2015. When our program first opened, we were exclusively focused on acting training. Once I joined the department, I added a technical theatre strand to the program, to encourage students to develop their skills as designers. Finally, after much pleading with my school administration, we were able to add musical theatre to our curriculum.

The Musical Theatre program as its own strand opened in the 2019-2020 school year after several years of offering musical theatre to our students through Thespians after school. We had an inaugural class of eighteen students, most of whom had already been in the acting program and simply changed strands. We also accepted three brand new students into Musical Theatre who auditioned for the school specifically because of the new strand. In the first year, we really concentrated on the basics and foundations needed to build the program. Our primary focus was teaching music theory, musical theatre history, and giving our students a sense of who they were as performers and how to best showcase their talent.

And though we were on a fantastic trajectory, March of 2020 arrived, and all our progress came to a halt. Like most other teachers and students across America, we were sent home and transitioned to online learning, and all that that entailed. While we did our best to maintain the momentum from the school year, there was a marked difference between in-person learning and online learning. I did my best to inspire my students, but I also knew that I would need to give
them something to look forward to, and so we began planning our program’s inaugural musical, which at the time was supposed to be *Into the Woods*.

The following school year began with a series of false starts. During the summer, we believed we would be starting the school year in person. Then as the school year approached, it became clear we would remain online. The return date to campus, along with the details of what that may look like, changed on a weekly basis. And so we began the year online, ushering in our second class of musical theatre students – only this group of new students had never set foot in our classroom, so their first impression was of classes on Zoom and online projects.

Our dreams of doing a live, in-person musical were very quickly dashed by the realities of the pandemic, which meant that we had to completely alter our original plans. In May of 2021, we released *The Drowsy Chaperone* for a weekend of video on demand. It was not the live show we had promised our seniors, but it was more than I think any of us expected at the time, and it served as a soft launch of our program. I think partially because we were so starved for art back then, the audience response was beyond even what I expected. To this day, *The Drowsy Chaperone* remains one of my proudest achievements – but as satisfied as I genuinely was, I knew that there was a milestone we still had to cross.

By the musical theatre program’s third year, anticipation for a live musical was at a fever pitch, and the expectation of the students, parents, administration, and other members of the schools were equally high. It was an exciting feeling, but also a daunting one because we knew we only had one chance to make a first impression as to what our program would be like. I knew the selection of the show itself had to check off a lot of boxes—it had to be challenging enough where it felt appropriate for a performing arts school while still being reasonable to do for a group of students who had been learning online for a year and a half. It had to be exciting for the
students in the program. It also had to be exciting for the audience. Because we had lost a year’s worth of ticket sale revenue, this show needed to come as close to possible to breaking even to make sure that we didn’t jeopardize future seasons. But above all, the show had to reflect a sort of mission statement of what the Musical Theatre program would be.

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Unlike many other high school programs, we select and audition our season at least a year in advance. When selecting our season, one of the first things we consider is our senior class. I like to ask myself, “Is there a show I would not be able to do again for years after my seniors graduate?” Sometimes this is because a particular cohort has the right types that fit a certain production. Largely, however, it’s to make sure we are providing our seniors with a final opportunity to shine in their last high school mainstage in our program. With that said, we do not guarantee any of our students parts, and we do not take seniority into account in casting unless all other things are equal. However, we do make the effort to give them opportunities.

*After The Drowsy Chaperone*, we knew expectations were high for the follow-up production. We ultimately landed between* Chicago *and* Legally Blonde, two drastically different shows that nevertheless had some practical similarities. They both featured strong female leads, were well-known properties that would likely sell lots of tickets, and were difficult enough to challenge our students while still being attainable. Though both were ambitious choices, *Chicago* seemed slightly more doable at the time, given our financial and casting constraints. At the time, I remember thinking that if we were able to pull off *Chicago*, sell lots of tickets and attract students into the program, *Legally Blonde* could be a possible follow-up. (In the end, this theory proved correct, and it will be our spring musical in 2023.)
CHAPTER 2: A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHICAGO

Chicago has become one of Broadway’s most successful and profitable productions, but its path to success was anything but guaranteed. The musical first opened on Broadway in 1975 starring Gwen Verdon as Roxie Hart, Chita Rivera as Velma Kelly, and Jerry Orbach as Billy Flynn. The show was based on a 1926 play of the same name, which had also been adapted into a silent film and later a musical adaptation starring Ginger Rogers.

The development of the original production is filled with enough backstage intrigue and drama that it has been retold in numerous avenues including books and even a television miniseries. The abridged version of the story is that Gwen Verdon had been after the rights for the original play for years, but the playwright, Maureen Dallas Watkins, was against the play’s adaptation, feeling that the play’s legacy had glorified the murderers she wrote the play about. Once Watkins died, the estate sold the rights to Verdon and her husband Bob Fosse, who began adapting the play into a musical. John Kander and Fred Ebb were brought in to write the book, music and lyrics, and Fosse directed and choreographed the production. Fosse was notoriously difficult to work with, and though the production was meant to serve as a vehicle of sorts for Verdon, over the course of the show’s development, the role of Velma was expanded, especially once Chita Rivera was cast in the role. The show was a modest hit but was quickly eclipsed by A Chorus Line. Critics preferred the uplifting nature of the latter show and found Chicago to be too cynical to be fully enjoyable. Chicago lost every Tony it was nominated for (Mordden.)

After a brief run in London and Australia, Chicago faded into relative obscurity until the 1990s, when it was revived on Broadway in 1996. The revival’s success eclipsed that of the original production of the show. This time around, the production won several Tony awards,
including Best Revival, Best Leading Actor, Best Leading Actress, Best Direction, Best Choreography and Best Lighting Design. This production of the show was a runaway hit, and one that continues to run today. It is now the second-longest running show of all time.

The success of the revival led to a renewed interest in a movie adaptation of the show, which resulted in a 2002 Miramax film. The movie, starring Renée Zellweger, Catherine Zeta-Jones, and Richard Gere, was a tremendous success as well. It performed well in the box office and went on to earn many Academy Awards, including Best Picture.

Despite the show’s initial lukewarm reception, Chicago has now become a household title along the likes of Phantom of the Opera, Les Misérables and Wicked. Even for those who are not fans of musical theatre, Chicago is almost inescapable in popular culture. The music, the choreography and the costuming have become embedded in the image of American Musical Theatre, and it is no surprise that many high school and college programs have sought to put on their own productions of this iconic show.
CHAPTER 3: THEMES OF CHICAGO & ADAPTATION TO HIGH SCHOOL EDITION

The plot of Chicago follows Roxie Hart, a bored and unhappy housewife who dreams of stardom and notoriety. After shooting and killing her lover when he threatens to leave her, Roxie is arrested and sent to jail. Now concerned with her future, she manipulates her husband Amos into paying for the best defense attorney in Chicago, Billy Flynn. Standing in her way is former vaudeville star and fellow inmate Velma Kelly, who is Billy’s client. The two begin to vie for attention from Billy and the public and are trapped in a battle over who will come out on top. In the end, while they both end up getting their freedom, neither achieves the stardom that each wants on her own, forcing them to team up to finally achieve their goal.

The musical, which is satirical and darkly comic in nature, uses this plot and these characters to make a larger commentary about American society. Through its various numbers, the show explores themes such as the corrupting nature of fame, the idea of performance versus deceit, and even women’s changing role in society. The musical obliquely discusses America’s obsession with crime, infamy, and scandal. The show is bookended by this idea, and the plot of the musical is a discussion about these ideas.

Roxie and Velma both crave fame and will achieve it at all costs. Though Roxie doesn’t exactly start the show as a principled person, we see her become increasingly unscrupulous in that search for fame. Even Velma betrays her own sense of self-worth by latching herself to Roxie if it means that she will become famous again.

One of the most prevalent ideas throughout the show is the idea of performance, and it happens in two domains. There is the literal conceit of the songs as vaudeville numbers that is a framing device in the production. At the same time, several the characters perform for one
another offstage as well. Roxie lies through the great majority of the show to get what she wants. Billy is dishonest through most of the production, and is only honest in the end when he says he was only in it for the money. Because these characters are performers (Roxie and Velma in vaudeville, Billy in the courtroom,) they are often unable or unwilling to turn off the “performer” part of their personality. Most of the songs are a take on this theme, although “Razzle Dazzle” spells it out most explicitly.

Though the musical seems to celebrate its characters, when Maurine Watkins wrote the original play, it was as a scathing indictment of the changing mores of the 1920s. Watkins was a working woman, but she was also highly religious, and she was disgusted with Roxie and Velma’s real-life counterparts (Mordden.) That she chose to write about two women criminals instead of the number of male criminals in Chicago may offer some insight into Watkins’ views about women’s changing role in society. The show takes place during a time when women were gaining more freedoms (the right to vote, for one,) and society was changing as a result. While it’s easy to look back on the 1920s and the changing roles for women as having been universally celebrated, there was obviously tremendous backlash. That discomfort can be reflected in the depictions of the female characters in the show. Most of them are immoral (or amoral, in the case of Roxie,) and subvert the expectation of women’s traditional roles in society.

While on surface the show seems to celebrate these characters and values, it is in fact shining a mirror directly into the audience’s own obsession with the very things the show is lampooning. Are we meant to root for these characters, or should we view them more critically and question why we may be inclined to root for such morally bankrupt people? Though the focus on the antihero is hardly a new one, and certainly one that is far more present in today’s
media that we consume, a musical production about a group of antiheroes was not common at
the time of the show’s original production.

* * *

Concord Theatrical, the company that owns the rights and licensing to Chicago, does not
allow high schools or other youth groups to perform Chicago as originally staged. Instead, it
offers a High School edition, with some small, but nevertheless significant changes that I assume
are meant to make the show more palatable to a wider audience. Some of the changes include the
elimination of some of the show’s most overtly sexual references, certain edits in the dialogue
and lyrics so the show is closer to PG-13 than to an R rating, as well as the elimination of the
song “Class.” The show also drops the drag element from Mary Sunshine’s character, instead
making the character a female role, and in doing so eliminates “A Little Bit of Good.” Finally,
some of the songs are transposed to better fit younger voices.

While the spirit of the original production remains largely the same, it is slightly sanitized
to make it appropriate for younger audiences. The edits eliminate some of the grit that was
present in the original production, leaving it at the director’s discretion how much of that element
they bring back in through directing choices.
CHAPTER 4: EXPLANATION OF VISION

In doing my research for the production, I initially struggled with developing a visual vocabulary for the production that I could use with my cast and crew. I was adamant that I wanted to come up with a unique take on the show, but I also wanted to have a reason behind it. I didn’t want to reinvent the show as much as I wanted to find an entry point into the production that would help guide the aesthetic choices as much as the staging.

While I was looking at inspiration images for the show, I kept stumbling across set designs for Cabaret (Pinterest’s algorithm didn’t seem interested in distinguishing between different Kander and Ebb shows.) And the more I saw pictures of the set for Cabaret, the more intrigued I became with the idea of a show within a show and a stage on a stage. Because our theatre space is a proscenium theatre, with a very small apron, I have almost always defaulted to traditional sets to best fit the space. I started envisioning what it might look like if I built a false proscenium arch on the stage, and put a stage on the actual stage, and played with the idea of a thrust stage built on our actual stage. The actual audience would still be watching the show from the front, but I started imagining ensemble members watching some of the performances, as if the characters in the show were putting on a show within a show.

These disconnected ideas soon gave way to a more coherent and cohesive idea. Structurally, Chicago is a traditional book musical, only the musical numbers often don’t push the narrative forward in the traditional sense as much as they provide social commentary to what is happening in the plot, or act as ironic or satirical counterpoints to what the characters are nominally saying. To use just one example, “All I Care About Is Love” in no way advances the plot. Instead, its comedy is derived from the juxtaposition of the book’s scene – in which Billy is
shown to be entirely driven by greed and a hunger for money – and the song’s lyrics, in which Billy and the chorines sing about how unconcerned he is with money and material goods, because “all he cares about is love.”

As I continued going through the show, I noticed this was a common thread throughout the show. Almost all songs (although not all) have the characters singing something in direct opposition to what they mean. This in turn led me into thinking about the characters’ performative selves versus their true selves, and I asked myself, “What if the characters sing on the stage during the more performative numbers, and only when they are truly being honest are they out in the floor space?”

It took a while before ideas started to coalesce and solidify into an actual coherent thought, but I had flashes of images, and I quickly threw together a very rough sketch on Photoshop of what this might look like.

![Figure 1: Chicago Elevation Sketch (Leo Arteche)](image)

*The very first draft of the set helped me visualize and explain more coherently to my team what the vision of the show was and how we could potentially execute it.*
Though the final set design was obviously far more elaborate and thought out, the general idea stayed consistent from the moment this visual came to mind. And from here I imagined that when the characters sang songs where they were clearly lying – “Funny Honey,” “All I Care About is Love,” “Me and My Baby” are just three to name a few – they would perform it on the platform stage. And when they were singing in moments where they were being truthful – “I Am My Own Best Friend” and “When You’re Good to Mama” – they would be on the regular floor space.

The eventual set design saw the platform pushed much further upstage to allow for more floor space for the ensemble to perform in. I also added a bar and a piano to the design, both of which were helpful in establishing the nightclub setting at the beginning of the show. And though I originally planned to strike both set pieces after the first number, I realized the show within a show concept worked better with the bar/cabaret space onstage the entire time.

This concept also helped explain why the characters stopped mid-scene in a jail and suddenly started flashy production numbers. By creating this idea that the songs are cabaret style numbers in a show within a show, it allowed us to suspend disbelief long enough where we could stop the action of the scene, break out into song with dazzling visuals, and then come right back to the jail scene as if nothing had happened. The movie obviously did this through editing, but being a stage show, I had no such luxury. I instead needed to rely on old school stage tricks to make this work.

As someone whose inspiration is almost always visual, it tracks that the vision of the production came from an image that popped into my head. And yet over the course of the production process – from casting, to staging, to design – this vision was not only instructive, but
an exciting way to make sure that I stuck to the original plan and that every element of the production served the themes of the show as a whole.
CHAPTER 5: AUDITIONS & CASTING PROCESS

Auditions for mainstage productions in my theatre department are held in May for the following year’s season. This allows us to do two things – for our actors in our fall plays, it gives them time during the summer to get off-book so they can begin the rehearsal process immediately, since our first play is usually early in the school year. It also allows us to schedule all the students who are cast in the mainstage productions into the Theatre 1-4 Honors class, where they rehearse for the productions. The straight plays are fully cast in May. For the musical productions, we select the company that will appear in the show in May but hold the actual auditions at the beginning of the new school year. This allows us to accommodate for students whose voices may change during the summer, or who may receive additional training that may give them an advantage the following year.

The first auditions for Chicago were held in May of 2021, as we were wrapping up our last year of online/hybrid school. Most of the musical theatre students were in-person students, as they had participated in our filmed production of The Drowsy Chaperone. A small handful of our musical theatre students who had remained home (two or three students) came to campus for auditions. Finally, seven or eight newly accepted students into the Musical Theatre program also came to audition for the production.

From the first auditions, several things were clear. We knew the show had massive potential based on the caliber of auditions. It was also clear that though no parts would be pre-cast, several students would be walking into the new school year at an advantage. Our eventual Roxie had the top audition of the production, and given that she was a freshman at the time of auditions, was a left-field surprise. Based on the dance call, we could tell that though the students
would need to work to refine their skills, most of them were able to move well and follow choreography successfully. As a result, we knew, and we let the students know, that the final decisions would likely come down to who could act the parts best, who had the best chemistry with each other, and who was the most consistent in the audition process. In the end, we selected twenty-one students to join the cast of the production.

When we returned for the new school year, auditions were held during the second week of school. By this time, we had one new student who joined the cast. We also made the decision to include two of our boys from the straight acting play who were not in musical theatre because we needed more male ensemble members in the company and knew they could perform well in some of the non-singing roles in *Chicago* (there are several non-singing roles for men.)

For the most part, auditions went as initially expected. The students we originally assumed would be cast as Roxie, Velma, Amos, and Mary Sunshine were cast in those roles. Our Mama Morton, whom we had originally envisioned as Roxie, gave not only a solid vocal performance, but had the most interesting version of the character in the acting scenes. The major surprise was Billy Flynn, who was a student who was new to the program.

With the production cast, we got to work on both *Clue* and *Chicago* simultaneously. Since some students who were in *Chicago* were also cast in *Clue*, I decided to begin the process focusing on music direction. I would teach everyone not in *Clue* the music for the show, so when we began rehearsals for the production in February of 2022, most of the cast was already off-book on the music, and the new cast members could lean on the others to learn the music as we rehearsed. This is not a typical or even ideal situation, but it was our way of making this bizarre production schedule work.
CHAPTER 6: MUSICAL DIRECTION

Music rehearsals began in September of 2021. Because of the composition of the cast, I wound up in the unusual situation where almost all my first sopranos, tenors and basses were in Clue. Nevertheless, I worked with who I had, and did my best to hear a vocal balance where there was none. Typically, I like to teach each vocal part and then have the students work with a section leader until they memorize the part, and we can put the music together. This proved more difficult, however, because my experienced students with lower voices were in Clue.

The music for Chicago is not particularly challenging at face value, especially after directing The Drowsy Chaperone, which had much more complex harmonies. I assumed that teaching the music for the show would be fairly straightforward. However, there were several challenges that arose that forced me to reconsider this assumption.

First and foremost, I had graduated all my leads and section leaders the previous year, so, in many ways, though this was a much simpler show, I was starting from scratch. Because of a unique set of circumstances having to do with Covid and transfer students, my senior class had the same amount of experience onstage as my freshman class, so I could not rely on my older students to lead the way, as I was accustomed to in the past.

The second challenge appeared in the way of rehearsal etiquette. In the previous school year, my musical theatre students were some of the few students on campus. Because it was the first year back from full lockdown, but we were still in the hybrid model, those students who had been on campus were thrilled to get to perform again. That, coupled with the fact that most of their social interactions were limited to the cast of The Drowsy Chaperone, meant their focus was intense. We knew that putting on a filmed production was going to be an incredibly difficult
task, and the students knew I was working overtime (literally,) to make that production happen. That, coupled with the tremendous example set by my senior class, meant that music rehearsals for *The Drowsy Chaperone* were a breeze. Again, the music itself was far more complex, but because the students basically had one singular thing to work on and concentrate on for the school year, they were hyper-focused during rehearsals.

The same could not be said for this group. I don’t entirely blame them, especially since this seemed to be a universal reality for arts teachers in my school, and for theatre teachers across the country. Now that the entire student body was back in person, the energy in the school had changed. Whereas last year the empty hallways cast a depressing pall that made Musical Theatre class the single ray of light in the students’ day, this year the students were back with all their friends, and since they had lost on a year and a half of socializing, they were making up for lost time. The lack of stimulation the students had over the course of their time online resulted in a difficulty adjusting to the massive amounts of stimuli the students were receiving now that they were all back on campus.

This meant I had to spend a lot of time in rehearsal redirecting the students and reminding them of basic courtesies that they needed to follow. I had to frequently stop vocal warm-ups because the students would become distracted and begin having conversations instead of warming up their voices. The rehearsal etiquette I had long taken for granted was yet another casualty of the pandemic, and reteaching appropriate rehearsal behavior became as much a part of my job as teaching harmonies.

Perhaps part of the reason I was encountering this challenge was because of how simple the music for *Chicago* was. For the students who picked up music quickly, within fifteen minutes of class, they had the material down. This led to boredom. For the students who struggled with
music because they were new to musical theatre or singing altogether, their slowness to learn the music, or more frequently, their inconsistency in singing the correct pitches, their frustration led to them becoming disengaged. It was a difficult balancing act, especially because I couldn’t rely on other students for help. For example, I only had one baritone and one bass, because everyone else was in *Clue*. Neither of the students had been in a show with me the previous year, so I had to spend a lot more time working with them than I did with some of my other students. It was in situations like these where distractions would inevitably arise and where my own frustration at the situation would grow.

One approach I tried to help keep the students engaged was by slightly altering the arrangements of certain songs. Initially it was simply an in-classroom exercise that was meant to sharpen the students’ ear for harmonies, challenge the more advanced students with more complex harmonic structures than what was on the page, and honestly, keep things fresh in the rehearsal process. For example, the Act One finale is a brief reprise of “All That Jazz.” The sheet music calls for unison, but I decided to create three-part harmony. The students who struggled remained on melody, while my more advanced students filled in the new harmonies. We realized after doing it several times that the new harmonies sounded richer and more interesting than the basic unison line that was originally written into the score. We decided to keep it, and added a small handful of harmonies throughout the score to add richness that was lacking in this particular arrangement of the music.

In October, a casting shake-up jolted the students’ attention back to the show. I replaced Velma with her understudy, something that was unprecedented in our program’s history. The students were suddenly very aware that they could not take their being in the show for granted,
and I noticed an almost immediate shift in their focus (that was not the reason behind the casting change, but simply a byproduct of it.)

By the end of December, the students had learned every song, lyric, and harmony in the show except for “Cell Block Tango” (half of my Cell Block girls were in Clue, so it seemed counterintuitive to run the number until we were all together again.)

After winter break, the entire company of the show took a break from Chicago rehearsals to concentrate on Clue. Because of Clue’s high technical demands, we needed a crew that was larger than the actual cast. At the time, I was very concerned because I was worried that an entire month off from music rehearsals would lead to the students forgetting all their music.

I was very pleased that post-Clue, our first vocal rehearsals together were far more successful than I expected. For one thing, my students joining the rehearsal process generally had more musical experience, which meant they picked up on what they missed much faster than anticipated. But more importantly, the original cohort had not lost what they had learned in the fall semester. And although at the time that it was happening I didn’t know it, this signaled a turning point for my students. After a difficult first semester of readjusting my students to being back on campus, and of setting expectations of appropriate classroom behavior and rehearsal etiquette, my students had finally adjusted to my expectations.
CHAPTER 7: CHOREOGRAPHY & BLOCKING

Having spent the first semester teaching music and waiting for Clue to be over to begin the actual rehearsal process, we knew we were going to have to work overtime to get the show blocked and properly rehearsed before opening night. Consequently, we didn’t start blocking Chicago until the first weeks of February. A ten-week rehearsal run is not outside of the realm of what is typically possible, but we lost a week to Thespian State competition, another week to Spring Break, and quite a few potential rehearsals for our Thespian Showcase and our Middle School production. This resulted in an outcome where we had literal hours to block single numbers. In a normal show that may be easier to do, but in a show like Chicago, where the ensemble is onstage for a huge portion of the show, it made the blocking and choreography even more daunting.

A second casting change threw another wrench in the process. At the beginning of the choreography and blocking process, I replaced my Billy Flynn with his understudy. This would ultimately prove to be the correct decision, but it meant that my new Billy Flynn was not off-book on his music or his lines and was playing catch-up while we were also blocking the show.

Before we began the rehearsal process, I had divided the scenes and songs between my co-director, my choreographer, and myself. I would take Roxie’s storyline, Michele would take Velma’s, we would split Billy’s scenes and the choreographer would handle two ensemble numbers (“We Both Reached for the Gun,” and “All I Care About is Love,”) and choreograph and clean transitions in the other numbers. Making the rehearsal calendar is always challenging, but it became daunting when we realized we were incredibly limited on time. February and March were a sprint, and we told the students that after the State Thespian Festival, they should
basically expect to be in rehearsal every day after school regardless of which character they were playing.

Four of the numbers I choreographed focused on Roxie’s journey. The only number that Roxie was focal in that I didn’t personally choreograph was “We Both Reached for the Gun,” which is almost appropriate since she’s being controlled by Billy and therefore not herself.

“Funny Honey”

“Funny Honey” was one of the first numbers I choreographed in the show, and since we were working on multiple numbers at a time, I had to start the number in a secondary classroom space that was much smaller. The result of this was that from the initial staging, the blocking was rather tight and confined to a small space. While it was at first simply a product of the space that we were utilizing, its effect was in showing Roxie’s growing sense of confinement in her own marriage.

This number had the important task of establishing the concept of the show within a show. While “Cell Block Tango” takes place entirely in the nightclub setting, “Funny Honey” takes place in Roxie’s apartment. But musically, it’s a torch number that is very clearly sung directly to the audience. I decided to balance this by placing Roxie upstage on the false proscenium platform and having her perform the number out to the audience, taking occasional glances at Amos. Amos and Fogarty were placed downstage left of Roxie. A bed with the corpse of Fred Casely was placed on stage right, framing the scene as well.

Through the use of lighting, which was pink, warm, and wholly unnatural for an apartment space, as well as a soft fog cue before the number to haze the stage, there was a dreamlike quality to the scene that gave the illusion that the scene was not fully grounded in
reality. Roxie’s costuming, which was an over-the-top luxurious pink chiffon robe that Roxie’s character would never be able to afford, also helped establish the idea that this number was not entirely grounded in reality. Roxie remains on the false proscenium stage through the first half of the number, and begins to “break” as Amos’s dialogue with Detective Fogarty begins to suggest that his story is a lie.

As Roxie realizes that Amos is selling her out, she rips off the robe and comes off of the platform, beginning to interact with Amos more directly. Though he does not respond to her, she points to Amos as she sings out to the audience lyrics such as “Look at him go ratting on me, with just one more brain what a half-wit he’d be.” The number concludes with Roxie lunging towards Amos as an immediate lighting change takes place – the lighting shifts to a stark white, almost institutional light. This helps to immediately break us from Roxie’s performance and take us into the scene. While the lighting and costume help to enhance this idea, the staging was, by design, meant to show that we would be living in two different worlds over the course of the show – the internal world of the characters as they saw themselves onstage, and the literal world that the characters were inhabiting in their lives. As the show went on, the lines would sometimes blur, so having a clearly defined break early in the show was our way to help drive that thematic decision through.

“Roxie”

Surprisingly, choreographing “Roxie” was the hardest of the four songs I choreographed. The expectation of the audience during the song is a large male ensemble dancing backup to Roxie – but I had the dual challenges of not enough boys, and the few that I did have were inexperienced at dance. I decided to help remedy this by adding girls with dance experience to
the number, not only to beef up the ensemble so it wasn’t just four students, but also to enhance the level of choreography that would be possible for the number.

I knew that given the song’s subject matter, which focuses on Roxie’s desire for stardom, she had to be the focal point. I envisioned early on that the number would be comprised of lots of “frame + pose + frame + travel + pose + travel” combinations; I also knew that the costuming would enhance this by having Roxie dressed in gold or silver sparkles while the ensemble was dressed in black, further drawing the eye inward to Roxie while she was framed by ensemble members.

I also thought this was a good opportunity to bring in some of Fosse’s style. The music’s bluesy style, and the vampy nature of the instrumental, lent itself well to slow, methodical isolated movements in the style of Fosse. While the number was by no means a recreation of the original piece, it was meant to honor the spirit of the style of the original choreographer down to the signature hats, which did not make a presence in any other number in the show except for this one as an homage to Fosse.

“Me and My Baby”

I had the clearest vision for “Me and My Baby” when I began choreographing the song. The instrumentation itself guided me, and I found that I could envision the number in my head from the moment that I heard the music. “Me and My Baby” is the number at the top of the Second Act (in the high school version of Chicago, “I Know a Girl” is cut from a full number to about sixteen measures of music,) and shows Roxie lying to the press about being pregnant to steal the spotlight back from Kitty and Velma.
This is an important number in the show because it shows us not only the lengths that Roxie is willing to go to be in the spotlight, but also because significant plot points are established. We learn that Billy is now prioritizing Roxie’s trial, and that he plans on getting Amos to divorce Roxie so she will gain sympathy from the jury and the public.

Musically, the song shifts in tempo four times, signaling major beat changes in the number. I used the music to help guide specific moments in the number. The first transition, from the shift in music from largo to allegro, was the moment where I decided to reveal Roxie’s showgirl costume.

From this point, Roxie jumps from the faux-proscenium stage to the rest of the stage and begins interacting with the rest of the cast. My vision for this number was that as she continues to spin her story about her pregnancy, more reporters and members of the ensemble would join Roxie, so they would grow into a mass and create the iconic Fosse amoeba formation. Throughout this, Amos, who keeps trying to get the attention by repeating “I’m the father! I’m the father!” is separated further and further from Roxie by the growing ensemble.
The growing pool of reporters frame Roxie as they travel across the stage in the number.

The “half-time feel” shift in the music’s tempo helped dictate the shift in the choreography’s movement style into the Fosse amoeba.

The second shift in tempo happens right before “Look at my baby, my baby and me,” about 2/3rds of the way in the song and this is the point where the amoeba is fully formed and now slowly traveling across the stage as a group. Symbolically, it represents the idea that Roxie (and Billy) have the entire press corps and public wrapped around their fingers. They move as a mass because they’ve all bought into Roxie’s story.
The third shift in tempo happens at “Get out of our way folks,” and suddenly the music picks up in tempo once again. The song ends with a repetitive section of music where Roxie and the press corps describe her baby “my cute little baby, my sweet little baby, my soft little baby, etc.” For this section of the song, we incorporated into the choreography a nod to the rehearsal process that while unknown to the audience, was an adorable full-circle moment. While the students were learning the music, some of them were really struggling with the order of the lyrics since it’s just changing out the adjectives to describe the baby. The actress who played Hunyak came up with a mnemonic device where different hand gestures and expressions corresponded to each of the different adjectives. At first, I kept the mnemonic device in the choreography as a joke, and to help the students remember the order of the lyrics. But the more we looked at the number, the more we realized that something about the ridiculousness of the hand gestures, paired with the “chuh chuh chuh” rhythm of the footwork, worked well in communicating the tone of the number. We ultimately decided to keep it in the song.

This was one of my favorite songs to work on, and probably the one whose final product most closely resembles what I originally imagined when I first heard the song. More importantly, this was one of the students’ favorite numbers to dance in, possibly because it was just challenging enough where they felt proud of what they could do, while still being accessible enough that they knew they could do it well.

“Razzle Dazzle”

“Razzle Dazzle” was the last major number we blocked for the show, both because it needed to provide the set-up for the final courtroom scene that follows it and because I wanted to
build enough of the courtroom set so my students could utilize it, since I envisioned them interacting with several pieces of the courtroom furniture.

In the original Broadway production, “Razzle Dazzle” was staged as an orgy between the company members (Mordden.) It goes without saying that this approach was not going to work for the high school edition. Instead, I opted to go with the perhaps more literal circus interpretation. Because it was a more straight-forward approach, I felt like I needed a lot more little moments happening.

The idea became that as the song progressed, the actors would do increasingly complex tricks and stunts. This was a fun number to stage because it was truly collaborative – to block the piece, I needed to know very specifically what my students were capable of doing. Before I staged the piece, I took a poll to find out what tricks and stunts each of my students could do. Based on that, I grouped them onstage so they were able to weave in and out of the set pieces to accomplish their tricks.

Blocking this number was a huge challenge – I was running out of time, so we literally had two rehearsal blocks to stage the entire number. There were also a lot of logistical things to work out in terms of costuming and props (Where would props come from? What were the actors going to wear? The original costumes I had them in no longer worked for their new choreography, etc.) However, at this point my students were so deep in the rehearsal process that they had become hyper-focused and were able not only to learn the choreography quickly but execute it well. This was another turning point in the rehearsal process, because it was the moment I realized just how much my students were capable of doing when given the right set of circumstances.
CHAPTER 8: PRODUCTION DESIGN & PROCESS

*Chicago* was the second 1920s-set show I had done in a row, so I was already very familiar with the aesthetic of the time. However, I also had to decide what the visual story would be that I was going to tell. When people who are familiar with *Chicago* think of the show, their frame of reference is either the visually sumptuous and generally historically accurate rendition in the movie, or they think of the stripped-down black dance attire aesthetic of the 1996 revival.

From the start, I knew I definitely did not want to go the route of the revival, since so many of the productions that have been done by other high schools basically attempt to replicate that production. I also knew that in our own theatre space, which lacks a cyclorama, putting my actors in all black against a black curtain was going to set us up for failure.

After coming up with the idea of the cabaret-style show within a show format, I knew that I wanted to create a cabaret on our actual stage. From initial sketch to final mock-up, although the set itself is much more streamlined and helped to serve the needs that arose over the course of the production, the general idea is actually quite similar.
Figure 4: Chicago Ground Plan (Leo Arteche)

The original ground plan called for closing off the entire stage with flats, building a proscenium arch and having two entrance ways. This later had to adapt as we created large set pieces including the cell block bars and the judge’s stand that needed to be wheeled on and off the stage. The final structure instead included black masking flats on castors that were hinged to the rest of the flats and opened up to allow for set pieces to enter and exit.

**Set Construction**

Taking the idea from my brain and creating it onstage was something entirely new to me in this show because almost every production prior to this one had traditional unit sets. I’ve built more apartments, houses, and storefronts than I can recount, but I’ve never built a proscenium arch, and I knew that gravity was not going to be on my side.

A couple of tricks made it not just possible, but safe, which is the main priority in any stage show, but especially one featuring high school students. First, I built two very sturdy and heavy columns made of 2 x 4 x 8 pieces and drilled and secured them to the other flats. I then
built a 16-foot structure made out of 1 x 4 x 8 pieces interconnected to each other and then drilled them on top of the columns. As initially expected, the structure sagged in the middle. I fixed this by attaching to the center of the false proscenium a zinc steel punched flat bar then connected it to one of the battens on the ceiling. This instantly took care of the sagging and secured the arch in place so that no amount of movement or jumping on that stage made the structure shake. I painted the bar black, and it instantly blended with the background when viewed from the audience.

Originally, I was going to build my own stage on the stage until I realized that the music department in the school had bought staging for their shows, and they had always offered them to us. I had never needed them up until now, so thanks to their generosity, I saved myself a lot of time. We simply had to cover the front with black fabric so the legs were not visible.

In terms of facing the set, I knew I wanted brick wall panels, but I had forgotten from previous years how horrendously flat and orange the panels from Home Depot are. I realized I could use a combination of gel stain and paint to give the walls some texture and dimension, and thanks to my amazing Advanced Technical Theatre class, I put them to work distressing the walls enough that when you saw them from the audience, they looked like actual brick.

The final elements were to face the proscenium arch. Originally, I wanted the entire thing to be gold, but this being the height of the supply chain crisis, there was no gold paint available anywhere except for spray paint. And because I had to build onstage, I knew spray painting an entire structure of this size was going to land me right in the principal’s office. I settled for gel staining the structure (which ironically enough smelled strong enough that I still had to explain it to my principal, who was much more understanding after seeing the finished product.) Instead, I used gold trims as the accents to give that pop I wanted, and then added LED strip lights to the
interior of the archway. Since I knew there was no way I could afford old-fashioned incandescent bulbs, and lacked the time and know-how of how to make that even possible, I went the LED route. The cool thing about the LED strips is that they could change colors, which I was able to use during “Cell Block Tango” for a cool lighting effect.

The final touch was two chandeliers on either side of the stage. There was no story reason behind it other than chandeliers have become a personal signature of my set designs, and I knew I had to go all out this time around. Because they were plug-in-chandeliers, I had to rig them to hide the cables and paint them black, so they were not visible to the audience. They were a challenge to hang and balance evenly, but it wasn’t until those chandeliers were up that the set felt complete.
Set construction and assembly process. Because we do not have a scene shop in my school, many parts of the set construction had to take place onstage. This was an unusual process, as I usually build pieces separately and then assemble onstage. However, for this production, there were pieces that would have been too large to construct in the classroom. The construction process took several class periods over a few days to complete.

**Set Piece Construction**

**Bar**

The bar was the very first major set piece I built, and it was created from a 2 x 4 base with 1 x 4 support beams. I also found a great gold vintage faucet on Amazon resellers. I was able to use a lot of spare wood from previous productions to build and face it, and I basically used every last bit of crown molding, baseboard and quarter round we had from previous shows to dress the bar. Because it was a heavy piece, I mounted it on casters to make it easier to maneuver (in the end we chose to keep it on the stage the whole show, but at the time of construction we needed more mobility.) The baseboard helped mask the wheels so the entire bar could move without the audience seeing the casters. (Again, this is a trick the audience never got to see, but it still made me happy to find a solution.) Finally, I painted the entire structure brown,
and then shaded it and highlighted it to give it dimension since our stage lights have a tendency of washing out pretty much everything if I don’t go in and manually add in dimension.

Figure 6: Bar Progress Pictures and Final Product (Leo Arteche)
Judge’s Bench

The structure of the judge’s bench actually was similar in idea to the bar itself. The only major difference was that I knew I needed it to be sturdy enough to have an actress securely stand and walk on it. I also needed the witness stand and the stenographer/bailiff’s stand to balance out the visual. Building this set piece was important because the show’s longest acting scene is the courtroom, and I knew I needed to build something unique for that moment. At the same time, I also had just secured the rights to *Legally Blonde* to be my spring musical the following year, so I figured if I did a little bit of extra work now, I could save myself the time the following year when it came time to build the courtroom for that show.

Typically, I build in my tech lab and then just take the pieces on the stage, but this particular piece had to be built entirely on the stage. The tech lab has industrial-style concrete floors, which while aesthetically beautiful, are not always perfectly level. I knew for this particular set piece, which needed to be stable enough for an actor to safely jump on it and jump off it, it was vital that it be perfectly level with the stage, so I built the entire set piece on the stage and then faced it and dressed it accordingly.

The judge’s bench was built with 2 x 4 boards and was mounted on casters for easier maneuvering, while the witness and bailiff’s stands were built with 1 x 4 boards so that they were lightweight enough to carry with one hand. For the rest of the courtroom, I simply painted benches we’ve had in the department for years dating back to a production of *The Crucible* in 2015. Somehow, they’ve survived after all these years, and I simply painted them brown to match the rest of the set.
We needed to build two cell block bars that would wheel on and off the stage to establish the jail scenes. They needed to be sturdy enough to stay upright without the need for the actors to hold them, but they also needed to be lightweight enough where they were not going to be difficult to maneuver. Finally, they needed to be quiet – I went through many casters before I finally found ones that were sufficiently lubricated and new enough where they did not rattle on our somewhat uneven stage.

I built the cell block bars by using a combination of 1 x 4 x 8 boards, casters and PCV pipes. Because we needed two of them in order for them to split, but we were limited on stage space (and wing space for that matter,) I knew they had to be taller than wide. But because
gravity favors the other configuration, I also knew I needed to reinforce the bottom of the bars. I did this by laying them on a foundation of 2 x 4 x 8 boars (cut down to size so they fit.) Everything was nailed and then reinforced with screws just for extra safety. Finally, we spray painted them a metallic silver to give the illusion of jail bars instead of PCV pipes. The result far exceeded my expectations.

*Figure 8: Cell Block Bars Construction and Rehearsal Footage (Leo Arteche)*

**Costuming**

The show’s vision of a show within a show helped generate the spark that inspired the first costumes of the show. In considering the costuming, I had to keep in mind that I had twenty-one actors to dress. But because I had made the early decision not to do the show in the traditional dancer blacks that many productions have done over the years emulating the
Broadway revival, I knew that a significant portion of the show’s budget would have to costuming and wigs.

One early running motif was the idea of “showgirl” style costumes for the musical numbers. I knew that when it came to dressing Roxie, Velma and Mama, I would have to invest in order to make the individual costume pieces stand out from the rest of the cast. I also wanted to create a visual vocabulary that was coherent, recognizable, but still felt fresh.

I was able to source many pieces for Roxie and Velma from burlesque boutiques on Etsy. These costumes did not come cheap, especially since a number of them came from overseas places like the United Kingdom and China, which meant we had to pay for shipping in addition to the labor costs. The pieces were expensive – but they also looked expensive, which meant they very much served their purpose in the show. If the show deals with themes of corruption, vanity, greed and excess, then the costuming needed to reflect that fully.

There were hundreds of other costume pieces that we needed to gather, and so we did a combination of purchasing new costumes from places like Amazon, pulling costumes from our inventory, and making new costume pieces as needed. For this show, the major construction project was the creation of the prisoner costumes. I was very fortunate that one of my colleagues in the theatre department, aside from being a fantastic teacher and director, is also a costume designer and seamstress professionally. With her help, as well as the help of one of her eighth grade technical theatre students who had an interest in sewing, we built twelve prisoner costumes.

In theory it was an “easy” construction project. It was a simple A-line dress with buttons going down the middle based on the following design I created during the summer before the show began. There were several modifications that had to be made from original design to final
construction to allow for the specific needs of the production to be met. First, we needed the dress to open and close immediately, since a lot of the numbers featured costume reveals in the choreography. This meant the original design with the buttons stopping at the navel had to be modified so the buttons went all the way to the bottom of the dress, since it was easier to take on and off like a robe than to step in and out of it. With the use of magnets inside the costume, we were able to have the costumes snap open and close without the need to worry about buttons, hooks and eyes, etc. Finally, because we needed to build twelve of the costumes in a limited amount of time, the final design was modified slightly to make it easier to construct.

Figure 9: “Chicago” Costume Design Renderings (Leo Arteche)
Lighting

The actual process of setting and focusing lights was a highly difficult one for this production. Two days before my first tech rehearsal, some glitch in the system caused many of our lights to either malfunction or stop working altogether. And though I am capable of setting and focusing lights, I can’t do either with equipment that doesn’t work. It was not until several days into the tech rehearsal process that I had the company send out a technician to do his best to repair the lights. This meant we were creating light cues and practicing them for the first time two days before opening night.

Lighting in my theatre is always a challenge for several reasons. When we first opened our campus, we did not have the funds to invest in the highest-quality lights, which meant we
frequently experience lighting problems – primarily that the LED PAR cans lose a color (RGB,) making the color design challenging. Secondly, because of where the lights are mounted, we often don’t have enough lights to flood the full stage. We lack a follow spot, and though we have some intelligent lighting that can be used to create spots, they’re not very strong, and only about half of them work. Finally, we don’t have a cyclorama, which means that by default the stage tends to absorb light rather than reflect it.

My one stroke of luck with this production is that *Chicago* can get away with a slightly darker palette, and I was able to use some of the “dead spots” onstage for artistic reasons.

When designing the color scheme for the show, I was somewhat limited in options because of the RGB issues. Some colors just do not read well on our stage. Blues, reds and pinks look beautiful, and I am able to create some really wonderful designs using those colors. Green, cyan and turquoise are strong colors, but obviously not flattering on the skin. The yellow and amber options are awful and really limit what I can do. Finally, white light looks institutional (which works perfectly for the prison scenes but that’s about it,) and the peach lights that are the equivalent of a soft warm white incandescent color, are not nearly as powerful as they should be.

When designing the show, I had to contend with these issues, in addition to a tremendous time crunch. I only had about a day and a half to set lights, and it was literally two days before opening night.

I had different primary color palettes and combinations that I used for artistic effect.

**Roxie’s Musical Numbers**

Roxie’s color palette fluctuated from pinks and magentas to blues and purples. There were two reasons for this – symbolically, it was meant to evoke a saccharine, feminine, artificial vibe that reflected the persona that Roxie puts when she’s in her performative mode. Practically,
Roxie’s costumes were either pink, lavender, or nude and sparkly. The color palette accentuated the costumes beautifully, and particularly in her costumes with rhinestones, the light refracted from the costumes beautifully. The audience literally applauded for every single costume reveal that Roxie had, and the lighting design did its job in highlighting the costumes.

Velma’s Musical Numbers

Velma’s color palette leaned more into blues, reds, and purples. Her scenes generally were lit with darker lighting. There were two reasons for this – her own personality is darker and more cynical than Roxie. And though she is just as flawed as Roxie, she’s a lot more outward about it, so it made sense for the lighting to reflect that. The other reason was a symbolic one – as the show goes on and her star “dims,” so does the lighting. For practical purposes she was obviously still lit well enough to be seen by the audience, but her numbers were deliberately darker, and as the show went on, her lighting gets bluer and darker, all the way until the finale, when she joins forces with Roxie and takes on her color palette.

Jail Scenes

For the acting scenes that did not involve musical numbers or fantastical elements – such as the courtroom scene in Act Two – I deliberately kept the stage dark except for a pool of soft white light center stage. This was to make the background to recede so we concentrated on the action center stage, and it was meant to evoke a liminal space that changed with the needs of the number. The one exception was for “Mr. Cellophane,” which used the same color palette. This was by design, as it was meant to symbolize that even in the world of the show, Amos doesn’t get to have the spectacular elements.
Billy’s Scenes

Billy’s color palette was primarily reds, golds, pinks, and magentas. This was meant to reflect the fact that he hitched his wagon to Roxie and so their color palettes were often complimentary. The exception was “Razzle Dazzle,” where I played with color fluctuations. The scenes ranged from reds and yellows to mimic a circus to yellows, pinks, greens, magentas and cyans. I deliberately picked very ugly color combinations in “Razzle Dazzle.” I wanted to fluctuate between a circus and a freak show, because the song has a cynical undercurrent. I wanted to show the ugliness of the criminal justice system and the kangaroo court, and using clashing colors was an effective way of communicating that.

Cell Block Tango

This was one number where I didn’t deviate from the audience expectation. I did not want to copy the movie, but I also couldn’t do “Cell Block Tango” without the color red. So, the colors shifted between red and white, with the amount of each fluctuating based on what was happening in the story and in the choreography.
Figure 11: “Cell Block Tango” Lighting (Photo Credit: Mariana Amado)

The lighting was achieved by backlighting the performers in a red wash and using a hazer and cool white tones to highlight. In this figure we have one of the more dramatic uses of this lighting, although in most of the number, the performers were much more visible to the audience.
CHAPTER 9: SHOW NIGHT

Opening Night

Opening night came and went in a blur, and it was one of those experiences where it didn’t hit me that it was over until I ran out of the booth, got onstage, and saw the standing ovation from the audience. It was completely surreal – it was our largest ever audience, and I had never seen that many people in the audience for one of our events.

The audience’s energy was electric and infectious from the start, and I was impressed by how not nervous my students seemed. If they were nervous at all, it was not visible in their performance. Even though I was in the tech booth navigating light cues and helping my microphone operator, who had trigger fingers anytime he thought there was feedback (which, to be fair, there are quite a few songs in Chicago where the instrumentation sounds quite a bit like soft feedback to an untrained ear) there were still moments where I could sit back and appreciate the dreamlike experience of the show.

One standout moment was the audience’s riotous applause *before* “Cell Block Tango.” The moment the spotlight hit the false proscenium, as a soft haze filled the stage, and my Mama Morton and six Cell Block girls hit their opening pose, the audience exploded. It was such an exciting moment as a director, not only because it really drove home the point that this really is such a beloved musical, but because I knew how special that moment must have felt for my actresses onstage.

Another great, and I think common experience, was just getting to hear feedback from the audience in terms of what they enjoyed. During auditions for the production all the way back in August, there were plenty of moments that excited me and made me laugh, but as is always the case in the rehearsal process, directors become numb to what they are seeing and often question
if anything at all is working. The audience’s laughter, especially during scenes like the Courtroom scene, which was a nightmare to put together with its extensive sound cues, highly choreographed staging and constantly changing light cues, made me realize that, yes – even though in rehearsal we stop feeling anything about the material we are working on – through fresh eyes, the material works. Hearing the laughter and seeing the show through the audience’s eyes made me take the moment to truly appreciate the performance my students were giving, and rather than looking at it through a critical eye, I was able to take a step back and simply enjoy their great work. I was no longer looking for what to fix, but rather enjoying their work as performers.

Opening night was a tremendous success. We had some minor technical hitches, the worst of which was a repetition of our final dress rehearsal, albeit to a lesser extent. For some reason, the students had trouble hearing the end of “Me and My Baby” and fell out of sync with the track – although thankfully they stayed in sync with each other. A similar issue had happened in dress rehearsal with “We Both Reached for the Gun,” so I had to completely change the plan day of show. Rather than having the song come through the speakers in the audience, I placed a large speaker backstage so the students could hear the track well. Luckily, the students’ lavalier microphones picked up enough of the instrumental that in the end the music sounded like it was coming live from the audience’s speakers as well. It was frustrating as a director because “Me and My Baby” is one of the numbers the students do best, but I also know that striking the balance between the tracks being loud enough for the students to hear, but soft enough that they are not blaring the audience, all the while making sure that the nine working lavalier microphones are not feeding back, is not an easy task.
Second Night

I was concerned going into the second night because our audience was going to be half of the size of the first one. I knew this going in – the literal purpose of the second show was to give a chance to those who could not come out to the Friday night show to see it. There was a definite different energy in the audience the second night, simply because there were fewer people, and they were generally less vocal (at least in the first act.) The cast was slightly thrown by this, and though they executed the show better the second night from a technical perspective, the energy was different. In hindsight, there’s a magic from opening night that is impossible to replicate again, and though the audience loved the show, doing it a second time felt the tiniest bit less special for the rest of us.

I also felt a great deal more pressure going into the second night because my family was coming to see the show, and I personally felt the weight of putting on a flawless show. We also had many students and teachers from other schools come to watch the production, which was both incredibly flattering, but also reinforced the sense that we had something to prove. Impostor syndrome, that enemy of all theatre teachers, quickly set in, and I had to remind myself constantly that my ego had no place in the performance and that my job was to manage the anxieties of my cast, and especially my crew, who felt even more pressure to deliver a perfect show.

Going into the second night, we also had to fix the audio sync issues from opening night. I tried to accomplish this by having “Me and My Baby” play from the stage speaker as well, just as it had for “We Both Reached for the Gun.” And though when we rehearsed the number before the show, the students were able to hear the onstage speaker perfectly, my stage manager forgot to play the song backstage during the show itself. In the end, I had to play the song through the
main speakers and literally pray that the cast would be able to hear it. Thankfully, the universe sent me a favor and the cast heard the music just fine and nailed the number.

In a way, even though there were minor technical hiccups in the second day (hiccups that would have been imperceptible by the audience but felt catastrophic to a tech crew – a light cue being four seconds late can feel remarkably traumatic for a freshman in high school who feels the pressure of putting on a perfect show,) I learned more from the second night than the first one.
CHAPTER 10: CONCLUSIONS

It has now been almost a year since the production wrapped, and with distance, I have been able to reflect on the process of the show and what I learned as a result. In many ways, writing this thesis has forced me to analyze and think about my work critically, while also having the consequence of allowing me to revisit a work that meant a great deal to me when I was working on it. It’s in my nature to always look ahead to the next production, often at the expense of enjoying the moment.

Theatre is in its nature ephemeral – it is one of the few artforms where the product is not a tangible product that lasts. Sure, you can record a show and have a record of it, but the actual live experience can never be perfectly replicated. I have always struggled with staying in the moment, and I’ve trained myself to always look ahead at the next thing I need to focus on. This has been a blessing and a curse, because though it has meant that I am often prepared for what is to come, it also means that my default is not to be present and enjoy the moment.

In hindsight, I did not take enough time to appreciate the process of putting together Chicago. I am incredibly proud of the finished product, and of the process to make it happen. But if I’m being honest with myself, I also know that I was rarely one hundred percent in the moment. In almost every rehearsal, I was worried about some future problem that I would have to deal with – a prop to be bought, a set piece to build, a costume that needed alteration.

There were many challenges that arose over the course of the production, each of which though frustrating at the time, offered me an opportunity to learn something that is helpful today. Some of the challenges that arose throughout the production were unique to the circumstances of
the pandemic. Others, however, would have happened regardless of when I was directing the show.

Staying within my budget was one of the hardest parts of directing this show. Once I had settled on my concept, and I knew I would not be going the route of black leotards and dance costumes, I knew a significant portion of my budget would have to go to costuming. I also knew I wanted professionally styled wigs for at least my principal characters. These wigs can run as expensive as $300 per wig, and I had four principal characters who needed new wigs. My set design, which I knew was ambitious, required a lot of materials. Because of scarcity of raw items in Spring of 2021, the cost of raw materials had skyrocketed. The same piece of lauan that had cost $15 pre-pandemic was then going for $30 a piece. All these factors combined created an increasingly ballooning cost of production. As much I wanted to spend freely, I also had to remember that at the end of the day, I couldn’t bankrupt the department on a single show. I was already preparing for the 2022-2023 season, and I knew staying within budget was integral in making sure the program would remain financially stable going forward.

Casting shake-ups are going to happen in many shows, but in Chicago, it really drilled home to me the importance of considering all components of an actor’s abilities in the casting decisions. I had a thorough behavioral and professionalism contract that all students and parents had to sign at the outset of the show. The contract outlined expectations for attendance, professionalism in rehearsals, expectations for being off-book, etc. As a teacher, replacing a student is a very difficult decision, and one that I did not take lightly. However, by sticking to the contract and being true to my word, I was able to establish a clear sense of expectations for my cast.
One important lesson that was reinforced throughout the run of the production was that no amount of preparation, rehearsal, or planning can prevent human errors from taking place. This is especially true in high school theatre, where students are all learning from experience. Even the most veteran performers, designers and technicians can make human errors. The important thing I had to remember was that while small mistakes can seem catastrophic at the time, they can be remedied if I can take a step back and regain perspective.

Time is always the hardest commodity to come by in any production, and while we did our best to schedule time to accomplish each goal, we still never felt like we had enough time to accomplish everything we wanted to do. Much of this has to do with the way the school day is structured. Because our school is on block scheduling, I only had the full cast of Chicago every other day for their Theatre 1-4 class. Because of this, I had to add in many after-school rehearsals to ensure the cast had enough time to learn and rehearse the material. Coordinating the schedule of twenty-one high school students is already a challenging task. The fact that our show was in late April, right on the heels of state testing and literally the week before AP exams, added the challenge of having to coordinate with teachers as well. We worked as much as possible with our academic teachers to make sure that students did not fall behind. The students had to rapidly switch focus from testing to show, often within the span of a couple of hours. I was impressed with their ability to do so, but I also know it required tremendous effort on their part.

Working with high school age students requires the director to consider factors that may be less relevant with other age groups. As directors, we always want to put the show first, since that is the product that the audience will see. But as teachers, we must consider every single decision we make and weigh the potential lasting impact that decision may make on an individual or the group. Many times, I found myself questioning my choices and whether the
directorial side of my brain would win over the teacher side of my brain. One example where this happened was when cutting students from certain numbers. There were several times over the course of the rehearsal process where it became evident that certain students were struggling with the choreography in specific numbers. The director in me wanted to immediately cut them from the numbers so I could move on to the next song or scene. The teacher in me acknowledged that I had to make sure I was providing opportunities for the students to learn the material and reinforce their knowledge in rehearsals. These competing instincts and impulses sometimes slowed down my ability to make decisions, because I had to consider the educational outcomes of my choices instead of only the artistic ones. In the end, I had to remember that making tough choices as a director can also be a teaching tool, since in the real world, decisions are often made quickly, and students need to understand that reality.

Even despite these challenges, I was struck by how quickly most of my cast learned material, be it music or choreography, and I was impressed by their ability to focus when something was important to them. They all cared deeply about the show, and though they are teenagers, so obviously there are going to be some focus issues along the way, when it came time for rehearsals, they showed a remarkable ability to concentrate on the task at hand. This was a concern for me walking into the rehearsal process, since Covid was so disruptive – especially when it came to focus.

One major lesson I took away from it was the realization of how much pressure I put on myself. Though much of it was self-imposed, I felt a tremendous need to prove myself as a director, a teacher, a designer, and an artist. I don’t entirely know what I was expecting, or what would have looked like success – nobody was going to enter from the audience and hand me a trophy that said, “You’ve achieved everything you’ve been after.”
I walked away from the experience newly confident in my own abilities as a director and a designer. This year, I am directing *Legally Blonde* with a thirty-person cast, many of whom are underclassmen or new to the musical theatre program. *Legally Blonde* is significantly more complex musically (*Chicago* had two-part harmonies – *Legally Blonde* has six-to-seven-part harmony in almost every ensemble number.) And while I hired my former choreographer to help stage the heavy dance numbers, I feel much more comfortable staging without any help at all.

It's therefore ironic that I finish reflecting on *Chicago* and writing this as I am mid-rehearsals for *Legally Blonde* and planning my next two productions of *Mean Girls* and *Into the Woods*. Revisiting *Chicago*, which was truly all-consuming, reminds me that I need to slow down and take in what I’m doing each day. And so, while *Chicago* is now in my past, the lessons I learned throughout that process follow me every day when I start rehearsal.
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