

ENCORE MICHIGAN

Dreams on the line in Tibbits musical

REVIEW July 11, 2014 Bridgette Redman

"A Chorus Line" may not be as gritty and shocking as it was when it first came out in 1975, but it is still an extravaganza of dance and a moving look at those who are trying to make their living as dancers on Broadway.

Seventeen dancers have made the final cut of an audition for the chorus line of an upcoming musical. Only eight are needed for the show. As they audition and are interviewed, they reveal pieces of their soul and why dancing is so important to their lives.

The Tibbits Opera House is an ideal venue for performing this Marvin Hamlisch musical, with the venue's outstanding acoustics and traditional pit orchestra arrangement of the musicians in front and below the stage. Singers aren't miked, and it is their pitch perfect voices that are featured throughout the evening's show – a with the exception of Ashley Smith's "Sing!" in which she frankly and entertainingly tells us she can't find a pitch or sing at all.)

Everything about the show feels raw and powerful, as if each of those dancers truly has their future on the line. The risks are high for each of them, and we know up front that less than half of them will get what each of them needs and wants so much. The lack of microphones emphasizes this raw feeling, making it feel even more real and more intense.

Director and choreographer Kevin Halpin helps ensure that the stakes are high for everyone and keeps the audience engaged. Each actor showed their nervousness, and the choreography purposely made them less than perfect, as though they were truly learning the dance numbers on the spot and some were not up to the task. Each cut that Zach, the in-show director, makes is one the audience can agree with.

While this performance is first and foremost an ensemble piece with everyone playing an important role and all of them blending as a chorus line, the show's plots let each of the characters' individuality shine through until the very end where they are once again turned into a chorus line where they are dressed alike and moving together in such a way that makes them indistinguishable from one another.

Christina Laschuk plays Cassie, an older dancer who has already had a career on Broadway and is now returning to the chorus line after discovering she doesn't have it in her to be the star that everyone thought she would be. She once lived with and had a relationship with director Zach (played by Nate Klingenberg). He accuses her of "dancing down," and tells her she could never blend into a chorus line because she is too good. She responds by saying that she is a dancer and sings the beautiful solo "The Music and the Mirror," saying those are the only two things she ever needed. In this solo number we see the dancing skills that give her her star quality, yet when asked to blend in with the ensemble, she does everything she was asked to do and shows she can be a member of the chorus. The only

thing that stretches credibility is that she looks way too young to be someone who has already been in the business for 17 years and is supposed to be the veteran. She looks fresh out of college.

Charlotte Vaughn Raines' Sheila stands out because of the attitude she projects at all times – whether she is talking or through her non-verbal communications. Her harsh, street-wise attitude and insistence at being addressed as an adult woman rather than one of the “kids” or a “girl,” makes her interview even stronger. She reveals an unhappy childhood, displaying her vulnerable side, and launches the beautiful trio “At the Ballet,” in which she is afterward joined by Bebe (Kyra Christopher) and Maggie (Catherine Skojec).

There were several moments of particular delight when it came to the dancing and Halpin's choreography. Davis Wayne as Mike started things out early with his tap routine of “I Can Do That.”

Likewise, Devon Frieder's Val created a fun moment with her “Dance: Ten; Looks: Three” (better known as “Tits and Ass”). It provided the perfect contrast after some of the heavier memories of childhood and adolescence that the other dancers had shared.

The lighting plot is a complicated one, with the intricate design done by Michael Blagys. On opening night there were some problems with execution, but they were relatively minor compared to the demanding and precise requirements of this production.

Myra Giorgi's set design was simple, but effective. Most of the show was performed on a bare stage, but it opened with mirrors covering the back of the stage and closed with a glitzy backdrop that matched the gold and white costumes of the final number.

“A Chorus Line” at the Tibbits Opera House is performed in a traditional fashion, bringing what is now a classical musical to life again in the way that the fans of the show expect. It works, because the themes and issues are timeless. There are still people pursuing dreams in fields that have increasingly fewer jobs available and who must face arbitrary barriers to achieving what they want in the timeline that they have planned.

“A Chorus Line” resonates for anyone who has a dream and has worked hard to make it come true – whether it has or hasn't.