**Chicago, The Musical**

A review by Louis G. Newman, B.S., Ph.D,

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Just the name, *Chicago*, brings to mind that not very delightful criminal era from 1920 to 1930 when the city of Chicago was the stage for Al Capone and lawless mobs. The original play was written in 1926 about the Prohibition era activities in the city. It was resurrected as a musical on Broadway in 1975 and had a long run including a revival in 1996, only second in length at the time to *Phantom of the Opera*. I did not remember that *Chicago*, the Musical, won the Academy Award for Best Picture of 2002. There are many familiar songs here including “All That Jazz”.

The musical stage show was presented by the Calabasas High School Theater and Music Departments with over 100 students involved. Perhaps the show was tamer than the Broadway version as it is specifically called out in the program as the “High School Edition”. From the publisher: “This version has been adapted to remove overtly sexual references and adult language”. Two songs were removed.

We have been going to various performances at Calabasas High School over the years. The first one that I remember was the magnificent “Fiddler on the Roof”. There have been two directors that have directed most of the shows: Jim Gilchrist (1979-1983 and 1989-2000) and former CHS student Bill Garrett (2000-2019). They have had so much talent from the school that all shows that I remember have had double casts for the main roles, first the brown and gold (school colors) casts, and then the black and gold casts. (I guess that black had more modern cache’ then brown.) Each cast had three performances in a usually full venue, first the old multi-purpose room, and then (in 2012) the new Performing Arts Education Center with 686 seats and modern theater technology. An identical theater is also at Agoura High School which is run by the same Las Virgenes School District.

So what happens in the show? The themes are typical 1926 issues of vaudeville, gangland, payoffs, and literally getting away with murder. There does not appear to be an honest person anywhere, except for one obviously innocent “convicted murderess” who was hung. Everyone has some sort of activity to make money from the poor and disadvantaged. The rest of the people just haul out a gun and shoot anyone that performs “immoral” actions that are not approved. The show revolves around the activities in the jail and the courtroom. As befitting the Bob Fosse participation, the dance numbers and costumes are spectacular. The title says it is a musical, and the voices are outstanding. There is a lot of talent in the large cast. But where are the memorable tunes? I was hoping for a 1920’s-based score. Chris, of the other opinion, enjoyed the interesting music. The band was located in the rear of the stage which led to good musical projection as opposed to the orchestra pit. As always at Calabasas High, the musicians were outstanding with their timing and volume control. They have an excellent high school music director. The staging background was simplistic, but that left room for motion everywhere across the stage. I had trouble believing that all the performers were high school students. They certainly seemed much more mature than I remember high school students to be, or perhaps I was a very immature high school student who failed to realize what was happening.

The glossy “Playbill” program showed much support from the local businesses, the parents of the participants, and other community members. The small yellow print on the black pages proved to be impossible to read during the darkened theater during the show. Several people were noted as holding up a cell phone to illuminate the program being held with the other hand. Chris with her new frequency calibrated hearing aids seemed to have no trouble following the plot while Louis lost many of the spoken details in the period accents, microphone distortion, and background noise interference.