



THE
NATIONAL THEATRE
FOUNDATION

CHICAGO

STUDY GUIDE



For almost 200 years, The National Theatre has occupied a prominent position on Pennsylvania Avenue—“America’s Main Street”—and played a central role in the cultural and civic life of Washington, DC. Located a stone’s throw from the White House and having the Pennsylvania Avenue National Historic Site as its “front yard,” The National Theatre is a historic, cultural presence in our Nation’s Capital and the oldest continuously operating enterprise on Pennsylvania Avenue.

The non-profit National Theatre Foundation oversees the historic theatre and serves the DC community through three free outreach programs, *Saturday Morning Live! At The National*, *Community Stage Connections*, and *Teens Behind the Scenes*. These programs provide the greater Washington area with access to high quality performing arts experiences while promoting and employing local and regional artists.

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NOTE FROM THE DRAMATURG

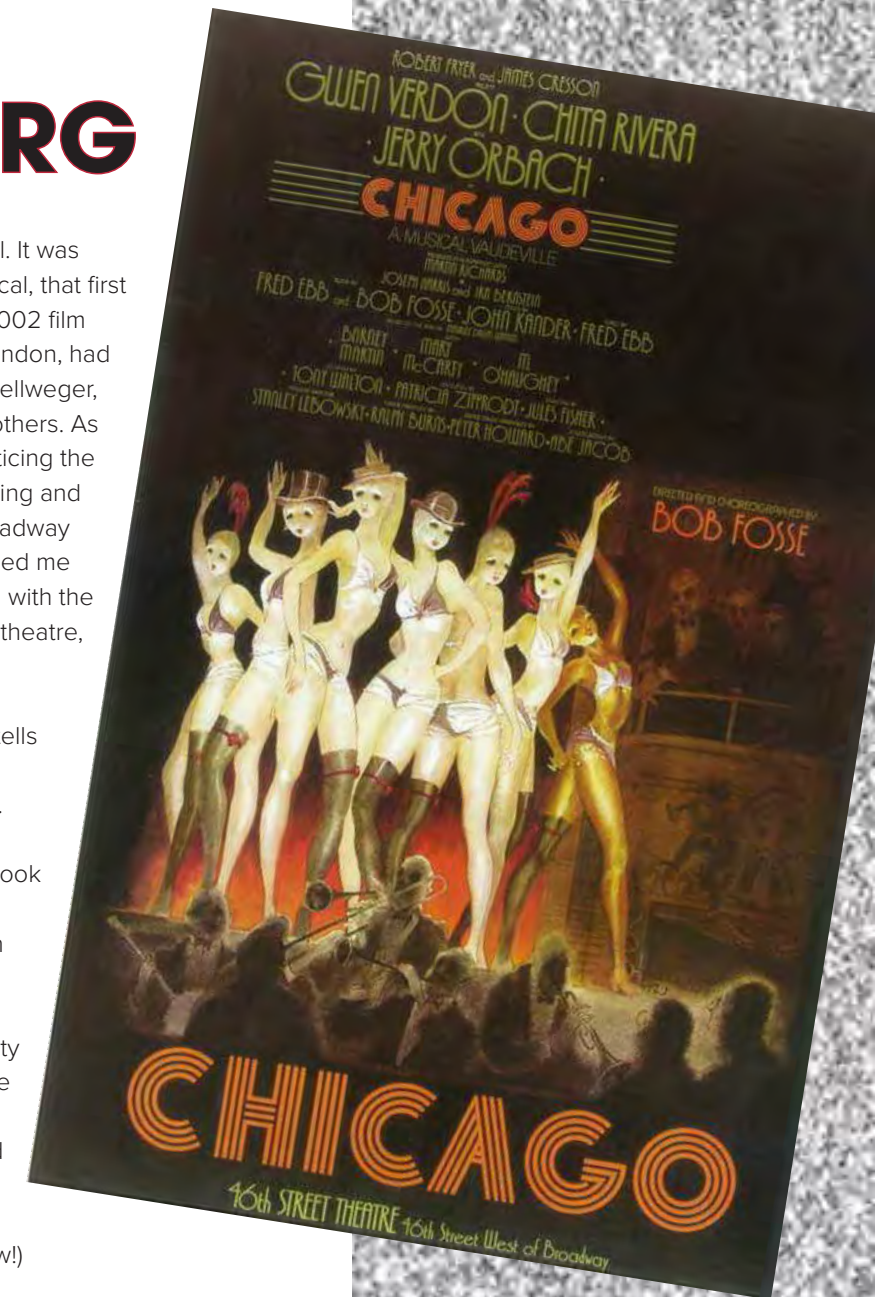
When I was twelve years old, I saw my first Broadway musical. It was *Chicago*, the funny, silly, and playful Kander and Ebb hit musical, that first caught my attention after the release of the award-winning 2002 film adaptation. The movie version, which was directed by Bill Condon, had a star-studded cast including Catherine Zeta-Jones, Renee Zellweger, Queen Latifah, Richard Gere, and Taye Diggs, among many others. As a dancer myself, I remember painstakingly learning and practicing the choreography to “All That Jazz” and “Hot Honey Rag,” dreaming and hoping that I might one day perform these numbers on a Broadway stage. My mom, knowing my obsession with *Chicago*, surprised me with tickets while on a trip to New York. Equally as impressed with the stage version as I had been with the film, to this day, musical theatre, for me, means *Chicago*.

Chicago, written by John Kander, Fred Ebb, and Bob Fosse, tells the story of Roxie Hart and Velma Kelly, two women in 1920s Chicago, Illinois who are imprisoned after committing murder. Based on the 1926 play of the same name by Maurine Dallas Watkins, the musical takes a whimsical, humorous, and witty look at the American legal system. The musical first premiered on Broadway in 1975, and starred Broadway divas Gwen Verdon and Chita Rivera as Hart and Kelly. It was critically acclaimed at the time of its premiere and was nominated for ten Tony awards, including Best Musical. It returned to Broadway twenty years later in 1996 with Ann Reinking and Bebe Neuwirth in the leading roles, once again received rave reviews, and ended up winning six out of the eight Tony Awards it was nominated for. In fact, the 1996 production was so popular that it has remained a staple on Broadway as the second longest running Broadway show. (In fact, this was the production I saw!)

What is it that makes this musical such a mainstay in musical theatre? Perhaps it’s the visionary choreography, originally created by Fosse, that utilizes the dance styles of tap and jazz. Maybe it’s the glamour of 1920s Chicago and the representations of the fashionable flappers and fast-talking slang of the period. It could even be the show’s unflinching humor that eases audiences into discussing the violent topics in the musical, such as murder. It is most likely a combination of these elements that makes *Chicago* such a well-received and long-lasting Broadway staple.

In the pages of this study guide, you’ll learn more about the history of the show (and its many adaptations), the style of vaudeville that informed the show’s structure and staging, the legacy and vision of the show’s original choreographer, Bob Fosse, and how *Chicago* uses principles of equity and inclusion in its casts. *Chicago* is a musical that has “all the jazz”; I hope it “razzle dazzles” you, too.

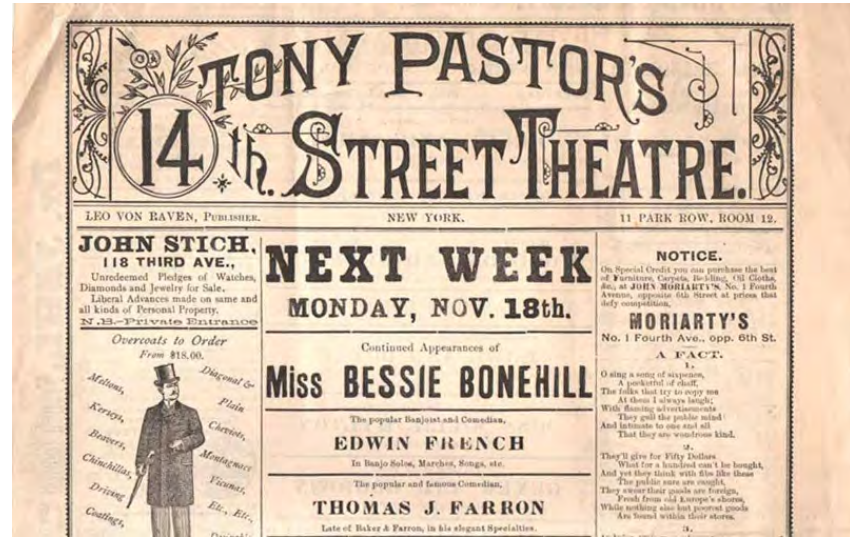
Jordan Ealey, Dramaturg



WHAT'S VAUDEVILLE?

a person who organizes and often finances concerts, plays, or operas, performing a role in stage arts that is similar to that of a film or television producer.

In *Chicago*, the musical, dance, and performance styles are influenced heavily by a genre called vaudeville. Vaudeville was also a crucial genre that influenced what we now know as musical theatre. Vaudeville is a part of what is typically referred to as “variety theatre” or variety show or variety entertainment, which includes genres like sketch comedy, magic shows, acrobatics, juggling, and ventriloquism. The idea of this kind of popular entertainment dates back all the way to the Roman empire, where the Roman people would go to see chariot racing, acrobatics, and other shows in that similar genre. Vaudeville began to rise in the United States following the decades after the Civil War, when Americans were looking for some things to entertain them. Though it’s not necessarily clear where the “first” form of vaudeville came from, some historians attribute the emergence of vaudeville to Antonio Pastor, an impresario and variety performer. He is also sometimes called the “Dean of Vaudeville.” In 1881, Pastor created the Tony Pastor’s New Fourteenth Street Theatre, where he housed variety performers that led to vaudeville. The theatre, known to the public as Tony Pastor’s, became one of the most popular theatres of the 1880s. This cemented Pastor’s legacy as a producer who “cleaned up” variety entertainment and created vaudeville.



An original image of Tony Pastor’s New Fourteenth Street Theatre playbill, 1881.

Source

The most important thing to understand about vaudeville is that people used it as a way to relax from their long days at work. It became popular for American audiences, especially the working class, because it offered them an escape from the hustle and bustle of their busy and chaotic lives. Unlike “highbrow” forms of entertainment such as opera or plays, vaudeville had low ticket prices that allowed it to be accessible to all kinds of people from different backgrounds. However, vaudeville was also home to some troubling tropes, which included blackface minstrelsy, as much of the style of performance in the genre comes from this. Blackface minstrelsy was a practice where white actors and performers would paint their faces Black and act as they imagined Black people to act.

elite or high culture

Surprisingly, some Black performers used blackface makeup in their performances. During this time in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century - which is the time directly following the Emancipation Proclamation that brought an end to American slavery - it was difficult for Black artists to get opportunities to perform. Therefore, vaudeville, even with some of its problematic elements, provided them with chances to show off their theatrical talents. Bert Williams is said to be one of the first Black celebrities; he received his early career success through vaudeville. He would go on to have an incredibly successful theatrical career: he would star alongside his performance partner, George Walker, in *In Dahomey*, the first musical by Black people to make it to Broadway and would be one of the first Black cast members in an integrated Broadway show! All of this became possible through taking advantage of the vaudeville stage. Other successful vaudeville performers included Aida Overton Walker, The Hyers Sisters, Bessie Smith, Eubie Blake, and Noble Sissle, among others.

So, now that we’ve covered some of the history of vaudeville, let’s talk a little bit about what goes



Members of the Walker and Williams Troupe performing vaudeville. Image via NYPL

into a vaudeville show! Remember, a lot of the audience members who attended vaudeville wanted escape and were tired from their work days. So vaudeville performers (who were called vaudevillians) saw their job as having to “wake” the audience up. This included performers who might introduce a song by saying they had a “special request” to sing. Another element of

vaudeville shows was the appearance of being spontaneous. By this, it means that audiences preferred performers who did not look like they were performing; they liked it when it seemed like the shows were not rehearsed (even though they were). In both of these elements, it’s clear that the audience is a big component of the show.

ACTIVITY: FIND THE VAUDEVILLE!

These are just some history, development, and characteristics involved in vaudeville. So now it’s your turn! Based on what you know about vaudeville, challenge yourself to find three moments in *Chicago* where you can see the vaudeville influence. If you really want to push yourself, see if you can find a moment of dialogue, song lyric, and choreography influenced by vaudeville!

where people are speaking

where people are dancing

THE OL' RAZZLE DAZZLE

SATIRE AND COMEDY IN *CHICAGO*

Another element that is often focused on in variety entertainments like vaudeville is satire. Satire is the use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other social issues. In other words, satire is used to make fun of something. (A good example of this is *Saturday Night Live*.)

Chicago uses a lot of satire to make fun of the ridiculousness of the American legal system, which is found in the way they stage scenes involving prisons and court rooms. One of the songs, "Razzle Dazzle" is a great example of this. Let's take a look at how "Razzle Dazzle" uses satire.

Where is this in the show?

This song comes right before the musical's climax, where Roxie will find out her fate in the trial. Billy is advising her that things will be fine, as long as she can put on a show.

The highest point of tension in the story of a theatre production.

The song sets up the idea of a show being put on. The court room is turned into a theatre and Billy and Roxie are putting on a show!

RAZZLE DAZZLE

Give 'em the old razzle dazzle
Razzle dazzle 'em
Give 'em an act with lots of flash in it
And the reaction will be passionate

Give 'em the old hocus pocus
Bead and feather 'em
How can they see with sequins in their eyes?
What if your hinges all are rusting?
What if, in fact, you're just disgusting?
Razzle dazzle 'em
And they'll never catch wise!

Give 'em the old razzle dazzle
Razzle dazzle 'em
Give 'em a show that's so splendiferous
Row after row will crow vociferous

In this lyric, no one can see if they have something in their eyes. Here, Billy is talking about fooling the jury with glitz and glam and saying that they can never catch on to it. He is using the exaggeration of sequins being in one's eyes to illustrate that point!

The use of the term "first-rate" which means amateur or not very good shows that Billy thinks that Roxie doesn't even have to be particularly skilled at doing so.

Give 'em the old flim flam flummox
Fool and fracture 'em
How can they hear the truth above the roar?
Throw 'em a fake and a finagle
They'll never know you're just a bagel,
Razzle dazzle 'em
And they'll beg you for more!

Give 'em the old double whammy
Daze and dizzy 'em
Back since the day of old Methuselah
Everyone loves the big bamboozaler
Give 'em the old three ring circus
Stun and stagger 'em
When you're in trouble, go into your dance
Though are you are stiffer than a girder
They'll let you get away with murder
Razzle dazzle 'em
And you've got a romance

COMPANY (with Billy):
Give 'em the old
Razzle dazzle
Razzle dazzle 'em

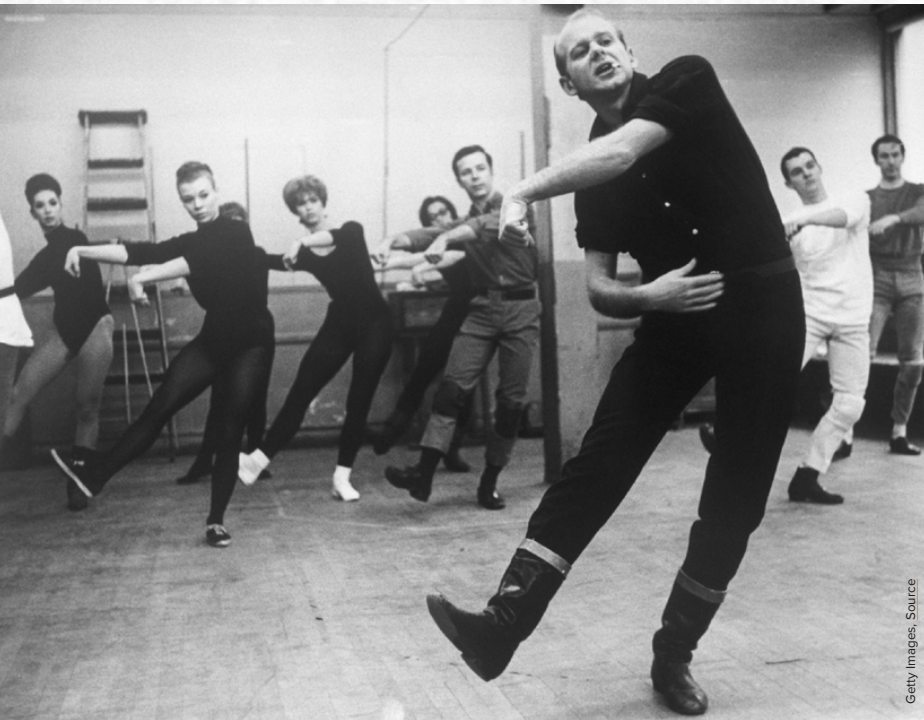
BILLY:
Show 'em the first rate sorcerer you are
Long as you keep 'em way off balance
How can they spot you've got no talents
Razzle dazzle 'em
Razzle dazzle 'em
And they'll make you a star!

These lines refer to dancing as a form of distraction. He is depending on the jury not being very observant. Also think back to the relaxed, distracted audience of vaudeville—the court room is just a vaudeville stage!

Referring to the ways Velma and Roxie have been able to gain fame from something so terrible like committing murder.

“ALL THAT JAZZ”

THE INFLUENCE OF BOB FOSSE



Getty Images, Source



Getty Images, Source

Bob Fosse is one of the most influential choreographers in Broadway musical theatre history. He is the most awarded choreographer in Tony Awards history, winning for Best Choreographer eight times for shows such as *The Pajama Game*, *Damn Yankees*, *Sweet Charity*, and *Pippin*, among others. Fosse also won an Oscar for directing the film version of the musical, *Cabaret*, and has been nominated for his work on other films like *Lenny* and *All That Jazz*. Along with choreographing the original production of *Chicago*, he also co-wrote the book to the musical.

How can you spot some Fosse choreography? Look out for finger-snapping, titled bowler hats, net stockings, gloved fingers that are spread out, turned in knees and toes, and signature shoulder rolls. Fosse himself calls it “the amoeba.” His dance style combines elements of jazz, ballet, tap, and cancan - just to name a few. The influence of his work is not only felt and seen across musicals until this day, but also with popular musical artists such as Michael Jackson and Beyoncé.

THE INCLUSIVE CASTING OF CHICAGO ON BROADWAY

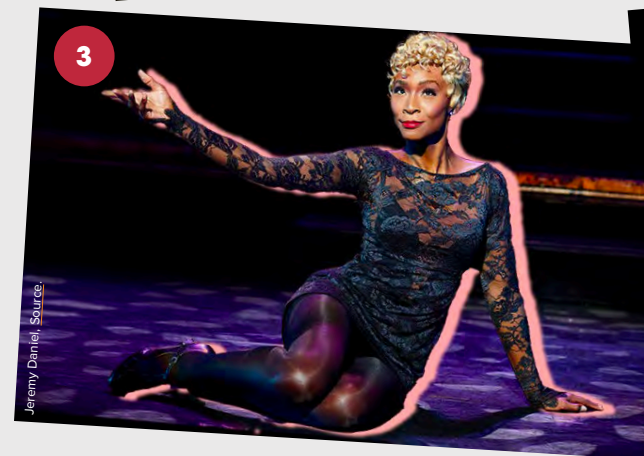
Musicals featuring women of color can be very few and far between. *Chicago*, fortunately, has a really long history of casting actors of color in its leading roles!



Source



Martha Swape/The New York Public Library, Source



Jeremy Daniel, Source



Jeremy Daniel, Source



Suzanne Dix/The New York Times, Source

1 Kirsten Childs (right) as Velma Kelly in the 1979 *Chicago* national tour

2 Chita Rivera as Velma Kelly in the original Broadway production

3 Angelica Ross as Roxie Hart—the first trans woman to portray the role on Broadway!

4 Brandy as Roxie Hart

5 Usher as Billy Flynn

ACTIVITY

Put yourself in the shoes of a casting director. How would you cast this show inclusively? What kinds of actors would you want to highlight?

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<https://masterworksbroadway.com/artist/bob-fosse/>



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