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Ms. Parent

Chicago Musical

Chicago Dramaturgy

A dark stage sits dormant and still, just then a voice reaches across the theater, “Welcome. Ladies and Gentlemen, you are about to see a story of murder, greed, corruption, violence, exploitation, adultery, and treachery – all those things we all hold near and dear to our hearts. Thank you.” The audience is immediately drawn in, for who could turn down such a temptation as a good story be it fiction or not. The real-life people of 1920s Chicago would certainly agree. Too caught up in their hedonist ways, the public didn’t even think to question the ethical implications of the glamourized stories the press peddled about the horrific crimes committed by beautiful young women. *Chicago* is no innocent fiction. Before it was musical, the story of *Chicago* was a movie, a play, and just one reporter’s day to day. It’s time to expose the backstory of *Chicago*, let us begin...



Maurine Dallas Watkins

The 1920s. Chicago. The alcohol flowed like the forbidden nectar of the gods as humanity did its best to outlaw it. In 1919, the United States passed the National Prohibition Act which led to the criminalization of the manufacturing, distribution, and sale of alcohol. Humans, ever the clever innovators found ways past the Prohibition Act. High demand for alcohol in big cities like Chicago drew the attention of organized crime groups looking to make some money; thus, giving way to violence and corruption within the city and its people. Alcohol went underground to illegal bars called speakeasies. Bribes, extortion, and intimidation became commonplace and Chicago’s scandalous reputation grew. Even before the 20s, Chicago was truly the place to be. After the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, young entrepreneurs and architects would descend upon the ruined city set on rebuilding it. Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, the city grew with skyscrapers and with people. The Great Migration would introduce jazz. Revolutionizing music and the culture of Chicago, jazz made the Roaring 20s. Considered “the devil’s music” by conservatives, waves of rebellious flappers only wanted to consume it more. Criminals saw jazz as a great business opportunity and struck mutually beneficial deals with jazz legends like Louis Armstrong and Joseph “King” Oliver. And so, Chicago became the epicenter of jazz, alcohol, crime, and more crime. Newspaper exploited the scandal of the second city. Among them was none other than the Chicago Tribune, where we lay our scene. New to Chicago, Maurine Dallas Watkins found work as a reporter for the newspaper in 1924. Little did she know the next eight months of her career at the Chicago Tribune would change the course of her life forever.

Watkins’ work took her to ‘Murderesses Row’ in Chicago’s Cook County Jail where she would meet Beulah Annan, the future inspiration for Roxie Hart, and Belva Gaertner, the future inspiration for Velma Kelly. Unlike the musical, these two merry murderesses did not know each



Beulah Annan

other prior to being sent to jail. Beulah Annan was a southern woman of 23 years when she was found on April 3, 1924, in her bedroom with the dead body of Harry Kalstedt, the real-life Fred Casely. Tired of her marriage to Albert Annan whom Amos “Mr. Cellophane” Hart was based on, Annan started having an affair with Kalstedt. Unfortunately, Annan’s story kept changing so it is not completely understood why she shot her lover. What is known is that Kalstedt was putting on his hat and coat before he was shot in the back by Annan who put on a record of a foxtrot song called “Hulu Lou” for over two hours and drank many cocktails waiting for Kastedt to finally die before calling Albert to tell him she had killed a man who tried to rape her. Prosecutes would argue that Beulah had killed Kalstedt because he wanted to end their affair.

Whatever the reason, her husband paid a hefty amount for Willian Scott Stewart, a high-profile lawyer. Together, Annan and Stewart first presented a self-defense argument where Annan and Kalstedt both reached for the gun and ended with both reaching for the gun because Kalstedt learned that Annan was pregnant. Belva Gaertner on the other hand had it a bit easier with her case argument. Like Velma Kelly, she was a performer, specifically a

cabaret singer with the stage name Belle Brown. On March 12, 1924, the body of Walter Law was found slumped over the steering wheel of Gaertner’s car with an illegal bottle of gin and an automatic pistol on the floor of the car. She was nowhere to be found at the scene, instead, she was in her apartment. She claimed she found herself covered in blood without any memory of what happened. The 38-year-old socialite went down the scapegoat route by blaming the jazz and the alcohol the murder and her lack of memories. She would also have the benefit of also affording the good lawyer, WW O’Brien. Both women armed with excellent lawyers that both inspired the charismatic Billy Flint, and beautiful looks took Chicago by storm with the help of Watkins’ articles that dramatized the women’s cases and made them infamous to the public who couldn’t help being captivated by the femme fatales.

She wrote on anything and everything that had to do with the women’s cases and personal lives. The public went mad for all the bits and pieces of gossip the press provided. Seeing the power of the press and public opinion, Annan and Gaertner started to rely on the public’s sympathy and love to win their cases. It is rumored that the two set up a beauty school within the jail to help their fellow women in looking appealing to the all-male juries that would decide their fate. Watkins still tried her best to tie in a small thread of skepticism in her articles, still, her efforts were all in vain. In the end, Annan and Gaertner were both be acquitted mere days apart from each other. Annan never give birth to the child she supposedly had leading to speculation on the authenticity of her claims to be pregnant at all. She would also divorce her husband soon after the trial as well and die around the age of 28-30 from tuberculosis. Gaertner returned to her last ex-husband until they broke up when she threatened to kill him. She went on to keep herself out of trouble from then on.



Belva Gaertner

Watkins regretted her role in influencing the acquittal of Annan and Gaertner who she always felt were guilty. So, like any good writer, she wrote about it later in the form of a play she titled *Brave Little Woman* before later being changed to *Chicago*. She wrote the script as a class assignment while attending Yale Drama School which then debuted on Broadway in 1926 where it was well-received running 172 performances. The dark comedy helped to highlight how corrupt the justice system was with its reliance on one's appearance over their story and how the press can be a weapon to get away with murder. *Chicago* was first made into a silent film by Cecil B. DeMille in 1927 and in 1942 called *Roxie Hart* where Roxie was accused of murder without having committed it. In the 1960s, the play would come into the hands of one Gwen Verdon who read the script to her husband Bob Fosse and urged him to make it a musical. Fosse agreed and tried to buy it from Watkins on multiple occasions failing each time until her estate sold it after her death. With rights in hands of producer Richard Fryer, Verdon, and Fosse, John Kander and Fred Ebb began working on a musical score. The two modeled each number on a traditional vaudeville number or a vaudeville performer to immerse the audience into the 1920s and to home in on the comparison of show businesses and the justice system. Fosse's unique choreography style went hand in hand with the show's jazzy numbers. It was under his directorship that the musical hit Broadway in 1975 and ran for 936 performances before being revived in 1996 making the revival one of the longest-running musicals in American history to date. Fosse would also go on to choreograph the 2002 film *Chicago*, the most famous adaptation, starring Renee Zellweger, Richard Gere, and Catherine Zeta-Jones. It won six Academy Awards, including Best Picture.



Bob Fosse dancing with Gwen Verdon

Bob Fosse's choreography style was used heavily as inspiration in our production, but what is Fosse's style? Well, it is his signature jazz style which often features crisp finger snaps, turned-in pigeon toes, and other specific detailed moves. He changed Broadway in the 1950s-70s with his choreography for musicals like *Sweet Charity* and *Damn Yankees*. His influence goes as far as reaching Michael Jackson and Beyoncé. Learning Fosse movements can be awkward as they require precise execution of detailed movements. Dancers must learn to isolate their body parts. Fosse's protégé Ann Reinking says, "The work is fragile. If you don't do it with the specificity it needs, it can fall apart." Every movement is supposed to convey the story. Dina Laurenson, a Fosse dancer, recalls that Fosse never called his performers dancers instead he called them actors. Moves didn't have to be big, rather they had to be powerful. Many dancers would find the "less is more" rhetoric helpful. From the precise movements to the commitment to telling a story, one cannot ignore how Beulah Annan and Belva Gaertner's actions can also be characterized in such a way. Both strategically dolled

themselves up for their trials and committed to their own stories for their trials. Utilizing the press and public opinion, *Chicago* tells a story relevant to today's information age where fake news and confirmation bias runs rampant.

Chicago has cemented itself as a classic musical with themes that will stay just as relevant as they were when Watkins first penned *Brave Little Woman* and when Gwen Verdon and Bob Fosse made the fateful decision to create the musical. The story of *Chicago* has come a long way and shows no sign of stopping. Without a doubt, the talented cast and staff of Brighton High School will give you the ol' razzle-dazzle tonight.