

EE in Theatre

Extended Essay in Theatre

How is the metaphor of show business as life presented in Bob Fosse's
Broadway Production of *Chicago*?

Bob Fosse's Broadway production of *Chicago*: A metaphor of show business as
life

Word Count: 3680

Pages: 12

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Historical Context	2
Chicago in the 1920s	2
America and Fosse in the 1970s	2
The Metaphor through Plot and Form	2
The Use of Vaudeville	4
Fosse's Choreography and Directorial Performance Choices	5
Brechtian Influence	6
Production Elements	7
Conclusion	9
Bibliography	i

Introduction

Bob Fosse grew up under the theatrical influences of the aging vaudeville circuit and inherited his love for it from aging vaudeville stars, so it only made sense that one of his most iconic works took a similar form. In 1975, *Chicago* opened on Broadway, written, directed, and choreographed by Fosse himself, with lyrics by Fred Ebb, and music by John Kander.

Set in 1924 in its namesake, *Chicago* follows nightclub dancer turned "Merry Murderer" Roxie Hart after shooting her lover. Keen for stardom and to avoid conviction, she hires Billy Flynn, Chicago's best criminal lawyer who transforms 'her malicious crime into a barrage of sensational headlines' ("Chicago") and Roxie herself into an overnight celebrity. She also competes for the spotlight with Velma Kelly, a Vaudevillian who previously committed a double homicide with her sister and husband as victims.

The plot itself is dark and deals with jazz, murder, and adultery in the prohibition era, but Fosse's vision and intention were darker yet. Conceived as a response to his interpretation of cynicism in America after the Watergate scandal, Fosse used *Chicago* to present a dark criticism of the realities of show business, often sensationalised by the media. Known to '[attack] hypocrisy wherever he saw it, even in his own work' (Miller), *Chicago* was just one example of his explorations of this criticism. His previous musicals, *Pippin* and *Cabaret*, and the near autobiographical film he would go on to direct, *All that Jazz*, also explored the metaphor of show business as life, of which Fosse is very familiar due to his own upbringing within the entertainment industry. This metaphor permeated through many of Fosse's directorial choices, but also through the form the musical takes on itself, and other theatrical elements. Therefore, this essay will explore the question:

How is the metaphor of show business as life presented in Bob Fosse's Broadway Production of *Chicago*?

This essay will analyse both how Fosse uses the Vaudeville acts and other theatrical elements in *Chicago* to present the metaphor he was almost obsessed with, and also how he uses them criticize itself- show business and theatre - for their false glamour, the chronic corruption, and the media's tendency to turn murderers into celebrities, immorally capitalising on show business for profit.

Historical Context

In order to present effective arguments on the hypothesis, it is imperative that the historical context of *Chicago* in the 1920s, where the musical is set, is explained further, alongside the context of the time the production itself was being conceived.

Chicago in the 1920s

Chicago is set in the 1920s, which marked the heyday of both Vaudeville and the prohibition era.

Vaudeville was the most popular form of entertainment at the time, with estimated over 900 vaudeville houses all across America in 1919 (Miller). At its core, vaudeville was simply a series of variety shows, where anything from singing to comedy, ventriloquism to tap dancing, could be an act, and anybody, from Babe Ruth to Hellen Keller, could appear in vaudeville. Vaudeville promoters were also looking for 'freak acts', "especially convicted murderesses whose victims were cheating lovers. On stage, these nonperformers might sing or dance, but they were there primarily to be gawked at." (Gottfried, 489).

The prohibition era, which began with the banning of all alcohol in 1920, also marked the beginnings of a period of lawlessness and rebellion that resulted in the popularisation of the 'speakeasies': secret clubs hidden throughout the city where you can freely enjoy bootlegged alcohol for steep prices. Certain personalities, like that of Texas Guinan in New York City, also thrived during this period as masters of ceremonies, entertaining guests with signature phrases and charisma to keep the public coming back for more. The business of illegal drinks was eventually taken over by organised crime groups, leaving murder and crime rates to climb to all-time highs.

Chicago was initially a non-musical play written by Maurine Dallas Watkins in 1926, based on the two real-life singers-slash-murderesses Beulah May Annan and Belva Gaertner, whose cases Watkins covered during her time as a *Chicago Tribune* reporter in the 1920s, and serve as the inspiration for the characters Roxie Hart and Velma Kelly respectively.

America and Fosse in the 1970s

The 1970s, when the play was produced, were also trying times for America. The Nixon administration had just dealt with the infamous Watergate scandal, and the US was going through a period of distrust towards the many attorneys involved, and therefore distrust towards the legal system (NCC Staff), which Fosse said he wanted to reflect in *Chicago*. This intention may have been the case, however, Fosse initially only took on the project to please his then

dancer girlfriend, Gwen Verdon. On top of his initial personal disinterest in the story of *Chicago*, Fosse suffered a near heart attack during the first week of rehearsal and had to undergo open-heart surgery, resulting in his suffering of post-operative depression (Gottfried).

Fosse had also grown up in show business all his life, and although he worshipped it and chose to create his career within its confines, he knew that the reality of show business was eerily similar to the stories he told of it onstage. Though Fosse's work often had dark undertones to it, the situation of the US and himself at the time only made this particular work even darker.

Chicago was revived again in 1996 with new choreography and vision by Ann Reinking, formerly Fosse's mistress, 'in the style of Bob Fosse' (*The Broadway League*). Reinking's revival is the version that is currently playing on Broadway, but this essay will mainly refer to the original production and book by Fred Ebb and Bob Fosse unless otherwise noted.

The Metaphor through Plot and Form

The plot and the way it's presented, coupled with its similarities to real-life is complex within *Chicago* and contains many layers.

The first layer is self-explanatory: the plot itself is based on two real-life murderesses who became viral because of their crimes. A real-life story interpreted and acted out for the stage is already a metaphor in itself. The criticism of the American justice system is also made clear with the conflation of the justice and entertainment industries that eventually leads to the girls' eventual plea of innocence despite their murders.

The second layer comes to play upon the realisation of the importance of form in the metaphor. *Chicago* is a musical, and a major part of the entertainment industry that it's critiquing. The mere fact Fosse chose to critique it through itself is a clear use of irony and a self-referential metaphor that carries much meaning.

The form of the musical then comes into play. Each song in *Chicago* is presented through a series of Vaudeville-style acts intercut between scenes of dialogue and action. Many a time, each act is presented 'a-la' actual Vaudeville star in the 1920s. Not quite a play-within-a-play, but performances within a musical, the chosen form to present the songs in *Chicago* admits to the audience its own self-awareness of the irony and the metaphor one step deeper, especially when noting how the Vaudeville circuit in the 1920s mirrors the Broadway industry in the modern times in their popularity levels as live entertainment.

The Use of Vaudeville

The choice to use Vaudeville to present each song was the idea of Fred Ebb, the writer of the musical book along with Fosse. Similar to Fosse's previous movie, *Cabaret*, they decided to set each song on a Vaudeville stage so they 'would be "justified"' (Gottfried 482). The structure of the show even similarly follows the order of a whole Vaudeville programme, such as beginning the show with what was meant to be a sister act with 'All that Jazz', the sprinkling of ethnic acts of which 'Cell Block Tango' is an homage, and having a next-to-closing act featuring the headliners Roxie Hart and Velma Kelly in the 'Hot Honey Rag' after being acquitted (Kenrick).

Chicago opens with a master of ceremonies addressing the audience directly:

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 (Ebb and Fosse 9).

Mimicking the role of the master of ceremonies, or 'the interlocutor', of Vaudeville shows, who introduced performers and kept the order of the show, the audience is transformed from just the audience of the musical itself, but also into the audience of a Vaudeville show, and Fosse effectively establishes the time period in which *Chicago* is set, as well as the flow for the rest of the musical.

Following the opening speech, Velma Kelly is introduced with her first song 'All That Jazz'. Her demeanour and invitation to the audience to go 'paint the town' (Ebb and Fosse 9) mirrors that of Texas Guinan, celebrity speakeasy hostess during the prohibition era. Guinan's infamous greeting to her club's patrons, 'Hey sucker,' would also be imitated by Velma Kelly at the top of act two (Trachtenberg). The character of Velma Kelly is therefore fashioned after two real-life celebrities, both in the entertainment industry (Gaertner was a jazz singer herself), and both criminals (although neither were ultimately convicted for their crimes). As previously mentioned, often Vaudeville bills will begin with a sister act. The audience is unaware of this fact at the beginning of the musical, but Velma was in fact meant to perform alongside her sister before murdering her. This negative subversion of the traditional Vaudeville order also demonstrates Fosse's cynicism towards the entertainment industries.

Roxie's first song is "Funny Hunny", where she enters 'sitting on top of [a piano], à la Helen Morgan' (Ebb and Fosse 14). This homage to the American singer and actress from the 1920s mirrors that of Morgan's song "Bill" in the musical version *Show Boat*, where she sings about Bill, a man she loves despite his ordinariness ("Bill lyrics"). Morgan's tendency to sit on top of a piano is also imitated by Roxie. However, by the end of the song, when Amos, Roxie's

loyal husband, finds out he's been covering for her for the wrong reasons and exposes Roxie, she ends the song singing 'That scummy, crummy dummy hubby of mine' (Ebb and Fosse 16), subverting the song's original message, and furthers evidence of Fosse's cynical view of all the happenings in *Chicago's* plot.

Other homages to Vaudeville stars and styles includes "We Both Reached for the Gun" that pays homage to ventriloquist acts, trick milk¹ and all; The Matron, during the Hunyak's Hungarian rope trick acts as a ring master to a circus; The quartet and Charleston in "When Velma Takes the Stand" (Miller); the "Tap Dance" in act one scene, among others. Roxie Hart even sings in act one scene nine, 'And Sophie Tucker'll shit, I know / To see her name get billed below / Foxy Roxie Hart', referring to 'the last of the red hot mamas' (Kremer) of the Vaudeville era, an extremely popular singer and comedian who often headlined Vaudeville programs.

The references and homages to popular artists and the stereotypical acts of the Vaudeville circuit serve as reminders of the time period *Chicago* is set in (the heyday of Vaudeville), but also as subtle reminders of the similarities of the Broadway and Vaudeville industries with the fictitious world of the play, thus reminding the audience of the actual realities outside of the theatre that unfortunately mimic the cynical narrative presented.

Fosse's Choreography and Directorial Performance Choices

Jade Wooldridge, musical theatre student at the Guildford School of Acting, has studied Fosse's original choreography for *Chicago*. On Fosse's signature style, she says 'he often hunched his back, and didn't worry too much about making moves aesthetically pleasing. Instead he relied on what was then considered crass, such as hip rolls and suggestive motions' (Wooldridge). These types of movements are featured throughout all of *Chicago*, and the then scandalous choreography only adds to the cynical reading and interpretation of the show. Fosse didn't try to mask the realities of show business behind pretty movements- 'he didn't want a show to be pretty' (Gottfried 493)- instead, he used his choreography to be extremely direct towards the audience with his intentions of painting the show business industry in an 'ugly' light. In fact, before the eventual cut of his staging, Fosse even imagined the number "Razzle Dazzle" 'orgastically ("pornographically" was producer Bob Fryers word for it) with dancers writhing and

¹ Trick milk refers to a ventriloquist 'drinking milk' during their act to prove it isn't them who's speaking.

coupling on the stairs in assorted sexual combinations' to symbolize the corruption of justice (Gottfried 541).

Fosse also really liked the idea of staging small scenes within songs— 'they made a show continuously musical' (Gottfried 544). The literal inclusion of scene's that happen in the universe of the musical within songs presented vaudeville style position the acts as a performance of the reality of the play, thus emphasizing the metaphor of show business as life.

Brechtian Influence

Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), a German theatre practitioner, was no stranger to satire either, and critics have compared *Chicago* to his and Weill's *Threepenny Opera* in their savageness and level of scandal never before seen in their respective time periods (Miller). The epic theatre practitioner was widely revered by Fosse, evident in both Fosse's life and work. Uneducated in the scholarly aspects of theatre, Fosse 'could be intimidated by big words' (Gottfried), and was often influenced by those who went to college to study theatre and could claim to be 'Brecht authorities' over him in the staging of his shows.

Chicago as a social commentary is already a tribute to *The Threepenny Opera* and what's credited with the first use of song in theatre to carry a political message. Beyond that, Fosse utilises several Brechtian epic theatre devices to create feelings of alienation within the audience and effectively present his message of show business mirroring real-life.

The use of the master of ceremonies and bandleader narrating and announcing the title of the 'acts' or songs consistently throughout the play mirrors the use of the narrator in many of Brecht's plays. In act one scene eight, the bandleader speaks from the bandstand 'Mr. Billy Flynn sings the "Press Conference Rag"—notice how his mouth never moves—almost' (Ebb and Fosse 38). Similar acts of narration occur throughout to introduce the various songs in the style of the Vaudeville master of ceremonies, and the bandleader's role as an emcee. This use of narration serves to alienate the audience and remind them once again that it is in fact a performance they are watching, inviting them to think objectively on the social commentary and metaphor Fosse is attempting to present.

Another form of alienation lies in another instance of direct address, not in the narration, but in the last scene of the musical, after Roxie and Velma's 'Hot Honey Rag'. After their dance, they turn and address the audience directly in a thank you speech:

Velma: *Thank you. Roxie and I would just like to take this opportunity to thank you. Not only for the way you treated us tonight, but for before this— for your faith and belief in our innocence.*

Roxie: *It was your letters, telegrams, and words of encouragement that helped see us through our terrible ordeal. Believe us, we could not have done it without you.*

Velma: *You know, a lot of people have lost faith in America.*

Roxie: *And for what America stands for.*

Velma: *But we are the living examples of what a wonderful country this is.*

(Ebb and Fosse 91)

Again, the audience has become a character in the show as audience members of Roxie and Velma's performance in the Vaudeville program within the musical. After being drawn into their world of jazz, liquor, crime, and show business, hearing about how they committed their crimes then watching as they are acquitted, developing empathy for them even though we know their intentions, the audience is then confronted directly by Roxie and Velma themselves of their role in letting them get away with their crimes. Through the use of direct address here, Fosse turns around and places the blame on the audience, since they were having too much fun as the musical progressed through the entertainment provided by the Vaudeville acts to realise the real consequence of Roxie and Velma's actions. This idea is verbalised in Billy Flynn's "Razzle Dazzle", 'When you're in trouble, go into your dance.../...They let ya get away with murder' (Ebb and Fosse 76)— exactly what the murderesses do to escape their conviction, but also what Fosse does through the use of the Vaudeville acts. The audience is 'dazzled' by the glitz and the glamour of show business, the sensationalised portrayal of Roxie and Velma's lives, and the flashy choreography that Fosse uses to reel the audience into becoming engaged with the narrative. After doing so, Fosse then alienates the audience through the use of the direct address and breaking the fourth wall to help the audience understand that exactly what they've been so engrossed in is the same societal investment in media stories that let criminals go free.

Production Elements

Fosse once said on black clothing, 'It's a much better line... You look better when you're wearing black. It thins you out... It gives you a dramatic silhouette. There's no break in colour, and you make a nice straight line on the page' (Gottfried 492). Fosse was referring to his own wardrobe preferences, but it's no coincidence that the colour black carries heavy symbolism in the costuming of the characters in *Chicago*.

Tony-award winning Patricia Zipprodt was the costume designer attached to the project, famous for rigorously researching the textiles and designs of any period piece. As *Chicago* is set in the 1920s, Zipprodt created costumes that contained this sentiment. Velma Kelly appeared throughout mainly in black and scantily clad, often in no more than lingerie and a robe. From the time the audience knows her, Velma has always been a part of the show business, and therefore is always depicted in black costuming that represents the darkness and ‘undertone of corruption’ (Gottfried 536) show business and the justice system contain. The audience first sees Roxie, on the other hand, wearing a silver sequin dress, representing the false glamour on the surface of the show business industries. Once Roxie’s introduced into show business, however, in her song “Roxy”, she wears a ‘black bikini, [with] strands of black bugle beads’ (Ebb and Fosse 93), mirroring the stripping of that false façade to reveal the darkness and cynicism underneath.

The lack of clothing in many parts also left audiences stunned with the boldness of presenting such taboo portrayals of the body onstage. The shock the costume designs created served to tantalise the audience with the loose morals attached to show business, before conflating it with the reality that those loose morals translate very well into the reality.

Set designer Tony Walton’s original idea for the set of *Chicago* included a giant top hat. “The onstage band would be on top of it. The brim [of the hat] curved so irregularly that it would give the audience a different view whenever the hat revolved a quarter turn. The action would be played on that brim” (Gottfried 493). Fosse was unwilling to stage his show on such an elaborate set, so he settled for the design depicted below in figure one.

Image removed for copyright reasons

Figure 1. A sketch of Tony Walton's set design for *Chicago* (1975)

The design still features the onstage band, highlighting them as an important element of the musical in that they set the musical in the era of jazz and vaudeville. The incorporation of the band onstage also further sets the atmosphere of the musical as a performance within a performance, alluding to the metaphor of real-life imitation show business.

The contrast between the dark and minimalistic atmosphere the set creates as a backdrop to the scandalous and energetic dances and staging also sets the cynical undertone of the false glamour of the show business façade Fosse wanted to highlight.

Both the set and costuming complement each other to help Fosse highlight his metaphor of show business as life. The underlying dark tones of both elements mimic his attitude and cynicism of the industries, and help Fosse better set the time period of his piece that ravel the audience into the world Fosse knew so well.

Conclusion

The musical clearly references the dangers of jazz and liquor, so how ironic that Beekeepers are advertised prominently at the bottom of the first page on the original production's playbill, Chivas Regal on the second page, Rémy Martin on the third, and advertisements for White Horse whisky, JB Rare Scotch, and Fleischmann's Gin litter the rest of the pages ("Chicago - Opening Night at the 46th Street Theatre").

Fosse was right to warn America about the dangers of mixing crime and show business. It wasn't long after the opening of *Chicago* that court cases like that of OJ Simpson and Jeffrey Dahmer made the murderers into overnight celebrities through extremely thorough media coverage that sensationalised their crimes.

The metaphor of show business as life penetrates almost every aspect of the musical: through its script, its form, its songs, its characters, its scenic elements, and its staging. It's no wonder Fosse continues to be celebrated among America's greatest choreographers and directors because of his attention to detail and thoroughness in his message.

Despite the cynical message, audiences still flock back time and time again to see the Reinking's revival of *Chicago* and it is currently the second longest running musical on Broadway, following only *The Phantom of the Opera* (Playbill Staff). Watkin's story has also been reimaged countless times in several adaptations since the original play's conception, including a silent film version in 1927, a film starring Ginger Rogers in *Roxie Hart*, and the 2002 Academy Award-winning film *Chicago*, among others. It is no doubt that Fosse's social commentary created through the use of this ingenious metaphor will live long among the heart of Broadway.

Bibliography

- "Bill lyrics." *All Musicals*, 16 Dec. 2013, www.allmusicals.com/lyrics/showboat/bill.htm. Accessed 9 Jan. 2018.
- The Broadway League. "Chicago, A Musical Vaudeville." *Internet Broadway Database*, Broadway League, 31 Dec. 2017, www.ibdb.com/broadway-production/chicago-4804. Accessed 7 Jan. 2018.
- Chicago*. By Lunchbox Productions, performances by Sharon Millerchip and Deone Zanotto, 2 June. 2010, Lyric Theatre at the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts, Hong Kong.
- "Chicago - Opening Night at the 46th Street Theatre." *Playbill*, May 1975, www.playbill.com/playbillpagegallery/inside-playbill?asset=00000150-aea2-d936-a7fd-eef6cad0000&type=InsidePlaybill&slide=1. Accessed 9 Jan. 2018.
- Ebb, Fred, and Bob Fosse. *Chicago: A Musical Vaudeville*. PDF ed., New York, Samuel French, 1976.
- Gottfried, Martin. *All His Jazz: The Life & Death of Bob Fosse*. Cambridge, Da Capo Press, 2003.
- Kenrick, John. "Vaudeville- Part II." *Musicals101.com*, 2003, www.musicals101.com/vaude2.htm. Accessed 9 Jan. 2018.
- Kremer, William. "Sophie Tucker: Everybody loves a fat girl." *BBC Magazine*, vols. BBC World Service, 8 Feb. 2016. *BBC News*, www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35505532. Accessed 29 Jan. 2018.
- NCC Staff. "The legacy of Watergate: Five ways life changed after the scandal." *Constitution Daily*, National Constitution Center, 8 Aug. 2017, constitutioncenter.org/blog/the-legacy-of-watergate-five-important-changes-after-the-scandal. Accessed 7 Jan. 2018.
- Playbill Staff. "Longest-Running Shows on Broadway." *Playbill*, 3 Dec. 2017, www.playbill.com/article/long-runs-on-broadway-com-109864. Accessed 3 Jan. 2018.
- Program for Anne Reinking's *Chicago* at the Ambassador Theatre, New York. Playbill, 2011.
- Program for Bob Fosse's *Chicago* at the 46th Street Theatre, New York. Playbill, 2012.
- Roland, Annette. "epic theatre." *The Chicago School of Media Theory*, U of Chicago, 2018, lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/epic-theater/. Accessed. 11 Jan. 2018.

Walton, Tony. *Set Design Sketch for Chicago (1975)*. Tony Walton, [tonywalton.net/](http://tonywalton.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/IMG_9963.jpg)

wp-content/uploads/2014/09/IMG_9963.jpg.

Trachtenberg, Leo. "Texas Guinan: Queen of the Night." *City Journal*, Spring 1998, [www.city-](http://www.city-journal.org/html/texas-guinan-queen-night-11938.html)

journal.org/html/texas-guinan-queen-night-11938.html. Accessed 9 Jan. 2018.

Wooldridge, Jade. Interview. 18 Oct. 2017.