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TECHNICAL DIRECTION

OF

CHICAGO

by

JOSEPH SKALA

A THESIS PROJECT SUBMITTED

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT

OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

IN

THEATRE ARTS

MINNESOTA STATE UNIVERSITY, MANKATO

MANKATO, MINNESOTA

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ABSTRACT

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This document provides a detailed and comprehensive record of Joseph Skala's process for the technical direction of *Chicago*, written by John Kander, Fred Ebb and Bob Fosse. It is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Theatre from Minnesota State Mankato. This thesis traces the technical director's process beginning with a preproduction analysis of the scenic design. It includes a historical and critical analysis of the production, a journal detailing the technical director's process, post production analysis and an analysis of the technical director's process development. Appendices and works cited are included.

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For *M.* and *J.* and for my Grandparents. For *F.* and for *S.*

But mostly for Naoko, with my love and thanks.

“Lord! Teach me to seek thee and show thyself to me as I seek: For I cannot seek thee unless thou teach me, nor find thee unless thou show thyself.”

-St. Anselm

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CHAPTER I

PRE-PRODUCTION ANALYSIS

Chicago, created by composer John Kander, lyricist Fred Ebb with book by Ebb and Bob Fosse, is scheduled to be the first production in Minnesota State Mankato's Department of Theatre and Dance's 2010-2011 mainstage season. The production will be directed and choreographed by Paul Finocchiaro, with musical direction by Nick Wayne. The scenic design will be provided by John David Paul, the lighting design by Steven Smith, the costume design by David McCarl and the sound design by George E. Grubb. The production's stage manager will be Rachel A. Lantow and the prop master will be Ali Bowman. Technical direction for the production will be provided by Joseph Skala.

The production's scheduled opening date is September 30, 2010. The first technical rehearsal is scheduled for September 24, and construction is scheduled to begin on August 23. The venue will be Minnesota State Mankato's Ted Paul Theatre.

Pre-production planning is, in this situation, somewhat unique to the production's position in the season. The first concept meeting took place on March 29, 2010, and weekly production meetings were held from that date until the conclusion of Spring Semester, at which point any official preparation was suspended until August. An informal meeting was held on July 22, 2010,

attended by Finocchiaro, Paul and Skala to discuss solidification of the scenic design. The first production meeting after break took place on August 18, 2010, during which Paul's white model and ground plan were further refined to mesh with the visions of Finocchiaro and Smith.

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of the set thus far revealed will be the attempt to support Finocchiaro's goal of using different levels of the scenery to represent reality and non-reality. The lower staircase of the main unit is to remain opaque, and along with the stage floor proper these levels will visually support the realistic aspects of the production. The taller staircase and upper platform therefore must somehow visually support the more fantastical moments of the production. Initially discussion centered around the use of lighting to distinguish between the two areas and the approach to the scenery seemed to be moving toward translucency by means of construction techniques incorporating some form of transparent plastic sheeting. Subsequent discussions between Paul, Smith and Skala suggested the construction approach depicted in Appendix Figure 1, which allows the upstage wall of the main unit to act as an extension of the full stage cyc hung on line set 33.

The two major concerns presented by this approach would seem to be structural and aesthetic. Simply put, the structure should interfere with the lighting effect as little as possible, and the line quality of the structure must be accurate enough to withstand the scrutiny of being illuminated in silhouette.

Addressing the first concern will require further consultation with Finocchiaro, as it is unclear at this time how many performers might be using the upper levels at any given time, or how strenuous the choreography is likely to be. It is anticipated that further consideration of this issue might have a significant effect on the structural necessities of the design.

The second concern, creating consistently straight lines that span 32' across an occasionally uneven stage floor, should be enabled by a construction approach that utilizes jigs to ensure the uniformity of component parts and simple mason's string and shims to ensure that the components are accurately installed. It is anticipated that this approach will challenge some of the prevailing proclivity for the use of 4' levels among shop personnel. Some benefit will be derived in this instance from the logical progression of the build, in that the lower set of stairs on the main unit seems the obvious choice for first construction. The opaque portions of the stair units will be constructed entirely of wood. The process of manufacture will be determined by patterned jigs and installation will be simplified by assembling components into carcasses approximately 8' long and installing these in unit form. The stage floor proper is fairly flat up stage of the plaster line so whatever shimming may be necessary at installation will hopefully inform the process needed to accurately install component parts over the mid stage traps, which appears to be the lowest area of the floor. If consistently straight lines can be achieved in the lower levels they can in turn be utilized to physically establish consistently straight lines in the upper levels. It is

hoped that this approach to construction will provide a consistent and efficient means of manufacture and installation of the scenic elements.

Also worthy of great consideration is Finocchiaro's proposed goal of having a performer fall backwards from the stage floor into the orchestra pit, which will be lowered to its extreme depth of - 6'- 7" for the production. Although the permanent lowering of the orchestra pit cannot be carried out until lighting focus of the pit pipe has been completed, the opportunity to address the situation earlier exists and an attempt will be made to prioritize further research.

An exact reckoning of allocation in regard to the production's \$2,700.00 scenic budget seems at this point somewhat elusive. Preliminary research into the cost and availability of steel seems favorable and the opaque portions of the set can be accomplished using reasonably priced materials and supplemented by the use of existing stock platforms. In addition, stock staircases are available for the upper unit escapes and downstage spiral staircase.

An estimation of the division of unknown labor resources over the course of the twenty four shop days before the first technical rehearsal also seems speculative, at best. As the first production of the main stage season, this production is likely to also be the first university production that many of the shop personnel have been involved with and it seems only logical to presume that this situation will have some effect on efficiency. Again, the progression of construction may ease this transition as wooden construction is often more familiar to students than metal.

A specific concern raised by McCarl involves the delicate nature of many of the costumes anticipated for the production, specifically the adverse effect of rough scenery on fishnet and lace. The budget seems sufficient to allow for the purchase of new sheet stock for all facings.

The introduction of different methods and techniques is always an opportunity in that it can encourage people to look at things differently and a challenge in that many people are often not inclined to do so. The essence of the design of the main structure could be seen as simply as horizontal lines that are straight and parallel. If in full scale one can accurately establish the lowest set of lines straight and parallel to the stage floor, those lines can in turn be used as a physical ledger to create subsequent lines. Similarly, the vertical lines of the upper structure may be determined by establishing right angles to the existing lower level. This process has the express goal of creating structural lines that are straight, parallel and perpendicular with virtually no procedural regard for level or plumb. It is anticipated that this process will prove challenging to some if not all of the known shop personnel, as the prevailing approach to scenic construction tends to attempt to incorporate level and plumb into the construction and installation of scenic elements. It is hoped that exposure to this approach will prove informative to the development of existing shop personnel's construction techniques and also create a positive first experience for newcomers involved with the production.

It is certainly worth noting that this approach to scenic construction is hardly unique or original to the author of this thesis but rather derives from two decades of education, observation and personal experience. It is further hoped that the efficiency inherent in the process and the quality of the finished product will validate the goals of this approach.

CHAPTER II

HISTORICAL AND CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

“Grandfather sang it under the gallows:
‘Hear, gentlemen, ladies, and all mankind:
Money is good and a girl might be better,
But good strong blows are delights to the mind.’
There, standing on the cart,
He sang it from his heart.”

W. B. Yeats, 1938

In 1975, John Kander, Fred Ebb and Bob Fosse’s adaptation of Maureen Watkins’ 1926 play *Chicago* asked the musical questions, “WHATEVER HAPPENED TO OLD VALUES? AND FINE MORALS?” (85). Answers to these questions would seem subjective to the opinions of the individual attempting to answer them. It seems obvious from its first line that the musical intends to address issues of morality, as “murder, greed, corruption, violence, exploitation, adultery, and treachery” (9) would all seem to require some degree of moral relevance in order to distinguish them from other human behaviors.

As an adaptation of an existing work, the musical version of *Chicago* has many similarities to the original. However, one critical difference in plot may

transform the musical into a statement that is perhaps as political as the works of Yeats. While capital punishment exists as a threat in Watkins' original play, Ebb and Fosse's adaptation portrays it literally. In an interview with Sir David Frost in 2010, Jon Stewart noted, "The difference between a satirist and a demagogue is we're observers. We don't have the confidence to take the next step." (Stewart). Whether the musical takes "the next step" is perhaps debatable but it certainly seems to do more than simply observe.

In the period between January 1, 1920 and December 31, 1929 the State of Illinois executed sixty nine convicted felons, all men. In the same time period nationally a total of four women were executed, two in Mississippi (both in 1922), one in New York (1928) and one in California (1929). Three of the executed women were convicted of murder and one of conspiracy to commit murder. The racial demographic was two black and two white. Further, in the entire history of the State of Illinois only two women have been lawfully executed to date. Elizabeth Reed was hanged for murder in the 1840s (in Lawrence County) and Marie Porter died in the electric chair after being convicted of conspiracy to commit murder in 1938. (Streib).

Some of the plot details of the musical regarding capital punishment borrow selectively from the history of the City of Chicago. Isabella Nitti was an Italian immigrant who resided on a farm in rural Cook County, Illinois. When her husband disappeared, she notified the police and several months later she remarried Peter Crudelle, a hired hand who worked on the family farm. When a

body, presumed to be that of her first husband was discovered in a storm drain several months later, Nitti, through a series of events initiated by her lack of understanding of the English Language, was convicted of the murder and sentenced to death by hanging. Had the sentence been carried out, Nitti would have been the first woman executed in the City of Chicago. However, a group of Italian American lawyers, including Helen Cirese, took up Nitti's case and successfully petitioned for a new trial. Cirese in particular worked with Nitti, teaching her English and refining her wardrobe and appearance. Nitti was granted a new trial, released on bail and in 1924 all charges against her and Crudelle were dropped. (Douglas Perry, 116-22, 262).

Watkins' *Chicago* makes some reference to Nitti in the form of "Lucia," an "Eyetalian woman" "who chopped off her husband's head while the star boarder held him down." (30, 31) In Watkins' play "Lucia" is referenced in regard to making Velma's bed but the character does not actually appear onstage. Watkins' *Chicago* does include the appearance of a character referred to as a "hunyak" but the character, "Moonshine Maggie," is a German immigrant with passable English who has been convicted of murder and sentenced to prison for an alcohol related poisoning. (57, 61-64)

Unraveling the choices made regarding ethnicity in the adaptation is a guessing game at best. Hugh Rawson notes that "Hun" was typically used in reference to people of German origin, (204) while the Hunyak in the musical version is Hungarian. The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 could be considered in

terms of the redistribution of ethnicity in the adaptation. The fact that *The Godfather* was the top grossing movie of 1972 could also probably be considered, as could the 1972 film version of *Cabaret*, which ranked eighth in box office receipts for that year. (IMdB, 1972). The adaptation clearly attempts to make the character of the Hunyak sympathetic to the audience.

Whether *Chicago* would remain interesting without the execution of the character of the Hunyak could be seen as a matter of personal taste. Raymond Knapp, commenting on the 2002 film version of “Chicago” in 2006, describes the character as “The only woman on death row who is innocent of murder.” (114). In his 1992 (updated) analysis Scott Miller touches historically on Nitti but does not mention the character of the Hunyak at all, noting that “in Chicago, everyone gets away with it. Only Amos, who isn’t performing his life, gets screwed.” (Miller). Silvie Drake, writing in 1992, found simply that “There are no sympathetic characters in Chicago.” (Drake).

In a short story entitled *Never Bet the Devil Your Head*, Edgar Allen Poe observed that “Every fiction *should* have a moral; and, what is more to the purpose, the critics have discovered that every fiction *has*.” (365). Drake’s review, written for a revival of the musical perhaps indicates the subjective and transient nature of morality. She notes, “A funny thing about “Chicago” the musical. It’s so much better than it was....It’s not the show that’s changed. It’s us.” Drake then addresses “last week’s L.A. riots and their causes” and notes

that “So through no effort of its own a musical that was once a playful satire is now a pointed one.” (Drake)

However, when the musical is considered in relation to the historical events of the mid 1970s it seems doubtful that Ebb and Fosse were intending to be “playful.” In the case of *Furman v. Georgia*, 1972, by a vote of five to four, the United States Supreme Court halted capital punishment. Between that time and 1977, no persons were executed. If morality is indeed subjective and transient in regard to art, it may be no less so in regard to law. Justice Marshall concluded his concurring opinion to *Furman* in part with, “In addition, even if capital punishment is not excessive, it nonetheless violates the Eighth Amendment because it is morally unacceptable to the people of the United States at this time in their history.” (Marshall, 360)

Subjective and transient morality seems observable in Charles Chaplin’s 1940 film *The Great Dictator*. Chaplin’s satire was prescient of the fact that there was something morally questionable with National Socialism in Germany but when the full extent of the violence and injustice was publicized only a few years later, the film’s humor obviously became disproportionate to reality. Yet John Kenrick notes that only a few decades after WWII, “Fosse Uber Alles” was a phrase used by associates to describe Fosse’s directorial approach. (330).

In a much smaller and more personal sense, a similar shift in moral perspective is observable in the history of *Chicago*’s original author. In an article entitled “How Yale Begat Chicago,” chief research archivist at Yale Library Judith

Ann Schiff notes that Watkins was “the precocious only child of a minister and a teacher from Louisville, Kentucky.” Schiff further asserts, “A devout Christian, she resisted all efforts to buy the rights to *Chicago* for a Broadway musical.” (Schiff). While any conclusions drawn regarding Watkins’ personal beliefs would be speculative, it seems observable that her feelings towards the play changed during the course of her lifetime. Perhaps in contrast to the hopes, or fears of Watkins, David H. Lewis asserts that the humor of the musical leaves the audience “laughing down the tattered fates of its underworld darlings with a forgiveness that borders on Christian charity.” (124).

And again, the subjective and transient nature of morality seems equally observable in legal history. In *Furman*, Justice Blackmun was one of four Justices who voted in favor of the death penalty because he believed the Constitution did not expressly prohibit it. His opinion changed over time. In *Callins v. Collins*, 1994, Blackmun reflected on the past, stating; “There is little doubt now that *Furman's* essential holding was correct.” (13). Among the reasons he provided for his change of opinion are these, “It seems that the decision whether a human being should live or die is so inherently subjective--rife with all of life's understandings, experiences, prejudices, and passions--that it inevitably defies the rationality and consistency required by the Constitution.” (27).

Lacking even a definitive source over which to debate, it would seem perhaps that literary criticism would be equally limited in regard to rationally and

consistently determining to what degree the musical adaptation of *Chicago* can legitimately be considered satire. Even Watkins' original play inspired literary controversy. Writing for the New York Times in 1926, critic J. Brooks Atkinson observed, "For "Chicago" is not a melodrama, as the prologue indicates, but a satirical comedy..." (Atkinson).

It is worth noting the possibility that the musical *Chicago's* morality, like the morality of *The Great Dictator*, was prescient. The death penalty was reinstated in 1977. In 2006, in a discussion sponsored by the Pew Forum, the Federalist Society and the Constitution Project, moderator Virginia Sloan provided the following introduction, "First to speak will be Sam Millsap, the former Bexar County district attorney in Texas who prosecuted Ruben Cantu. Mr. Cantu was executed in 1992; recent events indicate that he was very likely innocent." In his remarks, Millsap noted, "It's my view in fact that because it's driven by human beings and decisions that are made by human beings, it can't be fixed, and that as a result what has to happen is that the option to put people to death has to end." (Pew).

Elements of the plot of the musical could seem to predict Millsap's opinion and moral dilemma. However, it would seem that some critical distinction would still have to be made between the original play, which is based on fact and the adaptation which clearly introduces elements of fiction. The execution of two women in Mississippi in 1922 may indicate some merit for the inclusion of the execution of the Hunyak in the musical but it is equally observable that the

executed Women were African American, while the character of the Hunyak is ostensibly Caucasian.

Writing in 1926, Watkins' quickly introduces and dismisses the topic of race in the original play. Roxie, speaking to Amos regarding the cost of her meals in jail, observes, "All right then, I'll eat with the w--- and n-----!" (37). Ebb and Fosse include further racial observation not found in Watkins' play. Billy refers to Amos as "Andy" twice, (33, 64) doubtlessly in reference to "Amos and Andy," which debuted on Chicago radio in 1928.

The filter of our own present views on important and sensitive issues such as race may lead us to approach the past with our own perspectives.

Regardless of how Americans feel about race today, it is an indisputable fact that Mel Brooks' *Blazing Saddles* was the top grossing movie of 1974. (IMdB, 1974). It is perhaps possible even here to regard Watkins' original work as more purely satirical as it at least acknowledges the marginalization of minorities that was typical of society in the period. Watkins' play was reflective of its period. Ebb and Fosse's adaptation seems to avoid both racial and gender issues that seem widely debated during the 1970s in America.

While incarcerated in Beaufort County, North Carolina in 1974, twenty one year old Joan Little stabbed a sixty two year old jailor eleven times with an ice pick and escaped. Little evaded capture for a week before surrendering to the authorities. She was charged with first-degree murder and would have automatically been subject to the death penalty if convicted. She admitted freely

that she stabbed the guard. Little was African American, her jailor and assailant was white. Angela Davis, writing for Ms. Magazine in 1975 observes specifically, “She is being tried-by the same state whose Supreme Court decided, in the 19th century, that no white man could be convicted of fornication with a slave woman.” (Davis). Little was acquitted on the grounds of self defense, as physical evidence from the crime scene indicated that the guard had entered her cell with the intent of sexually assaulting her. The case marked a milestone in American legal history, as it was the first time that self defense against sexual assault was successfully argued in a murder case.

Also in 1974, Inez Garcia killed Miguel Jimenez and attempted to kill another man. Garcia claimed the men had raped her less than an hour before. She was convicted, (People, 1974) granted a new trial and exonerated.

In 1972, Yvonne Wanrow shot and killed an unarmed man who she believed had molested her children. She was convicted. She obtained a new trial, pled guilty to lesser charges and was eventually sentenced to community service and probation. Her case is the namesake of the legal term Wanrow Instruction which stipulates the use of gender neutral language in court proceedings.

The language used to describe these events in some of the popular media of their period is less than neutral. In 1974, an unidentified journalist at People described “The sultry Mrs. Garcia.” (People, 1974) Writing for People in 1976, Jane Estes notes, “Those are the simple, sordid facts of Yvonne Wanrow's case,

but they have set off a furor in the manner of such earlier causes célèbres as Inez Garcia and Joan Little.” (Estes). In an Editorial for Mother Jones Magazine in 1976, Elaine Herscher asserted, “Yvonne Wanrow needs everybody’s support.” (Herscher).

When Watkins’ play opened in 1926 the 19th Amendment was only six years old. Fifty years later American society was still attempting to find gender based equity, even in the legal use of language itself. Historical events provide again an interesting contrast to choices made in the musical version of *Chicago*. There may indeed be some grounds for the allegation “HE HAD IT COMING.” (19). But it would also seem that the real motivations behind at least some of the unhappy conclusions were more serious than some of those depicted in *Cell Block Tango*.

Capital punishment in musical theatre was not unique to *Chicago* during the period. *Hang Down Your Head And Die* was created at Oxford University, England, and the original cast included future Monte Python members Michael Palin and Terry Jones. The play had a successful run in London’s West End before attempting to leap across the Atlantic to Off Broadway. It opened on October 18th, 1964, at the Mayfair Theater (with a different cast) and closed the same night. Norman Nadel, writing for The New York World Telegram noted that the play “compels its audience, whatever its attitudes, to take another look at the Sixth Commandment.” (Nadel). Writing for The New York Times, critic Howard Taubman observed, “Death by hanging is swift, but "*Hang Down Your Head And*

Die makes a long evening of it.” Taubman further notes, “Its manner is that of an angry man in the pulpit.” (Taubman).

Although the revue’s Off Broadway debut was short lived, it had some interesting connections to the near future of American musical theatre.

Taubman’s review observes, “...James Rado and Remak Ramsay sing "The English Way To Die" written by David Wood with a deadpan drollery that is reminiscent of Gilbert and Sullivan.” (Taubman). *Hang Down Your Head And Die* was the first occasion on which Rado and Gerome Ragni worked together and the American failure of that particular production did not seem to diminish their interest in the subject matter.

Blues musician Corky Siegel recalls meeting and briefly collaborating with Rado and Ragni in Chicago, IL and notes that they were attempting to resurrect the failed revue, perhaps by making it more approachable to an American audience. Siegel notes the following lyrics from memory, stating that they were “accompanied by a fast blue grass style of minstrelsy:” “An innocent man is never hanged, mistakes are never made, so if you didn't commit the crime, you need not be afraid.” (Siegel).

In addition, the musicals *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which both debuted in 1971, provide interesting contrast in the sense that if these works are approached from a secular perspective, capital punishment would appear to be their dominant theme.

The musical *Chicago* describes itself as “a story of murder, greed, corruption, violence, exploitation, adultery and treachery.” The official website for the ongoing 1996 revival describes the musical simply as “a universal tale of fame, fortune and all that jazz.” (Chicago). Morality, it seems, is not only subjective in any analysis of *Chicago* but entirely dispensable. Knapp observes, “Indeed, conventional notions of morality seem simply beside the point in *Chicago*.” (238).

Poe’s short story was written in response to the critical allegation that he had “...never written a moral tale, or, in more precise words, a tale with a moral.” (Poe). Yet according to Perry, Poe was adapted to some parts of the story of *Chicago* before Watkins wrote her play. Beulah Annan, the basis for the character of Velma, shot her lover and then played Jazz records for several hours before calling her husband. The Chicago Evening American sensationalized the details of the time period between the shooting and the phone call, speculating that Annan played the records to cover up the sound of a tell-tale clock ticking “Mur-der, mur-der, mur-der, mur-der...” (96).

Like Poe, Watkins received her share of criticism regarding morality. Schiff asserts that “Watkins never lost sight of the darker themes her work sought to dramatize.” Schiff further notes that a Yale Divinity professor stated that Watkins’ *Chicago* was “too vile to be put before the public.” Watkins’ reply is interesting. “What surprises me is that he of all persons, a divinity school professor, should condemn the action of calling attention to evil. . . . More than

likely, he speaks of evil conditions himself. I do the same thing, only the stage enables me to make it more realistic.” (Schiff).

Watkins’ claim to artistic moral authority has some interesting precedents. In 1821 Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote that “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” (Shelley). In 1784 Friedrich Schiller declared that “The jurisdiction of the stage begins where the domain of secular law leaves off. When justice is dazzled by gold and gloats in the pay of infamy...then theatre takes up the sword and scales, and hauls infamy before the dreadful tribune of justice.” (Schiller).

Ebb and Fosse would seem no less entitled to artistic license. However, the story of *Chicago* is based on actual events and people and the musical adaptation certainly does not portray the compassionate efforts of individuals such as Cirese. It seems observable that the personal history of Nitti might be seen to have more in common with the fictional character of Eliza Doolittle than it does with the fictional character of Katalin Hunyak. Perhaps an execution in *My Fair Lady* would seem more incongruous with thematic content than it does in the musical adaptation of *Chicago* but it would also perhaps be equally contradictory to the intent of the original author. Watkins’ play sought to expose the reluctance of Illinois’ all male juries to convict women of murder and the corruption of the thriving legal and media industries that existed as a result of the sensationalism of crime. At least some legal opinion would seem to support Watkins’ perspective.

In Furman, Marshall noted that “There is also overwhelming evidence that the death penalty is employed against men and not women.” (365-6). He further quotes Justice Frankfurter regarding details pertinent to other issues addressed in both the play and musical versions of *Chicago*. Frankfurter observed in 1956, “When life is at hazard in a trial, it sensationalizes the whole thing almost unwittingly; the effect on juries, the Bar, the public, the Judiciary, I regard as very bad.” (368-9). While Ebb and Fosse’s adaptation of Watkins’ play retains some of these ideas it seems obvious that the musical contains political messages not found in the original.

Ebb and Fosse’s *Chicago* is in the style of Vaudeville. Miller’s analysis in particular provides an in depth examination of the derivation and history of Vaudeville in relation to the musical. At the time of this writing Jerry Orbach’s 1975 strip tease performance of All I Care About is available on YouTube and certainly provides insight into the look and feel of the original production. (Orbach).

The Book and Libretto of *Chicago* may be considered from the perspective of morality, gender, artistic license or legal history and in regard to content legitimate conclusions could perhaps be drawn ranging from prophesy to propaganda. There seems to be little doubt that the musical attempts to deliver a blow to capital punishment. The soundness of that blow would seem subjective to the opinions of individual observers.

CHAPTER III

THE TECHNICAL DIRECTOR'S JOURNAL

May 7, 2010

Chicago's position in the main stage season presents some interesting challenges and opportunities. The biggest challenge I personally seemed to face so far has been remembering to attend Concept Meetings. I missed two meetings but both Paul Finocchiaro and John Paul have been understanding and helpful in terms of keeping me informed of developments. Many, if not most of the members of the Production Team are also involved in Highland Summer Theatre, which obviously will need to happen before CHICAGO. Paul will continue to refine the set design over the summer and details will be finalized in August.

July 22, 2010

Finocchiaro, Paul and I had an informal meeting today to touch base regarding the scenic design. I was somewhat concerned with the amount of steel in the set, in terms of budget but also in terms of skilled labor. I think I made some progress regarding my own communication skills in the meeting. I simply said that at the start of the school year it was difficult to predict how quickly the work could safely be done and that it was unknown at this time what

skills new students would bring with them, or need to acquire. It might seem like a simple thing but it is important because in the past I have tended to try to simply overcome obstacles on my own, without keeping other members of the Production Team informed about the details of my process.

August 18, 2010

Today's Production Meeting finalized many of the details of the scenic design. The opaque portions of the set should be fairly straightforward in terms of construction and installation. I am planning to use oriented strand board (osb) wherever possible, mostly for the sake of economy. I am assuming that at least one half of the budget will be spent purchasing steel. I have obtained prices on the sizes required and I will be able to do more precise estimates when details are more firmly established but overall I feel comfortable with the budget at this time.

The riser portion of stair units was lowered 4" today, which adds up to a total of 44" inches subtracted from the height of platforms in the original design. This of course will not only reduce material costs but also make construction considerably less complicated. The upper staircase will be to some degree translucent and construction of this element will require consideration on my part and consultation with Steve Smith regarding the lighting.

August 23, 2010

I developed an approach to the upper staircase and presented a rough sketch to Paul and Smith. Paul was primarily concerned with the impact the structure would have on the lighting but was satisfied in terms of the look of the approach. Smith was also satisfied but requested that the vertical members be limited to as few as possible and evenly spaced. Conversations with Finocchiaro regarding the number of actors using the structure and the manner in which he anticipated using it lead me to believe that this approach will successfully address all concerns.

August 25, 2010

An element of the production that has been of concern to me is the fall into the pit anticipated during the execution. At today's Production Meeting I suggested the possibility of legging up a platform on which the crash pad could be mounted, in order to reduce the distance of the fall. After the meeting several members of the Production Team went into the Ted Paul Theatre to take a preliminary look and it seems like the idea might work.

On August 23 I made templates for the lower staircase stanchions from ½" plywood. These templates have been used to mark OSB sheets, which were then rough sawn with jig saws and then flush routed to finished size by means of the template.

I often wonder to what degree a Technical Director should prepare work for people working in the shop. Maybe this is easier to do when one is planning based on known variables. In this case I chose to make a template rather than drawing of a template. Whether this approach fully engages the most advanced students is debatable but the results make the approach appealing in terms of efficiency. At the end of the day on August 24 all of the vertical supports for the lower staircases had been completed and some assembly had begun on the units themselves.

September 1, 2010

Work on the lower staircase continues at a pretty good pace. If progress continues it is anticipated that the lower stair unit for certain and perhaps the middle platform will be completed this week. Installation of the stairs was, as anticipated, a fairly straightforward task. The stage floor immediately upstage of the stairs tends to dip, especially in the area of the trap center stage. The stud walls supporting the mid stage platforms required shimming but this task was fairly easy to accomplish as the lower staircase provided the required references.

September 3, 2010

Friday afternoon at three o'clock is a great time to be responsible for something if one is ahead of schedule. It seems like the first two weeks of the semester are starting to catch up to students involved in the build. We kind of

lost some of our earlier momentum and the middle platform was not completed this week.

There is some consolation though in the fact that the work completed so far is acceptable both in terms of function and form. The lower staircase is being used in rehearsal and no notes have been received.

In the next week I hope to prioritize the ordering and delivery of steel.

September 8, 2010

The lower staircase and mid stage platform have been completed and the spiral staircase has been installed. It is functional but will be a bit sturdier once the center post of the staircase is tied into the stage right set wall. The steel needed for the set was ordered today and will be delivered Friday afternoon. Fridays are somewhat unique in that there seems to be several groups of people who typically work in the afternoon but there is usually also a shortage of supervisors. Often it is only me, so unloading and cleaning steel should be an effective use of resources and people should be able to accomplish a lot with minimal supervision. The cost of the steel was \$1,243.00, just under half of the total budget.

Black scrim is desired for the area under the upstage staircase. This presents somewhat of a challenge in that scraps of scrim seem to be in short supply and mounting a full stage scrim under the unit would be physically

awkward and potentially unattractive. Paul volunteered to look into the possibility of purchasing a small quantity of scrim.

September 15, 2010

A lot of progress has been made since Friday. Most of the steel was cleaned and a good portion of the 1 ¼" square tubing was moved into the shop. On Saturday I set up a jig and began cutting parts for the twelve stanchions that will support the upper staircase and top platform. I continued construction, based on ideas developed from the earlier rough sketch and by Sunday afternoon the stanchions were assembled. Construction varied from the original concept in that the diagonal support consists of 1" x 2" tube steel, which should provide more rigidity than 1 ¼" square tube I was originally planning to use.

The decision to build these elements on the weekend was carefully considered. Safety required that they be built correctly and of course in order to look right they all have to be very similar. I decided in this case that it was in the best interest of the production to make these pieces in a controlled environment where consistency and efficient use of materials could be more readily facilitated.

In the past three days we have completed the four treads needed for the upper staircase, the stanchions have been installed and we have begun to install the treads. Some of the stanchions in the middle section of the set required substantial shimming, as expected. Installation of the stanchions themselves was approached by installing the extreme stage left and right stanchions first and

then stretching a mason's string between the two points to establish the horizontal. Vertical lines were established by squaring the stanchions to the top of the mid stage platform. All processes seem to be effective and installation of the treads is easily accomplished.

Installation of the stud walls that will support the upstage edge of the upstage platform has begun and should be finished this week. The upstage escape stairs are stock items and they are completed and ready to install. All other escape stairs and railings have been built and installed.

September 19, 2010

The upstage platforms were begun last week and completed over the weekend. Considerable progress was also made on the orchestra pit staircase, which should be finished on Monday, Sept. 20. The other platforms and structure required in the pit are built and ready to install. Installation of the upper platforms can begin immediately and I hope the upper level will be ready for rehearsal by mid week.

Again, the decision to advance the process by working on the weekend was not made lightly. With only five shop days before first tech it seemed the only solution to the present situation. And again, the need for quality, consistency and efficient material use seemed to require this approach. Had there been just a few steel projects on the set I would probably approach this situation differently. With the abundance of steel construction in this set,

however, it seems that everyone has plenty of opportunity to participate. Paul has spent several afternoons helping with the process, which I greatly appreciate. I also am grateful for the contributions of the graduate assistants and undergraduate students who I think have done great work.

Part of the difficulty at this point in the process is that much of the remaining work is steel fabrication. This limits, of course, the number of people who can participate, based on ability. In a perfect world everyone would have the opportunity to learn and practice new skills. It's also true that students majoring in theatre are investing a lot more than students who are participating through an Introduction to Theatre class. I often feel torn in terms of which student's best interests I can best serve.

September 21, 2010

The orchestra pit went down today and the center staircase and side platforms were installed. Smith saved the day when he facilitated the transfer of the staircase from the shop to the stage by detaching a lighting boom from the floor and breasting it upstage in order for the unit to have a clear pathway. Other than this near miss, the pit installation went smoothly.

September 23, 2010

At yesterday's production meeting, the center "stripper pole" was cut, along with the header that spanned the set from the stage left downstage wall to

the stage right downstage wall. This lessens the remaining work considerably. Progress has been made on the wall units and I expect that they will be installed before first tech tomorrow. This leaves the jail bars, some of which have been installed and the CHICAGO sign which has not been begun. Bases for the light bulbs that will illuminate the sign have been obtained from Smith and an approach to wiring the sign has been discussed. Plastic sheeting has been purchased to frame the perimeters of the letters.

September 24, 2010

First Technical Rehearsal tonight went pretty well. There were no big surprises and no train wrecks, so to speak. There is still work left to do on the jail bars and the sign still needs to be addressed but other than that everything else is there and seems to be functioning quite well. The fall into the orchestra pit was practiced separately and everything seems on track in terms of that moment in the play.

I was hoping to have the set completed at this point. It seems though that in general everyone is satisfied with the work that has been done and completing what is left seems possible in the time remaining. The production is under budget and I anticipate that no major expenditures will be needed to complete the set.

September 25, 2010

More work was done on the jail bars today and this evening's rehearsal went smoothly. The show itself looks to be in great shape and the performers seem comfortable on the set.

September 26, 2010

Today I purchased more OSB for the sign and began cutting out the silhouettes of the letters. The bases will be attached and wiring completed before the perimeter edging is attached, at which point the completed letter will be attached to a frame. It is anticipated that the sign will be hung on Tuesday or Wednesday at the latest.

The platform supporting the crash pad in the orchestra pit had been elevated in order to ease into the final stunt. Today it was lowered to its final depth and seemed to function well in rehearsal, both in terms of performer comfort and in terms of sight line concerns.

September 27, 2010

The letters for the sign were mostly completed today, including electrics and paint. The steel frame on which the letters will mount was completed and tomorrow it should be fairly easy to mount the letters and hang the sign. It certainly doesn't seem ideal to not be finished at this point. There is some consolation in the fact that everything else is finished and seems to be working

well. The scrim pieces, obtained by Paul, were installed under the upstage platform today. Rehearsals have gone smoothly and if nothing else comes up it should be easy to complete everything by tomorrow.

September 28, 2010

It's done! The sign was finished and hung today and looks pretty good. The plastic that was used to form the perimeter of the letter seems to be holding up to the heat from the light bulbs.

This evening's Major's Preview went very well and the audience seemed to really enjoy the show. The set seems like it is holding up very well and I do not anticipate having many repair notes during the run.

October 4, 2010

The show is half way through its run and there have been no issues to report to date. I have completed the strike sign up form and will post it tomorrow. I kind of feel a bit like the grim reaper when I do this in the middle of the run but planning seems to necessitate a bit of detachment.

October 11, 2010

Last night's strike went pretty well but a lot of the steel structure was still standing this morning. I guess I don't find that too surprising as it is time consuming to take apart steel and clean it up for re-use. Today put another dent

in what was left to do but it will probably be another couple of days before everything is completed.

All in all I think that things went fairly well and that the set served the production as intended. The process of building the set was completed under budget, there were no injuries to report and I think everyone involved gained positive experience.

CHAPTER IV

POST PRODUCTION ANALYSIS

Any retrospective analysis of a project may first be broken down into process and product. Product, in this case, seems the simpler of the two to address first. One may assume that finished scenery is the end result of the drawings and models produced during the design process. With a little imagination, one could also assume the inverse, which is to say that the design itself is the finished product and that the finished scenery is merely a 1' = 1' functional scale model of the design. The technical director tends to approach technical direction with the latter perspective. The finished scenery was completed to designer specifications slightly behind schedule and under budget. Structurally and cosmetically it held up very well for the run of the production. Aesthetically, the strong horizontal and vertical lines of the design were straight, parallel and perpendicular. In these regards it seems fair to say that in terms of product initial goals were ultimately achieved.

Analyzing process in retrospect is more complicated in the sense that unknown and changing variables seem individually to offer little opportunity for instruction. At the beginning of the semester the quantity and skill level of labor was an unknown variable, as it is likely to be to some degree at the beginning of every new year. Planning seems integral to process but any plan based on

critical and unknown variables is bound to flounder or drown as resources ebb and flow beyond an individual's control or influence. It was beyond the scope of the technical director's responsibility to change the systemic processes regarding the scheduling of labor and in this regard managing the process became more a matter of responding than planning. While one may applaud egalitarian values it becomes difficult to rationalize systemic approaches that seem to consider the needs of every individual as paramount to the needs of collaborative effort.

A great deal of initial consideration was given to the relative merits of planning work versus preparing work. There seem to be advantages and disadvantages to both approaches. The templates created for reproducing component parts worked very well in terms of expediting the process of building the lower levels and certainly every student involved was exposed to the concept of using templates to safely and accurately reproduce structural elements. Students did not participate in the fabrication of the templates but they wouldn't have participated in the creation of the drawing, either. Perhaps this becomes a matter of teaching to the lowest possible denominator but it is equally true that the process of building scenery is part of the larger process of mounting the production and that time is also a critical variable.

The templates in fact may have worked a bit too well, as the wooden construction was completed much faster than the steel. It was anticipated that this would be true to some degree. The physical approach to the project began down stage and as stair units and levels were completed they were incorporated

into rehearsals. On several occasions this approach caused some minor congestion as one stair unit or level was completed before the next was begun. Although this was not always the most efficient use of resources possible it was the most efficient use of resources practical under the circumstances.

Friday afternoons in particular were challenging, in that the technical director was the only supervisor in the shop and a large number of students scheduled themselves for this time period. Students were on several occasions divided into groups and assigned specific tasks. While completing the lower stair unit, students were divided into two groups, one group who installed the tread components of the stair units and the other who installed the riser components. This approach required the groups to rotate for every step so while one group was working the other group was waiting. This approach was used on multiple occasions throughout the build and although it received criticism from Departmental Technical Director George Grubb the students involved seemed understanding and engaged and the approach ultimately facilitated the overall needs of the production as it allowed for the prioritization of specific tasks.

In retrospect the decision to approach construction and installation without regard to level or plumb worked well, as it always does. The process of introducing this approach was fairly well received and the 4' levels only made it out of the tool room a couple of times. Whether students fully embrace the approach is perhaps less important than exposing them to it and this process did so successfully.

The timeline of the project was not ideal and it would have been preferable to have been finished earlier. As it was, damages were mitigated by prioritizing elements that the performers actually used, all of which were completed prior to the first technical rehearsal. Addressing the sign last obviously affected Smith, who was understanding and supportive of the process. The timing of the steel order was also later than ideal and the build would have perhaps progressed more smoothly had steel fabrication been started earlier. Materials were also purchased for the cut header unit and stripper pole, which would have probably not have been cut if not for time constraints.

In future, the technical director will attempt to expand on communication skills developed on this project. In particular, it seems that unknown variables are less formidable when they are actively defined as such. Early conversations with the production team were beneficial in that the uncertainty of progress was clearly established and expectations were still optimistic but grounded in the reality of the situation. The technical director sees potential in expanding the conversation to include the discussion of alternate plans when confronted with ambitious projects and unknown variables. Such plans might allow for the completion of elements as designed as the first objective, with assigned priorities and back up plans established in case resources were not sufficient to accomplish initial goals. While this approach may seem to take a pessimistic view of the process, when variables are unknown it is perhaps more prudent to plan on the side of caution.

In terms of this project, there may not have been enough time to complete the main header and stripper pole, had they not been cut. In future it will be more beneficial to the technical director's process to attempt to define priorities from the perspectives of the other members of the production team and also attempt to take a greater leadership role in alternative planning. It is perhaps possible to still perceive finished scenery as a scale model of the design but the detail and even functionality of the model are obviously limited by available resources and planning should reflect that reality.

One perhaps always begins a project with the intent of pleasing everyone involved, or at least without the intent of displeasing anyone in particular. The technical director could benefit from a more pragmatic approach to resource management. It is not a lot of fun to say no but saying yes to a thing that is not clearly defined has rarely led the technical director to happy conclusions in the past. One also would perhaps lose interest in projects that were not challenging. In future it is hoped that a greater degree of risk management on the part of the technical director will allow for processes that are more relaxed and hopefully, ultimately more productive.

But beyond that efforts will also be made to function as a manager beyond the confines of the shop. Although some progress was made regarding keeping other production team members aware of and involved in the process, there is still definitely a need for more assertiveness on the part of the technical director in regard to the production calendar. The budgeting of labor needs and material

costs is an extensive and time consuming process and there is nothing wrong with requesting the time needed to plan properly.

CHAPTER V

THE TECHNICAL DIRECTOR'S PROCESS DEVELOPMENT

The technical director's process remains a work in progress. Every process should have a definable goal or outcome. If that goal is simply to provide material needs to a production then the technical director's process is much easier to qualify. However, technical direction seems by nature to be a middle management position in which the needs of the production and the individual needs of people building the scenery must both be considered. In a professional setting, priorities would be relatively easy to assign. In an academic setting it seems greater consideration perhaps should be given to the needs of the individual participants.

A large part of the technical director's motivation for returning to an academic setting was to formalize his understanding and practice of processes such as planning, budgeting and drafting. Theatre Management, Drafting and Technical Direction courses have allowed the technical director the opportunity to explore and expand his knowledge regarding diverse approaches to these processes. Research and Theory and Criticism classes have provided the technical director the opportunity to expand his knowledge of research methods and Theatre History courses have broadened the technical director's base of knowledge.

Individually, as an artist and scholar, the technical director has benefited greatly from the content of all classes attended to date. It is hoped that the positive influence of this experience will aid and guide the technical director's future scholastic endeavors. It is also hoped that on completion of degree that the technical director will once again focus primarily on craft and leave the practice of art to those more inclined to that pursuit. While the design classes attended by the technical director have all been interesting and informative, there remains a seemingly obvious difference between the processes of imagination and the processes of realization.

The difference between these two processes is perhaps best illustrated in the practical application of research itself. For the director, the actor or designer the practical value of research is inspirational and one does not begin the process with a conclusion in mind. For the technical director the practical applications of relevant research are often more easily quantifiable. If one is attempting to participate in the creation of a play then consideration of the play's period will likely inform that process but there is nothing that requires that research to be applied. If one is attempting to purchase a new table saw then research is clearly begun with practicality and application as the primary goals.

The technical director's future success and satisfaction seem to depend on formulating approaches that effectively address the varying skill and comfort levels of all the students involved with the process of constructing scenery. This project in particular has been informative in the sense that the technical director

has gained valuable insight into implementing processes that are accessible to all skill levels. Further work must be done in order to more adequately address the needs of students with more advanced skill levels.

In the future the technical director also hopes to be in a position to exert greater influence over the focus and scheduling of work calls. While the projects completed thus far have been interesting in terms of attempting to juggle priorities with unknown variables, the informality of the scheduling of labor resources often provided challenges that were beyond the scope of the technical director's control. In contrast to this situation, the technical director's experience in his two year tenure as technical director for Highland Summer Theatre allowed during those periods greater influence over the overall schedule with positive results.

The technical director's experience as a teaching assistant in the scene shop provided over 1,500 hours of direct student contact. The opportunity to interact with and guide students with diverse backgrounds and interests has been fascinating, challenging and in many cases highly rewarding.

Within the context of that experience the technical director finds further support for the theory that the construction process relies fundamentally upon craft. There is perhaps an inherent risk in dividing people into groups. At the same time the technical director's experience has led him to believe that certain types of previous experiences allowed some students to participate more readily, gain more from their experience and make greater contributions to the process.

In the technical director's experience students pursuing a major or minor degree in dance, without exception, were simply outstanding. Dancers are trained to move and to emulate movement. In the context of dance movement is obviously meant to be expressive or evocative. It is meant to be art. In the context of operating a power tool movement is equally important but there is little subjectivity in either the goal or the result.

Conversely perhaps, the group of students who seemed to struggle the most were undergraduate acting majors. In the technical director's opinion, as a group these students were more apprehensive and more likely to interpret redirection or advice as criticism. The technical director believes the distinction in perceived quality of experience between these two groups can be explained by the perspectives from which the groups viewed their activities. It is doubtful that the dance majors considered their experiences in the scene shop as equal in artistic merit to their experience in the classroom or stage and if they did it was never expressed. Again in contrast, many acting majors seemed to express the opinion that time spent in the scene shop had nothing to do with their art. Perhaps the ability to disassociate allowed the students of dance to use the skills they possessed without consideration of a larger artistic purpose, which, in the technical director's estimation, is the essence of craft.

The teaching of craft relies on the successes of the past without considering the failures, or even giving much consideration to alternative methods that are obviously less effective or efficient. A challenge to the technical

director in the future will be the attempt to develop a logical and comprehensive set of lesson plans that address technical direction specifically. Some limited preliminary research has been done regarding textbooks on the subject but initial results appear limited. Substantial efforts in this regard will be necessary in order to provide students with a relatively clear blueprint for success.

In terms of technology, the technical director will doubtlessly be at a disadvantage to some of the students who are likely to be encountered in the future. This situation presents the technical director an opportunity to be a positive example of the benefits of continuing education. On a practical level, however, an investment into that education will have to be made. The technical director has made significant progress in this regard in the past two years and is very grateful to the faculty members and students who have provided invaluable assistance. But further efforts will be needed and it is assumed that this skill set will need continued maintenance and upgrades in order to stay relevant.

Communication will also be a continuing area of focus for the technical director. Greater collaboration and more assertiveness in terms of the overall processes of budgeting and planning will also enable the technical director to better prioritize the needs of both the overall production and the individuals constructing the scenery.

The technical director has never suffered from a lack of interest in self development. Often in the past, the desire to acquire new skills has been impeded by uncertainty regarding how or where to begin. Recent experiences,

this project included, have given the technical director more confidence in regard to approaching the unfamiliar with more curiosity and less apprehension. It is hoped that in future this approach will allow for processes that are more relaxed and enjoyable.

The technical director has always approached projects with passion. Whether personal abilities have always been sufficient to focus and direct that passion is a matter for ongoing consideration. It is true that the technical director certainly attempts to consider the needs and goals of others when practicing craft. If integrity is measured by intent then the technical director feels confident that there is at least some integrity in his approach to the craft of technical direction.

APPENDIX

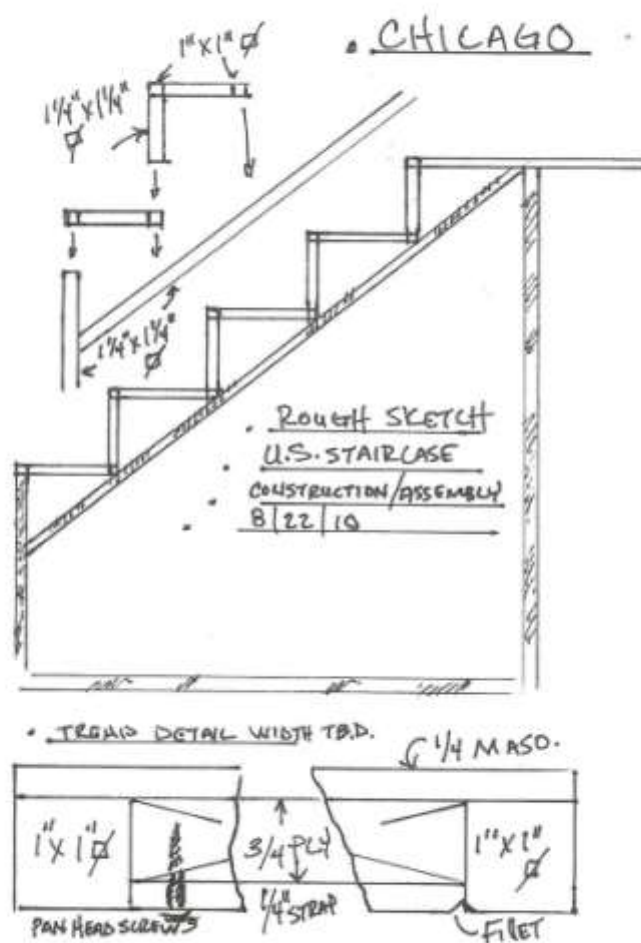


Figure 1. Rough Sketch.



Figure 2. Stanchions.



Figure 3. Chicago Sign.



Figure 4. Production Photo.



Figure 5. Production Photo.



Figure 6. Production Photo.

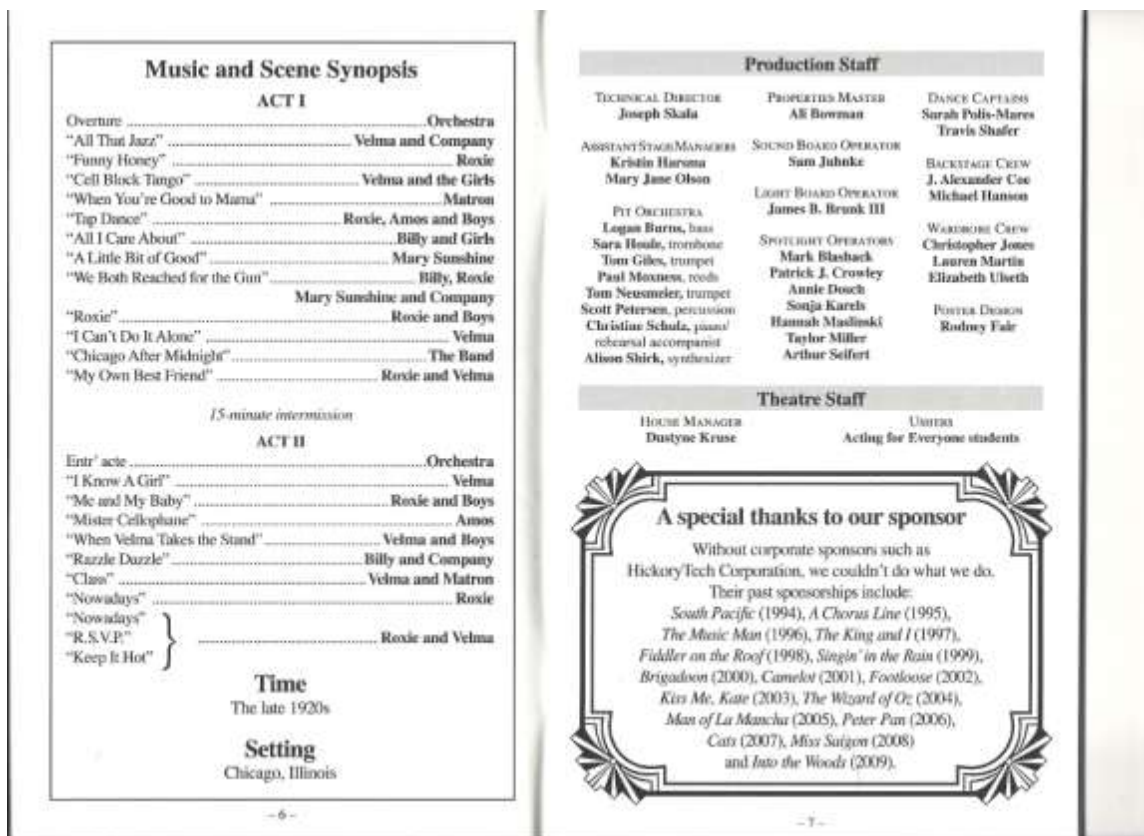


Figure 7. Program.

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