

CHICAGO

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ENTERTAINMENT

Razzle dazzling!

Hampton Court Theatre has been as near to losing its roof this week as it is ever likely to get. And it's a close run thing between the audience and the cast of **Chicago** as to who would actually be responsible for raising it.

In the ten years I've been visiting Teddington Theatre Club's little theatre I cannot recall such a rapturous reception to any show, nor indeed one so well deserved. For this is surely the club's best all-round achievement since they took up residence at Hampton Court.

The odds were formidable from the start. Chicago is a brash outrageous, raunchy, all-American musical primarily concerned with murder, infidelity, greed and corruption. To work well it has to be played at full volume, both musically and in spirit. There is no place for mediocrity or middle class inhibitions (on either side of the footlights) and it takes a fair-sized theatre to contain it.

Hampton Court seats just over 100 and actors may be heard whispering by those sitting in the back row. Not, on the face of it, the ideal venue for an extravaganza such as this. Director John Scarrott, however, was never in any doubt that the intimacy of Hampton Court would actually enhance the show, which he saw as a play with songs rather than a musical per se.

Whilst I wouldn't go so



PATTI BOTTOMLEY:
Too nice for Roxie?

far as to call it an improvement, the size of the theatre certainly ensures that the audience is captivated, willingly or otherwise, by this dazzling spectacle of decadence. When the entire chorus is belting out numbers like All that Jazz or Razzle Dazzle 'Em you are literally pinned to your seat. This isn't a show you sit back and enjoy; it demands a positive gut reaction.

What's so exhilarating about Jon Scarrott's immaculate production is the flair with which it is performed. You expect a club like this to sing, dance and even handle American accents proficiently, but to do all that with the kind of style and flair they exhibit here is always a bonus.

Some of the set pieces are every bit as good as the West End production, notably the press conference number, which has about half a dozen musical gear changes. Only occasionally does an imbalance between band and players upset a good number. Otherwise musical director Peter Thomas has done a marvellous job on a very difficult score.

One obvious reason why Jon Scarrott wanted to do the show was that the club has in its ranks actors who sing as well as they act and all of them naturally found their way in Chicago. Carol Palmer is relatively new to the club, having graduated from Youth Action, but her performance as Velma Kelly, convicted murderess with showbiz aspirations, is one of tremendous energy and attack. She reminded me of a young Libby Morris.

Carol is a buxom brunette and the contrast between her and Patti Bottomley as Roxie Hart, petite and blonde, adds an extra comic dimension to the partnership. Patti's performance is sensational in every department, even if at times she appears far too nice for the mean-spirited Roxie.

As if two star performances aren't enough, there is yet another from Peter Slater as the swaggering, narcissistic lawyer, Billy Flynn, who can get any broad off a moider rap provided you hand over 5,000 bucks. Marvellous character playing, too, from Phil Hickson as the wretched Amos, singing Mr. Cellophane as if he'd just thought of it, Peter Roberts as the sanctimonious Mary Sunshine, and Heather Godley as the blousy prison prima donna, whose superb duet with Velma, Class is executed with just that.

All superlatives spent, let me just add a word of admiration to Sally Jane Jackson for the imaginative choreography, and the numerous people who built the set, did the lighting and made the costumes. They don't need me to tell them that they set the scene for a show that will be remembered for years by those lucky enough to get a seat.

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HIGHLIGHT of Teddington Theatre Club's current season promises to be the musical Chicago, which opens at Hampton Court Theatre tomorrow. Because of an unprecedented demand for tickets, an extra matinee is being put on tomorrow afternoon and now that's sold out, too. Director J. Scarrott and his hard-working cast must be working the run was a fortnight rather than a week. Some of the cast are pictured above and P. Bottomley, who plays Roxy Hart, is below.

