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Theatre Review: 'A Chorus Line' at Wagner College

by MARIANA HOWARD

The timeless Broadway musical “A Chorus Line” is historic for many reasons. Not only because it was originally conceived, directed and choreographed by the legendary Michael Bennett or that it went on to become the sixth longest-running Broadway musical of all time, but because it connected with people around the world in a way that few shows ever do — in fact, its script has been translated into 20 different languages. “A Chorus Line” is commonly described as a show about Broadway hopefuls, or the grueling professional musical theatre audition process, or the agony/ecstasy of pursuing a career in show business ... but none of these explains why it’s still a global phenomenon after more than forty years. It is, and always has been, a show about human stories. This truth was honored by the outstanding cast of Wagner College’s production of “A Chorus Line,” currently running on their Main Stage, at last Friday night’s performance, which fittingly just happened to be the 41st anniversary of the first time the show was ever performed in NYC (at the renowned off-Broadway performance space, the Public Theatre).

The biggest strength of this production is how the roles were cast to perfection. Featuring students of the school’s illustrious musical theatre degree program, each member of this ensemble brought real nuance and craft to their part, despite the fact that the players are decades younger than the characters they portray. Admittedly, this takes a moment for the viewer to adjust to; in the iconic opening number, it’s hard to reconcile that the director Zach (played by Noah Bridgestock) looks so young ... but as the action moves forward and Zach becomes an unseen voice from somewhere in the back of the house, he transforms into a believably seasoned (and jaded) Broadway lifer who’s seen it all, a real testament to the caliber of Bridgestock’s acting.

A show with over a dozen primary characters, all of whom create impact in their own way, can make it difficult to stand out. Victoria Puza (as Sheia), Nina Gabriella Gross (as Diana), Darnell Xavier Kenney (as Richie), Jason Daniel Rath (as Mike), Zach Berteletti (as Paul) and Kelly Swint (as Cassie) manage to do just that. They all display strong vocal prowess and believably and embody the complexity of their respective roles. Puza communicates the cynicism and sassy sarcasm one could only project from years of experiencing the ups and downs of a Broadway gypsy’s career. Gross confidently carries the emotional heart of the show, in both the empowering number “Nothing” and the show-stopping “What I Did for Love.” Kenney is a lightning bolt of energy (and comic relief) throughout, powerfully commanding the stage in his featured solo during “Hello Twelve, Hello Thirteen, Hello Love.” Rath’s dancing is electrifying to watch and his portrayal of Mike has just the right combination of playfulness and bravado. Berteletti does a masterful job with Paul’s monologue, a scene that acts as the emotional centerpiece of the show and can easily be wrought with melodrama in less capable hands, but Berteletti does it full justice here. Swint plays the complicated Cassie with grit and humility and nails the vocal in a soaring rendition of “The Music and the Mirror.” Additionally, Jacob Cowan (Bobby), Tyler Roberts (Greg) and Mari Skoultschi (Connie) contribute much-needed levity with their expertly calibrated comedic turns in smaller roles.

Kudos to the core production team of director Michele Pawk, musical director Dr. Lauri Young and choreographer Maggie Marino Pitts, who constructed a tight ensemble and delivered a solid final product. Additional praise to Kurt Alger (costume design) and Brian T. Sharron (scenic design), who paid homage to the original production with a careful eye to detail.

In a city where NYU's Tisch School of the Arts gets most of the press for its performing arts program, Wagner College deserves far more attention that it receives for the wealth of talent it produces. It will be exciting to see which alumni from this production end up living out their own real-life story on the Great White Way.

Running time: Approximately 2 hours, no intermission.

Advisory: Adult themes, strong language. Recommended for ages 16 and up.

“A Chorus Line” runs through April 24 at Wagner College Theatre, One Campus Road, Staten Island, New York. For tickets, call (718)-390-3259.

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