

ETHAN MORDDEN

ALL THAT JAZZ

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE
MUSICAL CHICAGO



All That Jazz



All That Jazz
*The Life and Times of the
Musical Chicago*



Ethan Mordden



OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press in the UK and certain other countries.

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

© Ethan Mordden 2018

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted by law, by license, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reproduction rights organization. Inquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the address above.

You must not circulate this work in any other form
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Mordden, Ethan, author.

Title: All that jazz : the life and times of the musical Chicago /
Ethan Mordden.

Description: New York, NY : Oxford University Press, [2018] |
Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017031337 (print) | LCCN 2017032526 (ebook) |
ISBN 9780190651800 (updf) | ISBN 9780190651817 (epub) |
ISBN 9780190651794 (alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Kander, John. Chicago. | Chicago (Ill.)—Drama—History and
criticism. | Musicals—United States—History and criticism.

Classification: LCC ML410.K163 (ebook) | LCC ML410.K163 M67 2018 (print) |
DDC 792.6/42—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017031337>

Illustrations courtesy of Photofest; Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York
Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden
Foundations; and private collections.

Two short passages in Chapter 8 first appeared in the
Wall Street Journal, October 15, 2016.

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed by Sheridan Books, Inc., United States of America

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments *vii*

Introduction 1

1. The City: Unregulated Capitalism 3
2. The Era: “Be Nonchalant . . . Light a Murad” 25
3. The Play: “Like Hell You’re Through!” 39
4. The First Movie: Amos Is the Hero 62
5. The Invention of the Satiric Musical: How Can You Tell
an American? 79
6. The Second Movie: “I’m Going To Make a Character Man
of You If You Don’t Behave Yourself” 102
7. Fosse & Verdon and Kander & Ebb: “You Have To Act
Your Dancing” 117
8. The Musical: “No Show Is Worth Dying For” 137
9. The Revival and the Third Movie: “If It Doesn’t Fit,
You Must Acquit!” 198

For Further Reading 229

A Selective Discography 233

Index 243

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

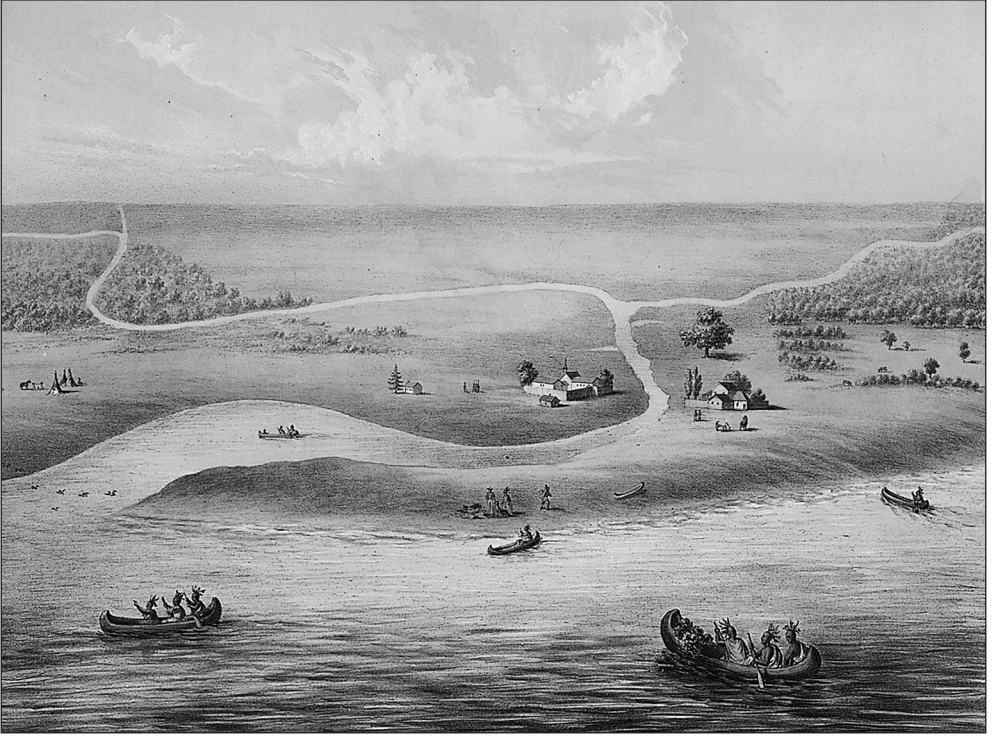
To my wise agents Joe Spieler and Kent Wolf; at the Library of Congress, to Raymond White and Janet S. McKinney; for the Gershwin Trusts, to Michael Owen; at Photofest, to Howard Mandelbaum; to the Herbert von Karajan of the West End, Gareth Valentine; to my fellow historians Jon Cronwell and Ken Mandelbaum; to Ian Marshall Fisher, as helpful and diplomatic as ever in his own smooth way; and, at Oxford, to Benjamin Sears, Joellyn Ausanka, and my excellent editor, Norman Hirschy.

All That Jazz

CHICAGO:
A PICTURE ESSAY



First, a classic shot of Gwen Verdon in her title song, "Roxie": ambitious yet carefree, the complete sociopath. Her costume (by Patricia Zipprodt) typifies the mixture of the realistic and the fantastical in Bob Fosse's musical-comedy version of life, sharp and clear, with all niceties and incidentals smudged out. All honesty, too. Seek not for justice in *Chicago*.





The City

Opposite page, top: Chicago in 1820, little more than Fort Dearborn (at center) and the home of John Kinzie (right), one of the so-called Fathers of Chicago. The south (left) and the north (right) forks of the Chicago River meet and flow into Lake Michigan. *Opposite, bottom:* Some seventy years later, the place is now the metropolis of the Midwest, with the sand bar removed and a great harbor created. Heavy industry—livestock, lumber, grain—is parked amid residential areas, for the business of Chicago is business. The city teems with it, as we see in Norman Jewison's movie *Gaily, Gaily* (*above*), with Beau Bridges (standing, left of three big white cylinders) as cub reporter Ben Hecht.



Early *Chicagos*

Above, the original Roxie, Francine Larrimore, in Maurine Watkins' drama that started it all, in 1926, modeling the dress she wears for her murder trial. "A nun," Watkins tells us, "would envy its chastity." Tradition demanded Roxie have a romance with the available hunk, Jake the reporter, played by Charles Bickford, seen here with Greta Garbo in MGM's *Anna Christie* (*opposite, top*), but Watkins wanted no distraction from her sermon on Justice. *Opposite, below*, Cecil B. DeMille's silent *Chicago*, in 1927, gave Roxie a marriage. But even breakfast in bed, lovingly prepared by Amos (Victor Varconi), can't soothe impatient, suspicious Roxie (Phyllis Haver).





The Talkie *Chicago*
Above, Ginger Rogers poses for “cheesecake,” with Nigel Bruce (her agent) and George Montgomery (her future boy friend) at left and Phil Silvers (in beret) on the floor. It’s twenties salesmanship, as with the ad *at right*: hyping tobacco but showing what was known as “it.”





Above, lawyer Adolphe Menjou advises his client, now in jail. But in this version, she's innocent; so who dunnit? *Below*, the cops collar Amos (George Chandler) as press and public look on. Is he the guilty party?





Musical Satires Before *Chicago*

Above, I'd Rather Be Right (1937) was the first to concentrate on spoofing a sitting administration, putting onstage the president himself, FDR (George M. Cohan, center). His mother (Marie Louise Dana) hands him a friend's traffic ticket she wants fixed, and FDR's Republican presidential opponent in 1936, Alfred Landon (Joseph Allen), is now the Roosevelt family butler, carrying a cake for FDR's birthday ball. Mrs. Roosevelt is a doting mother, as when she meets the show's sweethearts:

MRS. ROOSEVELT: What do you think of my son
being President of the United States?

ROOSEVELT: Now, mother.

MRS. ROOSEVELT: Twice, too.



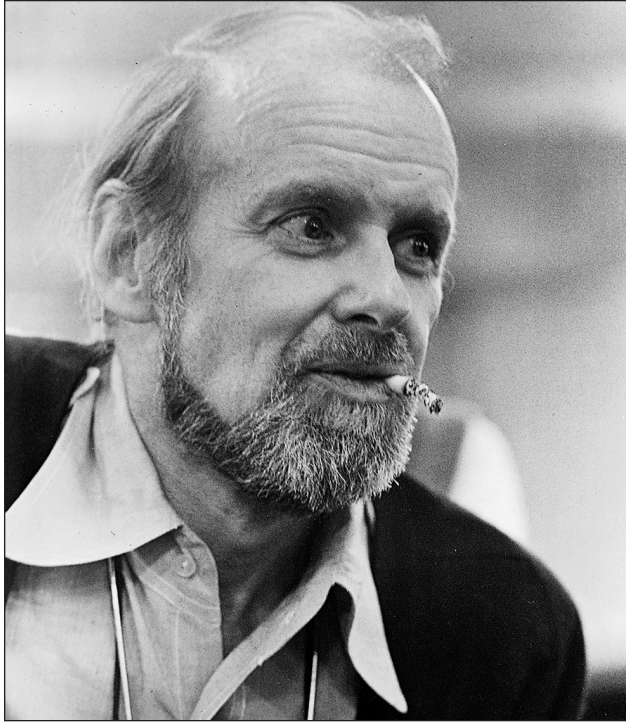
Finian's Rainbow (1947), a fantasy, took on racism, capitalism, and consumerism, as sharecroppers (*below*) buy dream destinies on credit. *Left*, Anita Alvarez is mute and David Wayne a leprechaun, slowly turning mortal and horny, because everything in America that isn't about money is about sex.





Bob Fosse

All choreographers start as dancers. *Above*, Fosse steps out with Tommy Rall in the Columbia film *My Sister Eileen* (1953). Over twenty years later, when Fosse made the autobiographical *All That Jazz*, also for Columbia, the studio wanted a marquee name for the lead. Fosse (*opposite, top*) held out for Roy Scheider (*opposite, bottom*): because Scheider was as close to Fosse as Fosse could get. He wanted *All That Jazz* to serve as a kind of artistic epitaph, a movie *à clef*; its strange combination of buoyancy and bitterness is a key to not only Fosse's volatile personality but the personality of the musical *Chicago* itself.





Another Fosse movie: *Cabaret* (1972), with Emcee Joel Grey at center and Liza Minnelli, a mere ensemble attraction, second from right in the second row. Is there a link between the aesthetics of *Cabaret* and *Chicago*? Hal Prince, who directed the stage *Cabaret*, thought Fosse borrowed heavily from his show, and writers have discerned a certain resemblance. However, the format of a story show containing commentative numbers dates back to Kurt Weill and Alan Jay Lerner's *Love Life* (1948).



Gwen Verdon

Before her Broadway breakthrough in *Can-Can* (1953), Verdon danced in Hollywood musicals. Here, in the Danny Kaye vehicle *On the Riviera* (1951), Verdon worked with choreographer Jack Cole, her dancing mentor till she teamed up with Bob Fosse to conjoin art and love. Did Verdon owe Fosse everything, or was it vice versa?



The Musical *Chicago*

Verdon in the “Helen Morgan” icon number, “Funny Honey,” awkwardly climbing onto Morgan’s trademark upright piano, as Fosse wanted his Morgan vulgarized rather than worshiped. *Opposite, right, Chicago’s* finale in the Philadelphia tryout costumes, traded in New York . . .



. . . for the less salacious tasseled skirts. Below, the 1996 *Chicago* revival, with Ruthie Henshall and her boys in the “Roxie” number.





The Movie *Chicago*

Above, our third view of the “Roxie” number, with a strutting Renée Zellweger and her oddly mature “boys.” *Below*, in turnabout, she must feign saintly tenderness on the advice of counsel Richard Gere. And that’s justice in *Chicago*.





Introduction

It's about more than the musical *Chicago*, actually. Because there is an entire *Chicago* saga—a play, a silent film, a talkie, and only then the musical, followed by a revival that turned a mere Broadway success into a global phenomenon, leading to a Best Picture movie musical.

Yet there's more, because this too easily underestimated show—underestimated as mere crazy fun, and everyone knows crazy fun has no intellectual content—carries with it the rich content of two of America's great myths, that of Chicago itself, the industrial, cultural, and geographic metropolis at the center of the American continent; and that of the 1920s, the first decade in our history that every educated American can “place” by its events, from the introduction of Prohibition to the Wall Street Crash.

So we have something of a panorama to investigate. *Chicago* is a tight show, fleet and ruthless. Yet it is filled with allusions to our show-biz past, the musical's favorite metaphor for American life from *Show Boat* to *Follies*. We need to take in all the elements of the *Chicago* saga to understand how resonant a form the American musical really is.

I feel it necessary to give the reader this little prelude, so he or she will be prepared for the unexpected. It happens that a friend, learning I was working on “*Chicago* the musical,” envisioned Bob Fosse hectoring his dancers like those directors in Hollywood backstagers

who keep shouting for more energy no matter how hard everyone is working.

“Meanwhile,” he went on, “Gwen and Chita are fighting over who gets ‘My Own Best Friend,’ and one of the chorus boys recites a daring limerick about the musical director, but he overhears even as Mary McCarty gets into it with one of those long-legged Fosse beauties. That’s how it starts, right?”

I shook my head.

“No? Then what does it start with?”

“Indians,” I replied.