

## **Review: A Shining CHORUS LINE at The Barn Playhouse**

By: Paul Recupero

*(For several years I enjoyed reviewing productions at many Philadelphia area theatres for Stage Magazine. So when the Barn invited me to review their currently running production of A CHORUS LINE, I was happy to oblige and again have the opportunity to share my thoughts.)*

Among the longest running Broadway musicals, A CHORUS LINE stands apart. No crashing chandelier, revolving barricade, or witches defying gravity. Instead, a bunch of random out-of-work dancers at a grueling audition in some empty New York theatre; for them, it's called Tuesday. The not-so-special concept of the show is what makes it so special.

A CHORUS LINE is musical theater stripped raw to its two base elements: the music and the characters (who are really reflections of society, so dare I say: "the music and the mirror"?). The show evokes authenticity. The desperate performers on the stage are auditioning in real time to the God-like voice at the back of the house. The audience members caught in between are ever present silent observers as the manic initial dance audition curiously morphs into group therapy. The fourth wall isn't broken; it doesn't exist.

The Barn Playhouse's production successfully embraces this concept. Director Steve DiNunno has assembled a stellar cast of versatile performers, each portraying a distinct character within their professional dancer persona. Every role on "the line" brings something universally relatable in their individual moments, and the ability to retain these character traits during the intensive dancing is impressive.

This is an ensemble show without one clear highlight—a tribute to all the performers—although a few deserve special mention. Tom Tansey as "in-show director" Zach is particularly strong. Zach is not very endearing, but for the eight on the line he will ultimately cast, he'll be their meal ticket. He's inscrutable, abruptly switching between unflappable autocrat and empathetic counselor, but always in control. The enigmatic Tansey masters these character shifts unceremoniously as he keeps driving the show forward, consistently in character despite being mostly off stage.

The musical's "B" plot is the relationship drama between Zach and one of the auditioners, Cassie (Sandy Lawler), which feels a bit out of place as it only takes prominence quite late in the show. Nevertheless, Tansey and Lawler are dynamic forces to watch in their onstage argument; meanwhile, the company cleverly punctuates the altercation while rehearsing a musical number in the background.

Lawler also excels in "The Music and the Mirror" combination, sharply dancing to Shelli Pentimall Bookler's spirited choreography. The wall mirrors used well throughout the show are visually stunning here. The richly performed sequence was blemished only by modulations in Lawler's body mic as she impressively belted the song's money notes. This unfortunately was not an isolated issue; similar modulations occurred sporadically in other performers' mics

during the show. (I attended the opening night performance; the mic issues will likely improve as the run continues.)

Also of note on the line are Tara Feathers who delightfully seethes sass as Sheila, Sarah Cox as the bubbly Kristine who unabashedly admits she can't sing while her husband Al (Connor Wells) proudly supports her, and Nick Adinolfi as the shy Paul who delivers an earnest and emotive monologue in one of the musical's few quieter segments. Many other praiseworthy character moments are just too numerous to mention here.

Most impressive in this ensemble production is that the cast interacts so fluidly with each other. The pacing is excellent. Dialogue is intertwined with Pentimall Bookler's smart choreography that dazzles while still being manageable for the performers, really shining in the frenetic opening sequence and the uniform finale. The vocals range from good to excellent and are especially strong in the group numbers; they are supported (but not overpowered) by the talented orchestra; kudos to music director Laura Burhans and conductor Barbara Newberry. High praise also must be lavished on DiNenno and lighting designer Jojo Glodek who somehow effectively lit the stage and its many backdrop mirrors without blinding the audience; seriously, that is no small feat.

Aside from the intermittent mic issues, my only quibble was with certain characters' visual interactions with Zach from the stage. DiNenno made the interesting choice to physically place Zach (typically a mostly unseen voice) at a lit desk in the far left back of the house. I liked this choice, as in concept it should further the audience's immersion, and indeed some performers delivered their lines in Zach's general direction. However, other performers delivered their lines straight out or to house right, nowhere near Zach, which was visually confusing and momentarily pulled me out of the belief that I was in the same theatre where the action was taking place. I sat near the rear of the house; had I been closer to the front and out of sight of Zach, I might not have noticed this slight peculiarity.

As the acclaimed reaction of the sold-out opening night audience showed, everyone involved in the Barn's A CHORUS LINE has much to be proud of. Of the several community theatre productions of this challenging musical I've seen, this is among the best, and I imagine it will continue to grow with each performance. The audiences certainly will, as my understanding (as of this review) is one other performance is already sold out. So those looking for a great musical to enjoy in the coming weeks should secure their tickets now.

*If You Go...*

**A CHORUS LINE**

**Music by Marvin Hamlisch**

**Lyrics by Edward Kleban**

**Book by James Kirkwood, Jr. & Nicholas Dante**

**Directed by Steve DiNenno**

**August 16–31, 2024**

**The Barn Playhouse**

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[www.barnplayhouse.org](http://www.barnplayhouse.org)