



Universidad Autónoma
de Madrid

Biblos-e Archivo
Repositorio Institucional UAM

Repositorio Institucional de la Universidad Autónoma de Madrid
<https://repositorio.uam.es>

Esta es la **versión de autor** del artículo publicado en:
This is an **author produced version** of a paper published in:

Revue française d'études américaines 171.2 (2022): 25 – 39

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3917/rfea.171.0025>

Disponible en: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-francaise-d-etudes-americaines-2022-2-page-25.htm>

Copyright: © 2022 Belin

El acceso a la versión del editor puede requerir la suscripción del recurso
Access to the published version may require subscription

"Disclosing Burlesque: On the Possibilities of Satire and the (Fe)Male Gaze in *Chicago* (1926, 1975, 2002)"

NOELIA HERNANDO-REAL

Keywords

Maurine Dallas
Watkins; Bob Fosse;
Fred Ebb; Robert
Marshall; burlesque;
vaudeville; musicals;
Chicago

Cet article compare l'érotisation des corps féminins et masculins dans Chicago de Maurine Dallas Watkins (1926) et deux de ses adaptations musicales : la comédie musicale de 1975 de Fred Ebb et Bob Fosse à Broadway et la superproduction à succès de 2002 de Robert Marshall. À partir d'une analyse des différents genres, des procédés dramaturgiques et des ambitions théâtrales et idéologiques qui poussent à montrer le corps nu sur scène et à l'écran, il est proposé une réflexion sur le potentiel émancipateur de la satire féminine et de l'exposition de la chair des femmes.

The *Merriam Webster Dictionary* defines "burlesque" as follows: "#1 a literary or dramatic work that seeks to ridicule by means of grotesque exaggeration or comic imitation, [...] #3 theatrical entertainment of a broadly humorous often earthy character consisting of short turns, comic skits, and sometimes striptease acts" (n.p.). Such divergent definitions of the same term prove useful in the exploration of different versions of *Chicago*, as the extents to which they aim to ridicule and/or critique a simple voyeuristic exhibition of the female body differ enormously. *Chicago* (1975), written by Fred Ebb and Bob Fosse, is best known as one of the longest-running American musicals in Broadway history, winner of six Tony awards, seven Drama Desk Awards and a Grammy Award for Best Musical Show. After its 1996 revival, Robert Marshall enlisted Renée Zellweger, Catherine Zeta-Jones, and Richard Gere for his 2002 blockbuster. A fact seldom recalled is that the Broadway musical was based on

a 1926 non-musical play by Maurine Dallas Watkins also entitled *Chicago*, a play based on two murder cases Watkins had covered for the *Chicago Tribune*.¹ Yet despite their differences, all these versions of the real events—Watkins’s newspaper reports and play, Fred Ebb and Bob Fosse’s 1975 musical version, and Robert Marshall’s 2002 film—share one pivotal common ground: the erotization of the female protagonists. A comparison of these three dramatic works based on the same story, nevertheless, raises significant questions as regards society’s voyeuristic attitude towards staged nudity and the potential of female empowerment through the exposure of flesh. While it is obvious that the three versions mock a simplistic appraisal of female beauty, a closer look at when, why and how nakedness takes place on stage, should lead the audience to question to what extent these versions themselves end up contributing to women’s objectification in the media. That is, such analysis will determine if these works aim to parody by means of exaggeration the commodification of the female body—and could thus be considered burlesque shows as in definition #1—or if they end up being reduced to a theatrical entertainment that exploits the female body through its exposure, as in definition #3.

It must be noted that seventy-five years separate the first *Chicago* from its film recreation. During these seventy-five years, the exposure of flesh became more and more common, prompting changes in the ideological connotations conveyed by the naked body on the stage. As Judith Lynne Hanna has pointed out, “The twentieth century saw the fully nude moving body in all kinds of performing arts” (128). In the United States, moving nude dancers first became popular because of Florence Ziegfeld’s revues in New York City from 1912 to 1929; the Ziegfeld Follies, modeled after the French Folies Bergère, included “alluring female stars, dancing girls, suggestive costumes and burlesque-inspired routines” (Stephenson 189). Indeed, Ziegfeld “established a glamorized mythology around the showgirl,” as proved by the glorification of Barbara Stanwyck, Gypsy Rose Lee, Lana Turner or Lillian Roth, who all started out as “Follie girls” (Stephenson 190). Ziegfeld’s sexualized exploitation of their bodies answered to patriarchal notions of female beauty, which, thanks to the success of these actresses, as most of them became glamorous screen actresses, perpetuated an objectification passing as glamor. Watkins’s play

1. In March 1924 Belva Gaertner, a cabaret singer and divorcee, was arrested for the murder of Walter Law, who had been found shot dead in his car after a night in town with her. Next month, Beulah Annan was arrested for the murder of her lover and boss, Harry Kalstedt. Watkins covered both cases and their trials for the *Chicago Tribune*, commenting on these women’s overt use of their femininity to play the victim. All of Watkins’s reports can be found in Watkins 1997.

satirizes such glorification and objectification; her *Chicago*, subtitled, “A Satirical Comedy,” is a burlesque that satirizes on the absurdity and artificiality of such mythologization, which is presented as detrimental to women’s struggle for equality. While the Follies girls were exhibiting their bodies in the New Amsterdam Theatre, just three streets away Watkins opened her play on December 30th, 1926 at the Music Box Theatre, owned by the Shubert brothers. Watkins, a New Woman² herself, wrote this play in the aftermath of the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment³ in 1920, a landmark in US women’s history; and, as will be discussed later, she took the opportunity to remind women of the dangers of patriarchy in spite of the alleged advances in the situation of women. The play was understood as “a burlesque show written by a satirically minded person” (Nathan qtd. in Tóth 2011, 194) and that, as an ironic Burns Mantle pointed out, taught “flappers how to handle the law” (qtd. in Tóth 2011, 194). The public welcomed it; it ran for 172 nights and went on tour; a film, then silent, was released in 1927 with Phyllis Haver in the lead role and another one in 1942 starring Ginger Rogers.

As Hanna has noted, before the 1940s, the burlesque was mostly associated with slapstick and satiric comedy, but it increasingly led to “preoccupation with bare female flesh” (128), something musicals would incorporate. The musical, which from its origins had reinforced the objectification of women from the heterosexual patriarchal perspective (Stephenson 188), came to dominate Broadway where *Chicago* had premiered, and it welcomed “naked singing bodies” exploited as “sexualized object[s] of desire” (188). In the 1950s Watkins refused to sell Robert Fryer the rights to make a musical version of her play (Pauly xxix), a refusal that scholars have attributed to her guilt at having contributed to the acquittal of the murderesses with her satirical newspaper reports on the cases (xxx-xxxi). However, it is my contention that, more than guilt, what stopped Watkins from giving the rights was her awareness of the potential danger of her narrative of women objectifying their bodies to be acquitted of murder, once her story was corseted as a Broadway musical. And if this was indeed her fear, she was to be proved right. It was only after Watkins’s death that Fosse, prompted by his partner Gwen

2. The New Woman was a term that became popular at the end of the nineteenth century to define women who were pushing the limits of traditional womanhood. New Women typically pursued higher education and had a career, refusing to be limited to domesticity.

3. The Nineteenth Amendment to the American Constitution recognized women their right to vote.

Vernon, who would go on to play Roxie, was granted permission to transform *Chicago* into a musical he also directed. And as Walter Kerr, writing for the *New York Times* put it, Ebb and Fosse's 1975 musical was "another world" compared to Watkins's *Chicago*, leaving Watkins's satire blurred, bloated out and even "lost altogether" (n.p.).

In the 1970s, nudity on stage had become a common device for shock effect. Some scholars indeed have identified in female performers' exposure of their bodies a challenge to the patriarchal order (Hanna 128), a strategy credited with some of the gains in sexual freedom. While a far-reaching discussion on the full feminist potential of women's nudity onstage is beyond the scope of this study, and indeed female nudity has been used for feminist purposes with success (Striff 1), it seems Ebb and Fosse's *Chicago*, subtitled, "A Musical Vaudeville," bluntly fell into the formulaic structure of patriarchal musicals, those that—also in the context of second-wave feminism—sexualized and objectified women: "pretty, young, slim, white and conforming to male-generated notions of idealized beauty" (Stephenson 190). The very advertising bill itself promised viewers such exposure of female flesh. Seven skinny women in bikinis form a circle under the spotlight on stage while in the shadowy balcony three blurred male figures look at them. The motivation behind such a poster was, apparently, to make clear that this musical was purposely a vaudeville, implying a metaphor that life is show business. However, what the poster—as well as the musical itself—problematizes is whether women play by the same rules as men in such a game and, thus, the question of whose gaze was meant to be pleased by this performance arises. Faithful to the vaudeville format, as Wollman has observed, every song follows the style of a specific vaudeville performer or tradition (155). Notwithstanding, on the whole, and as will be developed later, the songs favor the erotization of the female body and its commodification, as for example in the very famous "We Both Reached for the Gun," which both reminds viewers of vaudeville ventriloquist acts and yet also functions as an obvious metaphor for women's control under patriarchy: Jerry Orbach plays Billy Flynn the puppeteer, and has Gwen Vernon as Roxie in his lap, controlling her body and talking through her. He is even the one who has decided that for the trial Roxie must look decorous: she only lifts her skirt up to her knee. This version of *Chicago* succeeded as a patriarchal Broadway product, as evidenced by the eleven Tony nominations—although none were finally awarded—its 936 performances, and the \$330 million collected at the box office between 1975 and 2002 (Tóth 2011, 253).

Robert Marshall's film *Chicago* (2002) took advantage of the 1996 Broadway revival. Under the direction of Walter Bobbie, the musical was

critically and even more popularly acclaimed. With a more minimalistic and thus more timeless staging, this version had spawned a national tour, was awarded six Tony Awards, and prompted the production of the musical internationally. But Robert Marshall's movie version is more clearly influenced by the 1975 show: here too, costumes and props abound to overtly perform the sexuality of the female characters and to promote promissory nakedness. Judging by this version of *Chicago*, it seems Stephenson is right when he claims that "Contemporary society is obsessed with celebrity, and if one adds objectification, sexualization and the potential for nudity, then you have the perfect commercialized asset" (205). As was the case with the 1975 *Chicago* poster, the film also involved a calculated publicity campaign offering female objectification and voyeurism. Richard Gere as Billy Flynn looks impeccable in a dark suit, shirt and tie included, while Catherine Zeta-Jones as Velma and Renée Zellweger as Roxie stand at each side, their pelvises against his legs. Both of them are wearing backless dresses, displaying their very white flesh. Their dresses, which are extremely short, barely cover their bottoms with tiny tassels that promise to disclose what is concealed once they start dancing. Their costumes are completed with high heels and black fishnet stockings. The movie was a hit at the box office—it grossed around \$306,776,732—and was well received by the Academy. It was nominated for thirteen Oscar Awards and won six, including Best Costume Design (Collen Atwood); it also won the Golden Globe for Best Motion Picture—Comedy or Musical, among other numerous nominations and awards ("Chicago Awards"). Reviews and criticism of these two musicals, Ebb and Fosse's 1975 Broadway show and its 1996 revival and the movie version, typically include the words "erotic" (Brantley n.p., Winer n.p.), "sexy" (Bradsaw n.p., Evans n.p.) or "sexual" (Miller 24), "exuberant" or "heated up [...] by predatory sex" (Mitchell n.p.). At the same time their authors/directors, who removed the original word 'satire' from the title of their works, have insisted this is what their works are: "a satire, basically," said Robert Marshall ("Behind"), while Fosse's *Chicago* was his cynical "response to the Watergate" scandal and the wide-spread climate of corruption (Miller 24). It seems clear that Watkins, Ebb and Fosse and Marshall all mocked how much we prefer fabricated stories to reality as long as the wrapping is nice. Nevertheless, the fact that this wrapping is the naked female body raises questions as to the use of the female body as part of such satires, pointing to the commodification of the naked female body and its relationship with the gaze in the real world as well. Can a satire be built on female objectification through her naked body while simultaneously claiming to champion female subjectivity?

The theory of the male gaze has proved determining in articulating both theatre and film insights for decades. In her seminal “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), Laura Mulvey argued that “pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female [...] women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (n.p.). As contested as Mulvey’s theory has become (Manlove 85-87), theatre scholars have found in this concept a basis from which to protest the fact that theatre in general, and not only musicals in particular, has enjoyed a long history of pleasing the male gaze (Burke 3). Paradoxically, while statistics indicate that women are the ones who consume theatre—they choose the show, they usually bring their male partners to the shows, and these are the ones who must be “motivated by something as simple as ‘seeing some ass’” (Stephenson 206). But there is nothing simple in showing “some ass,” since, as Mary Devereaux has stated, the notion of the male gaze, which refers to actual looking and “to a way of thinking about, and acting in, the world” (337), makes spectators identify with the male hero and reaffirm the patriarchal apparatus behind our real acting in the world (Malone i). Nudity is saturated with meanings, as “a form of costume, nudity communicates a variety of messages” (Hanna 128) and, thus, who, how and why they appear naked on the stage deserves careful attention.

If the male gaze is pleased by the exposure of female flesh, which translates into the objectification and subjugation of women to men outside the walls of the auditorium, it follows that a work that aims to defy such patriarchal constraints should employ devices that break with such tradition. This does not necessarily mean that a female gaze is the opposite of the male gaze, and that pleasure arises just from the erotization of the male body. As put forward in her recent work on the female gaze, Iris Brey defends the need of a gaze that is hybrid and plural and that is pleased by watching the performance of equality and reciprocity among male and female characters (20). To this I must add that a work built on a female gaze should also make viewers wonder what hindrances there are to the performance of such equality and reciprocity. The three works discussed here show inequality among men and women, but they differ enormously in their treatment of (wo)men’s objectification as the site of desire and thus in putting forward such hindrances. Watkins opted for making her characters show flesh when the text required it, prompting what George Rodosthenous calls “implicit voyeurism” (219), that is, her female characters only show what is necessary and lead the audience to imagine nakedness. For example, in the Prologue that opens the play, the stage directions indicate that Roxie, “*as you can see,*” is perceived “*through*

the diaphanous, flashy negligée of blue georgette with its flounce of imitation lace and accordion plaited ruffles" (4). The suggestion of her nude body, also fostered by the "*intimate garments—peach and pink crepe de chine with deep Val lace*" (4) revealed in the half-closed drawers, all burlesque-like, fulfils a dramatic aim: Roxie's characterization as a woman who considers her eroticization her best asset in a male-controlled world. Consequently, throughout the play, the audience can see her lowering or raising her skirt, depending on who is looking at her. By contrast, the musical versions opted for "explicit exhibitionistic behaviour," displaying the female characters' bodies at times when the script did not require such nakedness. As promised by the posters already analyzed, some kind of female nakedness is part of almost every single scene. The famous "Cell Block Tango" scene showcases this claim. In contrast with Watkins's play, where prison scenes show female inmates in common inmate costume—unless they are trying on the trial outfits—Ebb and Fosse and Marshall chose to eroticize in an overt manner every inmate. In the Broadway musical, they all wear transparent striped dressing gowns, loosely tied around the waist, displaying lace and transparent black bras and slips, garters, black stockings and high heels—an improbable outfit that offers the audience gratuitous nudity. Similarly, costumes used for that same prison scene in the movie include bikinis, body suits and other kinds of minimal skin-tight garments, plus high heels. The overexposure of female flesh throughout both the Broadway musical and the movie perpetuates objectification. The exposure of the female body is so commonplace that even when actresses are in the role of journalists, they wear trench coats that disclose their underwear, the now customary garters and high heels. As Karl Toepfer has said, "it is very difficult to see any nude body (especially one which desires to be seen) without considering the implication that an invitation to see the body entails an invitation to desire the body" (77).

The three versions of *Chicago* are all built on the premise that the female naked body is desirable, and in the present attempt to compare the satires on people's stupidity when, blinded by these erotic bodies, murderesses are set free and erected as celebrities, it seems appropriate to consider male nudity as well. Watkins's *Chicago* does not provide scenes where male characters are stripped, although they are objectified occasionally in the way Roxie and Velma play with them and know, or think they know, how to control them, just as they have replaced one man with another all through their lives. Ebb and Fosse's and Marshall's *Chicagos*, however, seem to propose male objectification through nudity. The best example of this is to be found in the "All I Care About" scene, better known as Billy Flynn's striptease scene. Jerry Orbach and Richard Gere,

in the play and the film respectively, surrounded by an ensemble of women, remove suit and tie, to end up in underwear and suspenders. In spite of the difficulties in ascertaining what arouses the female and the male gazes—for instance, Susan Bordo has claimed that women “are not used to seeing naked men frankly portrayed as ‘objects’ of a sexual gaze” (177, see Eck 2003)—compared to the female exhibition of flesh within the same works, this scene falls substantially short. The loose boxer shorts, made of white cotton that matches their sleeveless vests, and the socks and suspenders Orbach and Gere end up in are not as revealing as the bikinis worn by the choruses of girls, and certainly not as erotic. The chorus of girls in *Ebb* and Fosse’s version enhances the eroticism of their bikinis by adding the traditional giant feather fans of burlesque and vaudeville, while the chorus of girls in Marshall’s film, wearing very little sparkling bikinis, dances erotically around Gere, even crawling down the stairs. Certainly, these two scenes help objectify the male protagonists—they too are desired by the female characters—but the use of costume and the proxemic analyses of their respective stripteases evidence that the implied female gaze, allegedly to be pleased with this scene, is not fed as much flesh as the male gaze is in other scenes, that is, there is neither equality nor reciprocity. Furthermore, even if designed as a parody on female nudity in burlesque shows, these male striptease turns end objectifying the female chorus and confirming that the female gaze will never be catered for as much as the male gaze is. Indeed, reviews of both scenes usually emphasize how “funny” this scene is (Kerr n.p., Miller 34-35), never how “erotic” or “sexy,” those adjectives being used to describe the works in general, even though they obviously refer solely to the actresses’ performances. It must be added that, unlike the 1975 musical, Marshall’s cast included athletic male dancers that, equal to female dancers, could erotically arouse spectators and that differ from the typical heterosexual male one that governs the male gaze; however, these dancers’ torsos, which is the most we see, are usually eclipsed by the central role of the female dancers’ and protagonists’ much more explicit sexiness and exposure of flesh.

As feminist scholars have claimed, it seems necessary to disclose the mechanisms of the prevailing patriarchal gaze and, if possible, provide alternative gazes (Case 124, Dolan 104). In spite of my present critique of how these musicals keep on pleasing the male gaze only, it may also be contended that the three works under consideration show that femininity is an artificial construction, most evidently through the spectacular exposure of female bodies. To contextualize this discussion, it is appropriate to note that masquerade has become a significant answer to the male gaze and its prescriptive stereotypes. A term revisited by Joan Riviere in

1929, masquerade implies that womanliness can be “assumed and worn as a mask” (306), a very apt theatrical simile. Drawing on Riviere’s theories, Jennifer Friedlander has claimed that an “excess of femininity” would allow spectators to see that “femininity is a mask, an artificial construction of identity” (100). Also drawing on Riviere’s work, Mary Anne Doane has warned of the dangers of women engaging in transvestism, that is, in assuming the viewing position of men (87). Watkins’s, Ebb and Fosse’s and Marshall’s *Chicagos*, in their specific treatments of female nudity, also exemplify such strategies and outcomes. To start with, Watkins’s Roxie seems to be aware from the start of how to please the male gaze, and consequently multiplies her femininity. Watkins makes the artificiality of this phenomenon evident by precisely mocking the very dichotomic stereotypes used to define women from a patriarchal perspective. In her first description, Roxie is both a Raphael-like angel and a Medusa (4), “a red-hot mamma with an angel face” (8), while later on she appears as a Madonna—even pretending she is pregnant—and as Eve (70, 105). Significantly, Roxie controls the exposure of her body depending on which of these stereotypes she wants to display and is always aware of the gaze. For example, as an erotic and tempting little Eve, she lifts her skirt for the camera (36), receives her lawyer and male reporters in prison in a jade green satin sleeveless dress, nude hose and turquoise ribbon garters (23), which she does not hesitate to remove for auction in front of the male characters (48). As the burlesque star she dreams of becoming, she treats the audience and the potential male jury as a male gaze that needs to be erotically pleased. But Roxie has also learnt to play the opposite, to control her swearing, to faint when brought into a corner, and to cover up her body when she wants to look like a Madonna. A still from the original production (Vandamm), with Francine Larimore in the role of Roxie, shows her in prison, after having announced her fake pregnancy, posing for the camera. A timely baby’s jumper is placed in front of that body she knows how to expose at other times.

The female protagonists of Ebb and Fosse’s and Marshall’s *Chicagos* also masquerade and exploit their ability to assume a patriarchal viewing position, as an answer to the male gaze, as suggested by the many examples of how they self-consciously exploit their sexuality through their nudity. Robert Marshall seemed particularly concerned with the theories of the gaze, as, according to him, the whole film is shot from the perspective of Roxie, played by René Zellweger (“Behind”). As Tóth has noted, “the first shot, in fact, is of her eye. She is in the central position and she affects and manipulates, in a sense, her own story by creating a double storyline parallel to the first and original one” (2007, 148). Consequently, all the dancing, stripping and commodification of the female nude bodies

take place in the mind of Roxie, as if it were that dream-world where she has become a burlesque star. Such a filmic strategy, widely praised for making the musical “more palatable for modern audiences not accustomed” to the genre (Sternfeld 334), though, does not but prove that Roxie has learnt to place herself in the viewing position of men so well that she has been completely cannibalized by this perspective and there is no other option left. Although the Broadway musical does not involve such a specific gaze strategy, it ultimately also validates this perspective, as I will demonstrate later in my discussion of the endings.

One may now consider whether masquerade and transvestism, already discussed in their relation to female nudity within the plays and film, are presented as apt strategies in the real world. Bearing in mind that the three works were conceived as satires, it is worth wondering whether they extend to the mechanisms exposing the female naked body. To start with, it must be noted that in none of the versions are the female characters completely in control of when to show or conceal their bodies. That is, in their performances of their gender—extending Butler’s post-structuralist notion to its theatrical dimension—they do not always author their striptease scenes. For example, in Watkins’s *Chicago*, the Sergeant tells Roxie, “you’d better get into some clothes, sister” (10) and Jake the reporter at one point also tells her, “Keep your clothes on” (13), implying a male control of female bodies. The cases in the musical and film are similar, and in Ebb and Fosse’s version, the fact that the prevailing gaze will always be male is evident when Miss Sunshine, the sob-sister, is revealed to be a man in drag. Unlike Watkins’s and Marshall’s *Chicago*, in which Eda Heineman and Christine Baranski respectively perform as cis Miss Sunshines, Michael O’Haughey plays Miss Sunshine, passing as a woman till his real identity is disclosed, involving a change in voice, gestures and proxemics that underlines he is a cis male who pretended to be a female. Both a homage to vaudeville drag queen shows and an apparent satire on how easily gender can be reversed (Miller 25), my reading underlines how the presentation of female identity in the press, and in the media in general, has also been controlled by patriarchy. Unsurprisingly, it is Haughey, in the role of a vaudeville promoter, who introduces Roxie and Velma’s “Hot Honey Rag” song later, prompting them to act as sexily as possible.

Turning to the female characters’ lack of control over their own bodies, this problematizes the agency of the female characters when dealing with such a controversial matter as female nudity (Pacillo 140) and thus questions the potential of masquerade and transvestism as valid strategies for real women. The very endings of the three versions prove determinant in this discussion. As is well known, and based on the real

cases, Roxie is found not guilty, and so is Velma. According to Tóth, “these women get acquitted [...because] they masquerade themselves as ‘good women’ through a performative performance of ideal femininity” (2011, 4), but also, I must add, because they look erotically beautiful, and because their conformity to their objectification of their naked flesh according to patriarchal standards is given in exchange for freedom. Nevertheless, Roxie’s triumph does not serve as a conclusion to Watkins’s play. The actual ending invalidates the possibilities of masquerade and transvestism as effective means to achieve agency. When the trial is over and Roxie has dressed up for the thousands of photos she is expecting, and for a promising future in show business, another murderess overshadows her. The stage direction reads, “*No one gives her a look*” (110). No one is interested in hearing what she has to say either, as she is told to pose for a photo with Machine-Gun Rosie because she has to “play ball” (111). In other words, she has entered the business, but she will only be an image; her body has been “aggressively sexualized and aestheticized [...] in order to relate in a particular way to an audience” (Lutes 348). The audience thus understands that her body is her only asset and that she will never rule over herself; she has become a dehumanized body for consumption. Watkins rejects masquerade as her Roxie, though free, does not completely succeed. In the end, she has become “the most ridiculous and disturbing figure” in the play (Lutes 354). By contrast, Ebb and Fosse’s and Marshall’s versions end up with the combined success of Roxie and Velma. The two women join forces and put on a show for the finale. These last songs, together with their final words of gratitude to the audience, make clear the satire on show business and the current trend of making celebrities out of just anyone. The looks of these two women in the final moments of the show and film validate the triumph of masquerade and transvestism in this world. Gwen Vernon and Chita Rivera are memorable in their white bodices and jackets and hula skirts in the Broadway production. But even more spectacular—flesh-revealing—is the ending of the film. Renée Zellweger and Catherine Zeta-Jones appear on the stage wearing extralong white coats, and spasmodically remove them to the general cheer of the audience. What follows is supreme choreography, including acrobatics, that shows the actresses’ dancing skills, and the difficulties of their sequin white minidresses to stay in place. Added to that, the eroticism of their bodies is further enhanced by two props: the hats they use to (un)cover some parts of their bodies to the rhythm of the music, and their machine guns, a common patriarchal and phallic symbol of power that provides these women with the false assumption that they are the ones in control.

In conclusion, despite their apparent satire of the commodification of the beautiful female naked body, the musical versions of *Chicago* were commercially driven and patriarchally motivated, fostering the objectification of women within and without the theatre. It is obvious that Ebb and Fosse and Marshall were not trying to change the world; and perhaps saying this of Watkins is not true either, but the fact is—as my analysis has sought to show—that in her *Chicago* the spectator finds a feminist agenda that is completely absent from later versions. The Roxie of Watkins's *Chicago* dreams of being elevated from an ordinary woman to become the desired, and watched, iconic figure of a film star. Thanks to Ebb and Fosse and Marshall, Roxie eventually fulfils her dream, for which she will feed the male gaze obsessed with objectifying women according to patriarchal stereotypes with her naked body, meaning that she is finally denied real agency. Nevertheless, Watkins does emphasize how easily one female naked body is replaced by another—younger, more exotic, or simply newer. Unlike the Broadway show and the filmic version, Watkins's play, by showing the possibilities and dangers of masquerading and transvestism when it comes to exposing the naked flesh of women, eventually makes a final call to the audience to be aware of the male gaze, an awareness that is necessary to later subvert this gaze. A musical recreation of Watkins's story true to her intent remains to be written, which is a challenging task within a genre traditionally oriented to please the male gaze. Fortunately for bearers of other gazes, the latest developments in this genre are indeed promising. As Stacy Wolf has noted, a musical can converse with women's changing roles and also change its very form (4). Bartlett Sher's 2018 feminist revival of Shaw's *My First Lady* (Green 2018) or Lauren Gunderson's musical *Jeannette* (2019), on the life of suffragist and activist Jeannette Rankin, for instance, constitute tuneful evidence that women's bodies on the stage can please gazes looking for equality within and without the theatre.

WORKS CITED

BRANTLEY, Ben. "A Lively Legacy." Review of *Chicago*. *New York Times* 15 Nov. 1996. <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/11/15/theater/a-lively-legacy-a-come-hither-air.html>. Accessed January 2, 2021.

BORDO, Susan. *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and in Private*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999.

BRADSAW, Peter. Review of *Chicago*. *The Guardian* 20 Dec. 2002. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2002/dec/20/artsfeatures2>. Accessed January 2, 2021.

ON THE POSSIBILITIES OF SATIRE AND THE (FE)MALE GAZE IN *CHICAGO*

- BREY**, Iris. *Le regard féminin : Une révolution à l'écran*. Paris : Editions de l'Olivier, 2020.
- BUTLER**, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40.4 (1988): 519-531.
- BURKE**, Sally. *American Feminist Playwrights. A Critical History*. New York: Twayne, 1996.
- "Burlesque." Merriam Webster. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/burlesque>. Accessed October 15, 2021.
- CASE**, Sue-Ellen. *Feminism and Theatre*. London: Macmillan, 1988.
- "Chicago Awards." Internet Movie Database. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0299658/awards>. Accessed January 2, 2021.
- "Chicago: Box Office Data." Internet Movie Database. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0299658/>. Accessed January 2, 2021.
- DEVERAUX**, Mary. "Oppressive Texts, Resisting Readers and the Gendered Spectator: The New Aesthetics." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 48.4 (1990): 337-47.
- DOANE**, Mary Ann. "Film and the Masquerade, Theorizing the Female Spectator." *Screen* 23, 3-4 (1982): 74-87.
- DOLAN**, Jill. *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*. Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan P, 1988.
- EBB**, Fred & Bob **FOSSE**. *Chicago. A Musical Vaudeville*. New York: Samuel French, 1976.
- ECK**, Beth A. "Men Are Much Harder: Gendered Viewing of Nude Images." *Gender and Society* 17.5 (2003): 691-710.
- EVANS**, Greg. Review of *Chicago*. *Variety* 24 Nov. 1996. <https://variety.com/1996/legit/reviews/chicago-4-1200447571/>. Accessed January 2, 2021.
- FOSSE**, Bob, dir. *Chicago. A Musical Vaudeville*. Written by Fred Ebb and Bob Fosse, with Gwen Verdon, Chita Rivera and Jerry Orbach. Forty Sixth Street Theatre. Performance, 1975.
- FRIEDLANDER**, Jennifer. "How Should a Woman Look?: Scopic Strategies for Sexuated Subjects." *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society* 8.1 (2003): 99-108.
- GREEN**, Jesse. "Review: Whose 'Fair Lady'? This Time, Eliza's in Charge." *New York Times* 19 April 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/19/theater/my-fair-lady-review-lincoln-center-lauren-ambrose.html>. Accessed October 15, 2021.
- GUNDERSON**, Lauren. *Jeannette*. 2019. <https://www.laurengunderson.com/all-plays/jeannette>. Accessed October 15, 2021.
- HANNA**, Judith Lynne. *Naked Truth. Strip Clubs, Democracy, and a Christian Right*. Texas: U of Texas P, 2012.
- KERR**, Walter. "Stage View." *New York Times* 8 June 1975. <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/06/08/archives/stage-view-chicago-comes-on-like-doomsday-stage-view-chicago-comes.html>. Accessed January 2, 2021.

- LUTE**, Jean Marie. "Tears on Trial in the 1920s: Female Emotion and Style in *Chicago* and *Machinal*." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 302 (2011): 343-69.
- MALONE**, Alicia. *The Female Gaze. Essential Movies Made by Women*. Coral Gables: Mango, 2018.
- MANLOVE**, Clifford T. "Visual Drive and Cinematic Narrative: Rereading Gaze Theory in Lacan, Hitchcock, and Mulvey." *Cinema Journal* 46.3 (2007): 83-103.
- MARSHALL**, Robert, dir. *Chicago*. Written by Bill Condon, with Renée Zellweger, Catherine Zeta-Jones and Richard Gere. Miramax, 2002.
- . "Behind the Scenes." *Chicago*. Miramax Films, 2002.
- MILLER**, Scott. "'Chicago,' *Deconstructing Harold Hill: An Insider's Guide to Musical Theatre*". Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1999. 24-36.
- MITCHELL**, Elvis. "'Chicago', Bare Legs And All, Makes It To Film." *New York Times* 27 Dec. 2002. <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/12/27/movies/film-review-chicago-bare-legs-and-all-makes-it-to-film.html>. Accessed January 2, 2021.
- MULVEY**, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16.3 (1975): 6-18. <http://www.jahsonic.com/VPNC.html>, Web. 14 Nov. 2012. Accessed October 15, 2021.
- PACILLO**, Edith L. "Media Liability for Personal Injury Caused by Pornography." *Violence against Women. Philosophical Perspectives*. Ed. Stanley G. French, Wanda Teays, and Laura M. Purd. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1998. 139-51.
- PAULY**, Thomas H. "Introduction." *Chicago*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1997. vii-xxxii.
- RIVIERE**, Joan. "Womanliness as a Masquerade." *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 10 (1929): 303-13.
- RODOSTHENOUS**, George. "Outlying Islands as Theatre of Voyeurism: Ornithologists, Naked Bodies and the 'Pleasure of Peeing.'" *Theatre as Voyeurism. The Pleasures of Watching*. Ed. George Rodosthenous. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 211-25.
- STEPHENSON**, Tim. "'Music for the Eyes' in *Hair*: Tracking the History of the Naked Singing Body on Stage." *Theatre as Voyeurism. The Pleasures of Watching*. Ed. George Rodosthenous. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 187-210.
- STERNFELD**, Jessica. "Revisiting Classic Musicals: Revivals, Film, Television and Recordings." *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*. Ed. William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008. 325-39.
- STRIFF**, Erin. "Bodies of Evidence: Feminist Performance Art." *Critical Survey* 9.1 (1997): 1-18.
- TOEPFER**, Karl. "Nudity and Textuality in Postmodern Performance." *Performing Arts Journal* 18.3 (Sep. 1996): 76-91.
- TÓTH**, Zsófia Anna. *Merry Murderers. The Farcical (Re)figuration of the Femme Fatal in Maurine Dallas Watkins' Chicago (1927) and Its Various Adaptations*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011.

ON THE POSSIBILITIES OF SATIRE AND THE (FE)MALE GAZE IN *CHICAGO*

—. “On the Verge of Reality: Roxie’s Daydreaming as Passage Between Two Realms of Existence in Chicago.” *Dream, Imagination and Reality in Literature. South Bohemian Anglo-American Studies* 1. České Budějovice: Editio Universitatis Bohemiae Meridionalis, 2007. 147-52.

VANDAMM, Florence. “*Chicago* theatre still.” Museum of the City of New York, 1926.

WATKINS, Maurine Dallas. *Chicago*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1997.

WINER, Linda. Review of *Chicago*. *Newsday* 15 Nov. 1996. n.p.

WOLF, Stacy. *Changed for Good. A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011.

WOLLMAN, Elizabeth L. *A Critical Companion to the American Stage Musical*. London: Methuen, 2017.

“DISCLOSING BURLESQUE: ON THE POSSIBILITIES OF SATIRE AND THE (FE)MALE GAZE IN *CHICAGO* (1926, 1975, 2002)”

[Noelia Hernando-Real](#)

Belin | « [Revue française d'études américaines](#) »

2022/2 N° 171 | pages 25 à 39

ISSN 0397-7870

ISBN 9782410025705

DOI 10.3917/rfea.171.0025

Article disponible en ligne à l'adresse :

<https://www.cairn.info/revue-francaise-d-etudes-americaines-2022-2-page-25.htm>

Distribution électronique Cairn.info pour Belin.

© Belin. Tous droits réservés pour tous pays.

La reproduction ou représentation de cet article, notamment par photocopie, n'est autorisée que dans les limites des conditions générales d'utilisation du site ou, le cas échéant, des conditions générales de la licence souscrite par votre établissement. Toute autre reproduction ou représentation, en tout ou partie, sous quelque forme et de quelque manière que ce soit, est interdite sauf accord préalable et écrit de l'éditeur, en dehors des cas prévus par la législation en vigueur en France. Il est précisé que son stockage dans une base de données est également interdit.