

'42nd Street,' sung big, loud and proud in Aurora



Liz Lauren



By **Chris Jones** · Contact Reporter

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One of the great pleasures of the artistic renaissance at the **Paramount Theatre** in Aurora is seeing what it can do for Chicago actors. Take **Larry Adams**, for example, who is playing **Julian Marsh** in director **Rachel Rockwell's** mostly boffo production of "42nd Street." You wouldn't want to insult Adams, who has a fine voice and a palpable heart, by calling him a journeyman actor. But he goes with the work around Chicagoland. He has sung in front of his share of pre-recorded tracks and thin bands. On Friday night, though, I watched Adams do what an actor like him most likes to do: stand in the middle of a grand old palace of varieties, eye a thousand or so faces ready to receive, and belt out "42nd Street," one of the great and timeless anthems of the indispensable art form known as American musical theater, with a huge orchestra underpinning his every note.

I thought I caught a tear in the corner of his eye. At the very least, there was a certain swagger in his gait, wholly appropriate for Marsh, a director second and a Big Personality of the Theater first.

"42nd Street" is, of course, that kind of emotional, romantic show, a celebration of the kids in the chorus, the out-of-town graft, the precarious line between hit and miss, the rewrites, the disasters and, most of all, the Broadway dreams of the young that invariably re-infect their elders.

Many musicals, even those with this kind of pedigree, work beautifully in intimate productions with revisionist notions. Not "42nd Street," a piece that positively demands outsized promotions, a full-size cast, glittery costumes and a fantastical set so big as to flirt with the ridiculous. Rockwell's production, which is choreographed with pizzazz by Tammy Mader, truly delivers in all of those essential elements, even if some still think that Aurora is to Chicago what Allentown is to the Glitter Gulch of Broadway. The set, created by Kevin Depinet (who has been killing in Aurora) is not only huge but genuinely funny, and Doug Peck's musical direction is very much on the money.

"42nd Street" was a 1933 Busby Berkeley film, of course. The show, first produced on Broadway in 1980 (the director, [Gower Champion](#), dropped dead on opening day in a storm of publicity), has a book by Michael Stewart and Mark Bramble with more creaks that Peggy Sawyer has dance tricks. But even the silly burlesque numbers have songs (music by Harry Warren, lyrics by Al Dubin) that you're sure to recognize, including the likes of "Shuffle Off to Buffalo," which they use in casual conversation in upstate New York. And if you hope that public radio's "Marketplace" will play "We're in the Money" after the market close tonight, well, you have "42nd Street" to thank.

I would not list this as one of the Paramount's true greats. I've seen "42nd Street" several times recently, and some of those other productions have created more truthful comedy than is the case in Rockwell's production, where the comic subplots are too broadly ridiculous to really be funny. I've also seen more complex relationships developed between Julian and Peggy (played here by the charming and delightful dancer Laura Savage). In this production, this pair (who can be a surrogate father/daughter or, more interesting yet, almost lovers) don't really explore too deeply within each other.

"42nd Street" has a current of darkness that the best productions exploit with an intensity you won't currently see in Aurora.

But I suspect few others missed that stuff. On Friday, I heard many intakes of breath as Dina DiCostanzo's Anytime Annie and the rest of Mader's stellar ensemble tapped up another storm, or another outre Depinet set-piece rolled out from the aisles. Tyler Hanes is notably charming as Billy Lawlor, the so-called juvenile lead and, while I wished we had gotten to know Savage's Peggy better, she's certainly an empathetic heroine. You want her to succeed — which is crucial with this show. Savage is stepping up here, and stepping out, from the Chicago storefront scene. So her big night is in Aurora.

No compromise there. Not anymore.

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When: Through Feb. 9

Where: Paramount Theatre, 23 E. Galena Blvd., Aurora

Running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes

Tickets: \$36.90-\$49.90 at 630-896-6666 or **paramountaurora.com**

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