

They hit the mark – again.

Last night's opening of Chicago proved, without a doubt, that the New Plymouth Operatic Society (NPOS) puts on world-class musicals – slick, funny, powerful, illuminating, and as polished as any professional production.

This time on high heels in a show of unforgettable characters.

In a reversal of Jersey Boys from last year, Chicago is ruled by the women – sexy sirens, dangerous dancers, and unrepentant headline-chasers. And calculated killers.

Set in the 1920s, Chicago is inspired by real-life female murderers and the media circus that surrounded their trials.

In a cast bursting with talent, the stand-out star was Becky McEwan as Roxie Hart – a self-confessed killer obsessed with... herself.

The engaging performer, who trained at Alison's School of Dance in New Plymouth and South Seas Film & Television School in Auckland, is known for roles in Shortland Street and Power Rangers – and more.

Her pedigree shows in every toss of the head, smile for the camera, and pose for the people.

She's a study of poison and honey.

As Velma Kelly, the diminutive Andrea Michelle was an impressive presence – and what a dancer.

A graduate of the American Musical and Dramatic Academy in New York and LA, Michelle can dance miles of styles, with her ballet background shining through. She stepped straight into the vixen, queen of the jail role with Liza Minelli-like quality, even though Judy Garland's daughter played Roxie in Chicago, not Velma.

Julie Trigger embodied Matron Mama Morton, commanding the stage with school-bully swagger, and a depth gained from roles in Les Misérables, Wicked, and Blood Brothers.

Callum Stuart was convincing as slick lawyer Billy Flynn, showing a lot of razzle dazzle, especially in a flamboyant fan dance with the girls.

An engineering geologist by day, Stuart starred as Tommy DeVito in last year's Jersey Boys, once again proves he belongs on land and stage.

Philippa Drinkwater was a songbird in the role as gossip-hungry reporter Mary Sunshine.

A long-time contributor to NPOS and a former member of the London Philharmonic Choir, Drinkwater's vocal control was tūi-like – striking and clear.

Simon Coles scored our sympathy as Roxie's hapless husband Amos Hart.

A former student of Warren Bates at Stage Centre, Coles has returned to the NPOS stage after 15 years, and it's great to have him back. His tender rendition of Mister Cellophane especially touched our hearts.

We see you, Amos.

The choreography by Drew Noble was wow-inspiring – as were the dancers, both male and female. All the dance sequences were fabulous in their timing, flair and stylish steps – on chairs or on the boards. Noble, who trained at the National Academy of Singing and Dramatic Art (NASDA) and has credits across Aotearoa, delivered acts of magical movement, including a chair-dancing showstopper with Cell Block Tango.

The set was simple but dramatic and those wooden chairs were the main props.

It was a great decision to place the orchestra, led by Fraser Bremner, on two bleachers framing the stage, enabling them to interact as part of the show.

A finely tuned musician and composer, who has worked with the NZ Symphony Orchestra and Sir Dave Dobbyn, Bremner conducted himself and the orchestra with panache and showmanship.

Lighting played another key role in the show, sponsored by G.J. Gardner Homes. A beaming backdrop helped shift moods and motives throughout the show, often drenching the stage and cast in dramatic purples, pinks and reds.

This production of Chicago, the second by the operatic society (the first was in 1986), was directed by Helena McHugh, a NASDA graduate and co-founder of New Plymouth's THESPA (The Space of Performing Arts).

She delivered this story of corruption, adultery and treachery with aplomb and humour. A quirky part of the show were the linking lines, introducing songs and dances, which were delivered by different cast members.

Costumes were every version of sexy black, including for the men, until the finale, when Roxie and Velma emerged as silver-clad stars.

Created in 1975, by John Kander, Fred Ebb, and choreographer Bob Fosse, and set in the Prohibition Era of bootleg and speakeasies, flappers and Art Deco, it still feels relevant today.

In fact, it strongly reflects the look-at-me, social media era of now.

Chicago is also uncanny in its capturing of the United States of then and today, where it's still an unpalatable place for immigrants, where seeking fame is everything, "fake news" is created by those sources telling the lies.

It appears that with glitter, glamour and purposeful distraction, some can get away with murder – and All That Jazz.

But mostly, Chicago is about sparkling escapism, which we all need right now.

Review by Virginia Winder