

HER KINDA PLAY, CHICAGO IS

Marcia Lewis lends some sass to a show with everything else

by Matt Mroczka

About twenty years ago, Marcia Lewis stood in front of the Schubert Theater in Manhattan, palms sweaty ready to audition for the famous Joel Grey's touring company of Cabaret. At the time, the marquis blazoned "*A Chorus Line*", one of Broadway's longest-running shows. Lewis made her way into the theater, and onto the stage. At her feet was the tape line where the talented cast of *A Chorus Line* would stand to deliver their monologues and tilt their silver top hats. It was Lewis would never forget. She was auditioning for the now legendary Broadway producer, Hal Prince.

Fast forward to the present. The tape line is gone and *A Chorus Line* now fodder for community theater. But again, Marcia Lewis is on stage at the Schubert. She's not auditioning for a touring company (she got that role in Cabaret 20 years ago by the way). Lewis has landed in a show which includes Anne Reinking, James Naughton, Bebe Neuwirth, and coincidentally, the famous Joel Grey. It is the Tony Award-winning, *CHICAGO*. And Lewis is ecstatic.

It's a sunny Sunday afternoon in Manhattan, and soon the curtain will rise on a matinee of *CHICAGO*. Lewis sits in her dressing room "putting her eyes on," talking quite matter-of-factly about a life dazzled with stories of the theater. Her mirror is bordered with photos of her alongside famous celebs, most notably Rosie O'Donnell and President and Mrs. Clinton. There are more than a few with her close friend, and cast member Bebe Neuwirth.

"It's been a good life," Lewis says with a smile, "but I must say that this is probably the happiest I've ever been. I've always wanted to be part of the original cast of a Broadway show that's a hit!"

And she's got that with *CHICAGO!* The play, for which Lewis was nominated for Best Supporting Actress in a Musical, swept the 1997 Tony Awards, winning among others, Best Revival, Best Actress (Neuwirth) and Best Choreography (Reinking). Finding tickets for the show takes weeks, if not months of leg work. Next to *RENT*, *CHICAGO* is probably the hottest ticket on Broadway.

Lewis plays the crafty and influential matron "Mama" Morton of the Cook County Jail, where the characters of Velma Kelly (Neuwirth) and Roxie Hart (Reinking) reside for their crimes of passion. The prisoners line Mama Morton's pockets in return for favors. In her song, "When You're Good To Mama," Lewis says, "They say that life is tit for tat, and that's the way I live. So I deserve a lotta tat for what I've got to give."

And give it she does. Lewis' performance is gutsy, to say the least. And her pairings with Neuwirth, in particular the song "Class", tear down the house. That form of demolition, however, is not new for Lewis. She's been a wrecking ball for most of her career.

Lewis began her Broadway career in the classic *Hello Dolly*, starring opposite Phyllis Diller and Ethel Merman. She went on to be featured in such shows as Tommy Tune's *Bye Bye Birdie*, *Fiddler on the Roof* with Topol, *Orpheus Descending* with Vanessa Redgrave, *Cabaret* with Joel Grey, *Roza* with

Georgia Brown, and *Rags*, which earned her a Drama Desk nomination for Best Supporting Actress. In addition to her role in *CHICAGO*, Lewis was also nominated for a Tony as the school principal Miss Lynch, in *Grease*.

And Broadway is not the only venue where Marcia Lewis garners praise. The cabaret circuit has always been abuzz with her talent. In fact, Lewis only recently gave up her cabaret show *On the Road to Chicago*, which she performed every Monday night while also doing the play. "I like to keep busy," Lewis said, as an understatement.

In fact, Lewis has even thought about going on the road with *CHICAGO*, just so she could get back into the cabaret circuit. "If I went to London," Lewis explains, "I would be able to perform my cabaret act there as well."

"I have put my bid out [for the London cast]," she says. "But I would like to have the option of coming back to the 'mother ship' at some point."

On the cabaret scene, Marcia's most recent audiences saw her at the prestigious Rainbow & Stars. But Lewis has taken the act all over the Big Apple, most notably performing her one-woman concert at Carnegie Hall.

The "left" coast has also had a dose of the Lewis talent. Los Angeles fans have seen her at Studio One, the Gardenia, and the Westwood Playhouse. Her performances have won her the Bistro Award for Best Musical Comedy Performance and the coveted MAC AWARD.

TV audiences have seen Lewis in many memorable roles. She starred in the

sitcom *Legs*, in a role written for her by Gary Marshall. And she has also brought her trademark fervor to roles in *The Bob Newhart Show*, *Kate and Allie*, *Mr. Belevedere*, *The Bionic Woman* and *Happy Days*, in a role that Lewis says still brings her recognition on the street. "It always amazes me that people remember that scene where Fonzie kisses me."

Lewis says she would go back to television if the part was right. She likes the freedom that television provides, but also feels as empowered as ever with her role in *CHICAGO*. "Walter," she says in reference to Walter Bobbie the director of *CHICAGO*, "has allowed us to tailor our characters to our personality." This is true, Lewis says, for the leads as well as the chorus of talented dancers. "No one who comes to this show has to learn their role in memory of the actor who had it before. It's refreshing to be able to have that much freedom."

In a half hour the curtain will go up. Lewis' "eyes are on." She must now get dressed and finish her hair. To bring the interview to a logical end, she reflects on her illustrious career. What has it taught her? Her mouth is very broad and when she smiles, it encompasses and illuminates her face. She opts not to talk about her career in terms of herself. She has advice to those who will one day be playing the roles she has played and singing the songs she has sung. "Be informed," she says. "Take voice lessons. Enroll in acting classes and just perform. Do it for free at first, cause that's the only way you're gonna get noticed. But when they offer you the money, don't turn it down. You've earned it." Words to live by.