

# Stars of the Slammer

Life imitates art imitating life as a production of *Chicago* goes behind bars

By JUMANA FAROUKY ASHFORD

ANYONE WANTING TO CATCH A PERFORMANCE of *Chicago* could head for the Adelphi Theatre in London's West End to watch bit-part TV actors gyrate their way through a slick, big-budget production. Or they could travel 40 minutes out of the city to Ashford, for a performance that's a little more intimate and a lot more surreal. Both shows aim for razzle-dazzle: bright lights, flashy costumes, sassy song-and-dance numbers. But only one of them has mandatory fingerprinting at the door, beefy guards keeping watch by the wings and five-centimeter-thick bars on all the windows. And it's not the show in the West End!

This week, for a few hours a night, the inmates at Bronzefield Prison are trading searchlights for the spotlight. The prison gym has been transformed into a small theater, with an orchestra pit at the back and a two-tier stage on which 17 women—all cleavage and fishnets—strut their stuff with the kind of attitude drama school just can't teach. Two weeks ago, rehearsals were still an exercise in controlled chaos. Now, with help from a professional director, choreographer, voice coach, costume designer and three seasoned actors in the lead roles the inmates are in character, in step and (mostly) in tune. Ladies who couldn't remember their lines a few weeks ago are now getting all the laughs. The tiny brunet who spent dance practice painting her nails with Tipp-Ex can do a jig on stilts. And the shy, sweet-faced black girl who plays Velma Kelly is belting out *And All That Jazz* like she's gunning for a Tony.

This close-to-home version of *Chicago* is the brainchild of Wasfi Kani, founder of Pimlico Opera, a small touring company. In 1991, the outfit put on a production of *Sweeney Todd* in Wormwood Scrubs, one of Britain's most notorious men's prisons.



JAILBIRDS Bringing the big house down with *Chicago*

using lifers as cast and crew. It was a success—tickets sold well, critics loved it, and nobody escaped. Since then, the company has collaborated with a different prison every year on musicals like *Assassins*, *Guys and Dolls* and *West Side Story*. The crime theme is no coincidence. “The shows have to be relevant to the inmates,” says Michael Moody, *Chicago*'s director. “There has to be something in them that they can play on and show off with. And, the shows are a bit naughty, too.”

**“The show takes my mind out of the prison for a while.”**

—BRONWEN, inmate and cast member

The productions earned Kani an award from the Queen, and some ex-cons have moved on to jobs in theater and film. But, Kani says, “I don't do this to make them into drama darlings. I'm trying to teach them how to be disciplined, how to focus themselves and how to achieve something. It isn't just educational rehabilitation for the prisoners, it's also about taking the public into prisons.”

This is one of the nicer ones. Opened in June 2004 with a capacity of 450, Bronzefield was designed specifically for

women. That means brightly-painted walls, Matisse prints hanging around the place and a row of potted trees in the main hall. But no amount of magnolia yellow can cover the stale smoke in the air, or the hollow echo as voices bounce off concrete bricks, or the cold clunk of heavy keys in steel doors. “You only see us laughing and playing around, but this is an awful place,” says Bronwen, 34, in on pick-pocketing charges and playing *Chicago*'s prosecutor and detective. “The show takes my mind out of the prison for a while. This is the best bit of prison for me. This and talking to my mum on the phone.”

Most of the women in Bronzefield are sent here on remand from local courts, waiting for sentencing on anything from fraud to murder. Few stay longer than a couple of months, when they're either released or moved on to more long-term accommodation. Which wreaks havoc with the performance schedule. “There's the constant worry that someone's going to be unconvicted or unsentenced and we'll lose them,” says prison director Janine McDowell.

Opal, 24, a mother of three, inside on shoplifting charges, wasn't going to let that happen. After an officer heard her singing outside her cell and suggested she try out for *Chicago*, she landed a role as the judge. “I wanted to act ever since I was a kid, but never had anyone to push me,” she says. In the last weeks of rehearsal, Opal was worried that her lawyer's advice to change her plea from guilty to not guilty would get her released and make her miss the show. So she decided to change it back. “I begged them to let me stay,” she says. “If I get out, I'll come back to do the play, if they'll let me.”

Despite her best efforts to stay in jail, Opal was set free. On opening night, someone else was sitting in the judge's chair—because the show must go on. For the audience of musical lovers tapping their feet to a brassy rendition of *Me and My Baby*, it's a glimpse into a world they'll never know. And for the women of Bronzefield Prison, it's a chance to briefly escape into a life filled with glamour, glitter and jazz hands. It won't last long, but right now, this jailhouse rocks.

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