

Chicago's stars and producers (from left): Zeta-Jones, Richards, Meron, Zellweger, Gere, and Zadan



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Chicago's gay mafia

An oral history of how four gay guys came together behind the scenes to help turn *Chicago* into the hottest movie of the year and the Oscar front-runner **By Michael Giltz**

The film version of *Chicago*, due in theaters on December 27, has already earned industry buzz as the film to beat for the Oscars—and distributor Miramax has a dream team of gay filmmakers to thank for that. Originally a 1975 stage musical with songs ("Razzle Dazzle," "All That Jazz") by John Kander and Fred Ebb, directed and cowritten by Bob Fosse, *Chicago* was a sexy, cynical vaudeville-style romp about two 1920s flappers—Roxie and Velma—who murder men who'd cheated on them. The women manipulate their superslick lawyer, Billy Flynn, the media, and even a butch prison matron, Mama Morton, to get off the hook. With its hot-button themes, the show was revived on Broadway in 1996 (where it's still running) and a film version finally came together, shepherded largely by four openly gay men: director Rob Marshall, executive producers Craig Zadan and Neil Meron, and screenwriter Bill Condon. Their involvement began with Marshall's meeting at Miramax about another recent Broadway hit...

Marshall: I went in about directing *Rent*. And I said, "Before we begin, can I tell you what I'd do with *Chicago*?" At

Participants

Bill Condon screenwriter; Oscar-winning writer (and director) of *Gods and Monsters*
Rob Marshall director; codirector of Broadway's *Cabaret* and director of ABC's *Annie*
Neil Meron and **Craig Zadan** executive producers; producers of TV films *Annie*, *Gypsy*, *Life With Judy Garland: Me and My Shadows*, and *Serving in Silence*

the same time, I was having meetings Marty Richards, our producer [who has been nurturing the project since the 1970s]; he had always been such a supporter of my work on the stage. But I think [Miramax hired me] mostly because I was able to come up with an idea of how to do this and make it work.

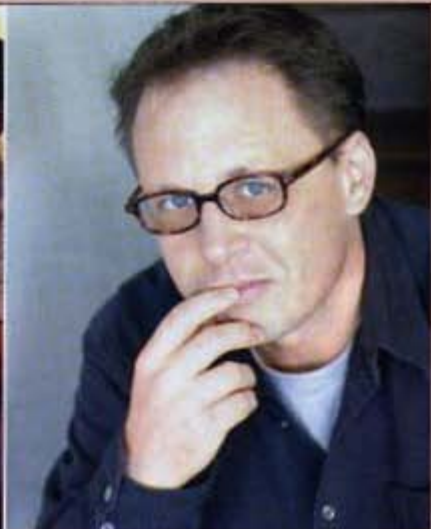
Meron: It had been at Miramax and with Marty for years and years. [Keeping track of it] was a sort of sideline for us. We were interested in the outcome of *Chicago* because it impacts our business. Every movie musical, success or failure, will impact what we do.

Marshall: Then we went in search of a writer. It worked out with Bill [Condon] specifically because it was just sort of the right combination of things. You know, I loved the fact that he was a moviemaker as well. Because we needed to, in a way, write it together.

Bill was unbelievable because he helped flesh the idea out.

Marshall's idea was to set the musical numbers in the colorful, surreal world of Roxie's mind, while the plot of the film unspools in the gritty reality of 1920s Chicago.

Condon: I did really go after this because I felt that I'd spent years thinking about the specific problem of the way that films get adapted. I remember going in to meet with Rob and it did seem we were talking about the same thing. There is a great model for how to do it, and that's *Cabaret*. The idea of musical numbers that exist in another world where they comment on what's happening—it's how *Chicago* was conceived originally; it came right out of the *Cabaret* movie. Retaining that vaudeville world and metaphor made it a more likely musical to work on film. ▶



Marshall (left, center) and the chorus view filming through a monitor on the *Chicago* set. It was all "tremendous fun," says screenwriter Bill Condon (right).

Marshall: I could tell that [Bill] had the right sensibility. It's shocking that he hasn't written musicals before because he's a natural librettist.

Meron: [Bill] is a fanatic. He's as passionate about musicals as any of us. That's a little-known fact about Bill Condon. He'll go see as many pop musicals as me. And at that point—once there was a script in good shape and they were convinced that they were going to make the movie—that's when Rob really wanted us to become involved, and he asked for our support.

With Zadan and Meron on board, casting began.

Marshall: Catherine Zeta-Jones [who plays Velma] seemed like a perfect fit. I think she's finally playing a character instead of just playing herself.

Meron: Catherine is so at home in this genre that if she were an actress in the '40s and '50s, she'd be one of the great stars of the movie musical era. She'd be right up there with Judy Garland.

Marshall: Richard Gere [who plays Billy Flynn] did not audition. That was really a leap of faith. And we knew that if we were in trouble, we would just say, "This isn't working." But he's just a natural musical theater performer! Who knew he could dance like that? I didn't.

Zadan: Richard started in [the stage version of] *Grease*, so we knew he could sing and dance. Renée [Zellweger, who

plays Roxie] was the only one who no one had ever seen sing and dance. [But] Baz Luhrmann told everybody that she was the runner-up for *Moulin Rouge*. He said, "Anybody who uses her in a musical is very lucky, because she's brilliant." So he thought she was amazing.

Marshall: Renée sort of dips her foot in the water to see how it feels first before she jumps in. And she came to watch us work a little. At the end of that day, as we were walking out, she said, "Would you show me that one little step?" And they shut the door and left us alone in the room and I started working with her and I could tell immediately that she knew how to dance.

Later, actually, we ended up at a restaurant, [and] we started singing. It was so embarrassing, but she said, "How does that song go that you were working on?" And so I started singing it and then she started singing it, and I think it was her way of kind of saying, "Listen, I can sing." I heard her sing like six or seven songs in the restaurant.

Condon: *Sweet Charity* had been a favorite film [of mine], and when I would meet with Rob we would talk about who was the new Shirley MacLaine, [because] Shirley MacLaine is sort of an ideal for Roxie, you know? Basically she's ruthless and cunning and a bit of a mobster. So the question just became how to make her more identifiable without softening her. And I think a lot of that got solved with casting Renée Zellweger, who is just such an endearing presence.

Marshall: Harvey Weinstein [cochair of Miramax] championed Queen Latifah [to play Mama] in a huge way, and she's great.

Filming commenced in December 2001.

Marshall: I was so tired. I didn't have a day off in six months because during the weekends we would check and light the numbers we were going to do that week. But then there were moments, little triumphs. Catherine slid down that pole that she was petrified of! People would come when they weren't doing their own numbers and watch. [It was] so great to have Renée there watching Catherine's number or Catherine there watching Richard's number. It was like that all the time.

Condon: There was always music and dancing for the next nine months. I think everyone felt this sense of no matter how hard it could get, you never get to have this much fun. It was tremendous fun all the way through.

Marshall: Chita [Rivera, who played Velma in the original production and has a cameo in the film] was so emotional. She made a little speech to the whole film set, basically saying, "I can't tell you what this feels like to come full circle with this." She saw the [movie] trailer a couple days ago and called me and screamed in my answering machine, "I can't believe what you've done!"

Zadan: The fun part was when Rob would come in and say, for instance,

MARSHALL: SCOTT JARRE; CONDON: DEBRAE TANKER

"OK, I'm putting together [the choreography for] 'We Both Reached for the Gun.' I have this weird idea about putting the reporters on bungee cords." Bungee cords? Cut to: They're shooting it, and it's just brilliant, and you sit there and go, "Oh, my God!"

Condon: Rob's sensibility merged with the Fosse sensibility and came up with something that's actually very different. One thing I think is exciting is, it's half musical numbers and half book. Movies, even the great *Cabaret* movie, have these long stretches of just book. But [with *Chicago*] it's very rare that five minutes go by when there's not another number coming—there are probably 15 of them in the movie. So that's quite different from Hollywood adaptations for a long time. I'm just dying for the one screening in Chelsea or in Hollywood. You want to see that gay audience [respond]. That's something I'm so looking forward to.

Zadan: We've also had the benefit of seeing with preview audiences, and it's thrilling to sit in a movie theater and watch it with a crowd. It's really exciting.

Meron: It's a balls-out musical! It's so exciting, and the impact of a successful musical film to the pack of musicals that are based on Broadway musicals? It's good for the theater, it's good for the movies, it's good for the audience, it's good for us, for Rob, for everybody associated with it right down the line.

Marshall: I keep telling Kander and Ebb that my life has been charted through Kander and Ebb shows. The first Broadway stage I ever stood on was [backstage at] *Chicago*. My first Broadway show [as a performer] was *Zorba*, which was their show. The first show I did as a dance captain was *The Rink*, then my first Broadway show as a choreographer was *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. My first Broadway show as a director, which Sam Mendes and I codirected, was *Cabaret*. And then my first feature film is *Chicago*. It's sort of this unbelievable thing with Kander and Ebb. I've just been connected with them. They're like family to me. ■



What's with gay men and musicals? Find the *Chicago* team's thoughts on that only at www.advocate.com