'Girls Of Murder City': The True Cast Of 'Chicago'

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Chicago, theater critic Rupert Hughes wrote in 1926, was a work of genius. Written by crime reporter Maurine Watkins, the play sought to "put an end to the ghastly business of railroading pretty women safely through murder trials by making fools of the solemn jurymen."

Chicago has been a staple of American popular culture ever since. In 1927, Cecil B. DeMille produced a silent-movie version of the play. Fifteen years later, Twentieth Century Fox remade Chicago as a talkie. In 1975, a musical adaptation by director and choreographer Bob Fosse took Broadway by storm, went on tour and reappeared 20 years later to become the longest-running revival on the Great White Way. In 2002, Chicago returned to Hollywood — and won the Academy Award for Best Picture.

These days, almost no one knows that Chicago was inspired by the trials and acquittals of Belva Gaertner, a former cabaret dancer who left the stage to marry one of America's leading manufacturers of scientific instruments; and Beulah Annan, a beauty whose favorite record was "Hula Lou," the tale of a "gal who never could be true."

In The Girls of Murder City, Douglas Perry, the online features editor of The Oregonian, tells their stories in delicious and devilish detail. Although the number of killings by women in Chicago was increasing exponentially, Perry points out, jury members — all of whom were male during the Roaring '20s — remained favorably disposed toward "demure ladies with pretty figures and good pedigrees." Even when there was overwhelming evidence against them. Jurors let two blondes off scot free, he reveals, only to sentence to death Sabella Nitti, a "dirty, repulsive" woman and an immigrant to boot. "Nice face — swell clothes — shoot man — go home," Sabella told her fellow inmates. "Me do nothing — me choke."

With the help of a fashion expert, Perry writes, Beulah's lawyers made her appear "sweetly childlike and at the same time delectably ripe." When she announced that she was pregnant, male reporters leaped to her defense. They described her as if she were a work of art, with hair that was not simply red but "Titian," a helpless fluttering "butterfly on a wheel."

In much the same way, Perry adds, Belva evaded the prosecution's attempts to find a "hat-proof, sex proof" jury. Decked out in a dress that "clung in soft folds to her body," her sultry eyes and sensuous lips trumped the confession she made at the scene of the crime.

As entertaining as Chicago (on stage or screen), and far more informative, The Girls of Murder City recaptures a moment in which the Victorian feminine ideal was (and wasn't) giving way to the "churning change" of the flapper lifestyle — and ebulliently elucidates the emergence of the criminal as celebrity. It's this
summer's "not guilty" pleasure.