

**ROXIE ROCKS
CHICAGO!**



Karen's Corner of the World

The Broadway veteran won't worry about falling buildings or rising curtains. She just takes life one step at a time.

By Sheryl Berk

I'm kicking up my heels — literally — with Karen Ziemba. Backstage, as I perch my pumps on her couch, the star of *Chicago* offers me tea amidst vanilla-scented candles and soft music. "Take a load off," she jokes, plumping up pillows for me. There are old family photos on the tables; Impressionist posters on the walls. Her dressing room is a homey hideaway in the heart of a theater district that's suddenly become chaotic — if not a health hazard.

"The sky is falling," Ziemba says, trying to make light of the recent Condé Nast building construction fiasco. "It's terrible to think that things are crumbling around us. There's so much noise, too — the jackhammers and the sirens. Everyone is always looking up. So much stress and anxiety!"

But not in here. Ziemba's nest at the Shubert is mellow to the max — as is its inhabitant. So what if she's filling the footsteps of Ann Reinking in the role of Roxie? So what if her costumes are slightly X-rated ("I didn't think you could cut a skirt up to there, but William Ivey Long proved me wrong!)? So what if her costars are Bebe Neuwirth and Joel Grey, two of the biggest names in theater?

"I am really *not* nervous," she insists, and I believe her. Because after an hour of sipping tea and swapping

stories, it rubs off on me. I feel relaxed and ready to take on the world — or at least the subway ride home.

So how does it feel to play Roxie?

Great — but it's very different for me. A left turn, so to speak, from the other roles I've played in *Steel Pier* and *Crazy for You*. Roxie is such a sexpot!

And you certainly don't look like yourself in the role. I did a double take.

The red hair — very Orphan Annie, I know! People don't recognize me at all. They're used to the long-haired brunette who wears sweatpants — not this femme fatale in her fishnets!

Is it fun for you?

Oh, it's so much fun. Roxie has a lot of heart — pun intended. I played her on tour for a few months before stepping in here, and I feel like I've really gotten to know her now. She feels more comfortable all the time. She grows on you.

Is there a big difference in doing her on tour and on Broadway?

Well, it's always about adjusting and catching the balls that are being thrown to you no matter where they come from. I've had so many different Velmas and Amoses and Mamas since being on the road, all of the standbys going on during these big summer vacation months. I think the

biggest difference is the sense of intimacy you get at the Shubert. It's a wonderful theater.

And a theater you've had a great deal of experience performing in.

This is my fourth show here. It's like my home away from home. I did *A Chorus Line* here — I played Maggie and later Morales, Cassie, and Bebe; I did it twice over the years. Then I did *Crazy for You* and now this. My costumes keep getting smaller and my dressing room keeps getting larger!

Do you feel any pressure to emulate Ann — or any of the other actresses who've played Roxie?

The comparisons are almost always inevitable, but that's not what I think about. I don't try and "do Ann." For me to try and be a carbon copy would be ridiculous; I'm not an impersonator, I'm an actor. I can't be somebody else, because my life experience is different and my vocal and dance qualities are different. Thankfully, Ann and Walter Bobbie encouraged bringing as much of Karen into Roxie as I could. The only thing I do steal from Ann is the puppet number, "They Both Reached for the Gun." She is so gifted at quixotic, staccato moves, and she has this beautiful doll-like face and eyes. She was simply magnificent, and she helped me execute some of her moves.

Is the choreography tough?

Like running a marathon! It's very deceiving — it looks so simple. I wasn't used to it at all. It's very tight and restricting, and it does tire you out physically as well as mentally. By the end of the week I'm pretty exhausted, but it gets easier with every performance. The Fosse movements and Ann's take on them are very contracted; everything is so specific and small. It goes against the natural dancer's instinct to be free and let it all go. It goes against my grain.

The costumes are also a bit, shall we say, restricting?

They're certainly small, and they look pretty tight, but they're actually very easy to move around in. With this kind of dance it's important to see the limbs and the extensions of them, so you can't cover them up with fabric. Thank God for tights that cover your privates!

Did you always know you wanted to be a performer?

Always. My mom started me out in ballet when I was in grade school in Michigan. The singing also came naturally. I think part of it was hereditary since my grandma was an opera singer. I was quite a ham as a kid. I used to make my two younger brothers dress up like girls and co-star in my own little amateur hour productions. I was a brutal director! I grew up listening to records of Broadway musicals: *Oklahoma!*, *The Most Happy Fella*. I remember always singing around the house. It was in me.

Do you consider yourself a dancer first, a singer second?

I hate to define myself. But if we're doing a chicken and egg thing, the dance came first. I think I'm lucky enough to be able to do both — and I think you need to be able to do both to make it on Broadway. And you need to be able to act — only Renaissance women need apply!

Were you intimidated working with Bebe?

A little, but she's such a great gal and a giving partner. We actually broke the ice in the East Room at the White House. We performed together for the first time there for a PBS special that will air September 16. She recommended me, and we performed for President Clinton and Hillary and about 200 people.

The show seems so appropriate for our media-crazed day and age.

Oh, absolutely. The entire O.J. trial really emphasized that. I was talking to Fred Ebb about this just the

takes to get there. Ain't that the truth?

You also worked with Kander and Ebb on *Steel Pier* and the off-Broadway revue *And the World Goes 'Round*.

And I would kill to work with them again. See, there's that Roxie homicidal instinct kicking in!

Was *Steel Pier* a big disappointment for you?

I thought it was a wonderful show, so it was great while it lasted. What was disappointing was that it didn't last long enough. Not enough people gave it a chance.

Chicago seems to appeal to a huge audience.

Teens, adults, older people who remember the original. I love that kids think it's cool. There's a group that's seen it about 25 times — *Chicago* groupies! What a thrill.

Do you ever want to choreograph?

It's just one of those things that you have a calling for. Susan Stroman told me she was always making up steps in her head. I don't feel that way yet. I'd rather execute than instruct.

Do you have to work out to stay in shape for the show?

Nope. It's a built-in workout all its own. I do yoga stretches, but aerobically, I'm taken care of.

Do you ever worry about getting older? About not being able to sing or dance as well as you do now?

I don't really think about it much. I'm a here-and-now person, and I like to enjoy what I have without worrying it will go away. If you're always wondering what's around the corner, you'll miss what's in front of you. I'll leave it to Roxie to stress about the fleeting nature of fame. I'm just going to sit back and enjoy it. ■

SHERYL BERK interviewed Colm Wilkinson in the last issue of *InTheater*.



Ziemba played a champion marathon dancer in Kander & Ebb's *Steel Pier*.

JOAN MARCUS

other day. I said, "You guys are always ahead of your time. How did you know?" It's a very cynical, smart show. Biting. People think it's a new musical because it's so timely. Think of Court TV today and all of these slugfests on Jerry Springer and Sally Jessy Raphael — all this dirty linen being aired in front of us. And people become famous from scandal: Look at Monica Lewinsky, Amy Fisher. Everyone wants to be a star — no matter what it