

Cover Story

WHAT IT TAKES FOR A GREAT MUSICAL PRODUCTION

In short, a lot of everything – people, money, costumes and audiences

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St. Cloud Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

WAITE PARK — For GREAT Theatre to mount a Broadway-style musical, it requires a large cast of volunteer actors, hours of rehearsal, gallons of paint, racks upon racks of costumes and, of course, an enthusiastic audience.

It also requires a lot of money. Over \$200,000, in fact.

That's how much it cost GREAT to produce "Chicago," which runs Sept. 12-22 at the Paramount Center for the Arts — \$211,556 in total.

As a nonprofit organization, all of GREAT's budgets are public information. But artistic director Dennis Whipple said people are still shocked when they hear about the steep costs associated with putting on a show.

Rights, royalties and restrictions

Months before the curtain rises on opening night, theater companies like GREAT are already paying thousands of dollars to put those wheels in motion.

"First we do royalties for scripts and music rental. For 'Chicago,' that's about \$1,700 per performance, and we have eight of those," Whipple explained. GREAT paid a total of \$15,124 in royalties to Samuel French Inc. for rights to perform the show. "That's money due

before we even tell anyone we're doing the show."

Purchasing the rights to a show doesn't grant a company the right to perform it in perpetuity; the rights are solely for the performance dates listed. After GREAT is done using the scripts and music provided by Samuel French, "(we) have to ship back (the materials) to be destroyed."

The royalties contract also includes major restrictions.

"We can't copy the Broadway set, or costumes, or choreography. We can't change the gender of a character, we can't change a line, we can't video tape it — that's in bold," Whipple said.

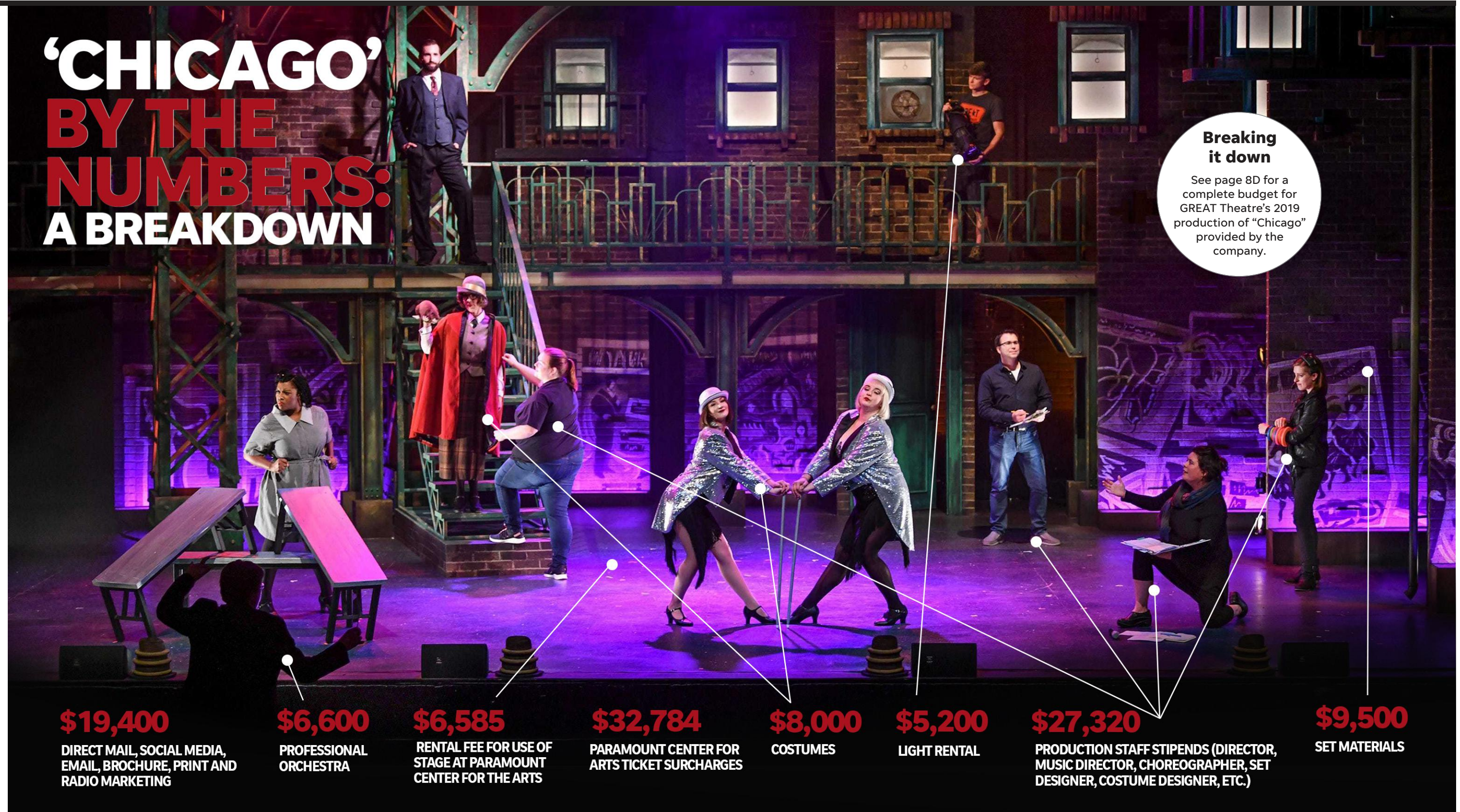
For the design team of GREAT's "Chicago," those restrictions are actually a blessing in disguise: They allow for greater creativity and innovation, ensuring the production will be unlike anything audiences have previously seen.

"We have a joke that people leave our shows and go, 'Did you buy all that at Walmart? Where did you get that?' Well, it was nothing. We were given a piece of paper, and with resources and creativity, all of that was created," Whipple said.

"It's original, so it's locally made for local audiences. There will not be another 'Chicago' like ours. The touring 'Chicago' is visiting every city in the country, but ours is unique to our thea-

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'CHICAGO' BY THE NUMBERS: A BREAKDOWN



Cast members and behind-the-scenes production team members are pictured from a scene of GREAT Theatre's upcoming production of "Chicago" during rehearsals Sept. 9, at the Paramount Theatre in St. Cloud. DAVE SCHWARZ/ST. CLOUD TIMES

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ter and our community.”

But explaining the nuances of a rights agreement to those outside of the theater community can be difficult, Whipple said.

“I think (people can be) shocked about royalties,” he said. “The idea that we have to pay for it and we can’t change it, and we don’t own it, and they can’t video tape it — that’s frustrating to people. They don’t understand it.”

People power

But Whipple thinks folks may be even more surprised to learn what GREAT’s biggest expenses are: paying GREAT employees or contracted staff, and Paramount Center for the Arts ticket surcharges.

For “Chicago,” the former category amounts to \$96,676 total, which breaks down to:

- \$47,040 to pay salaried programming staff (like Whipple, technical directors, etc.)

- \$27,320 to pay contracted production staff (like a director, choreographer, etc.)

- \$15,716 to pay administration staff (like an executive director, communications manager, etc.)

- \$6,600 to pay for a professional orchestra

Those are big numbers, to be sure, but Whipple said GREAT “really (values) paying people, because who doesn’t value being able to eat and have housing?”

“There can be this idea around community theater that people just do it for the fun of it. That is one reason, but it is also an actual skill that people go to school for and get degrees in,” he said. “This is an industry. We have 12 full-time employees, and this work allows them to purchase mortgages and raise their families. It’s a business that employs a lot of local artists.”

“And it’s not just the full-time staff, either,” agreed Lacey Schirmers, managing director. “It’s also the contract artists. That’s another 40 people.”

Setting the stage

GREAT Theatre stages most of its productions at the Paramount Center for the Arts, save for a handful staged in their own Helgeson Learning Lab Theatre or elsewhere in the community.

That’s where the latter category of major expenses, Paramount ticket surcharges, comes in, amounting to \$32,784 for “Chicago.”

“You pay a gross percentage of sales based on how much you sell. The more (tickets) you sell, the less you pay. We’re at 9% of total ticket sales (paid to the Paramount,)” Whipple explained. “We pay them 7% of our subscription sales for all their subscriber tickets. We pay \$1 for every comped ticket. 3.5% on all credit card sales. 50 cents for every redeemed voucher or complimentary tickets.”



Cast members perform a scene from the GREAT Theatre production of “Chicago” during rehearsals Sept. 9, at the Paramount Theatre in St. Cloud.

DAVE SCHWARZ/ST. CLOUD TIMES

“That covers, as we understand it, box office, house managers, that type of work.”

That nearly \$33,000 does not include the additional \$6,585 paid in rental fees to the theater for use of the stage for three weeks.

While a fair chunk of change does go to the flashier components of the show — \$9,500 to set materials, \$8,000 to the purchase and creation of costumes, \$5,200 to light rental — the majority of GREAT’s budget goes toward expenses that most audiences never consider.

“As an audience member, you’re just lost in the experience. You’re so drawn in to what you’re seeing that you don’t think about it,” Schirmers said. “(Audiences) don’t even know what they don’t know.”

Whipple concurred, adding that many of their larger expenses are fixed costs over which GREAT has no control, like royalty fees or the Paramount’s ticket operations fees. Those standing expenses are the budgetary framework around which GREAT builds its season.

“Production expenses are a very stable number. We do work backwards. It’s asking ourselves, ‘Can

‘Chicago’ by the numbers: A complete breakdown

Budget for GREAT Theatre’s 2019 production of “Chicago” provided by the company.

EXPENSES:

- **\$15,124** — Royalties, scripts and music rental for eight performances

- **\$27,320** — Production staff stipends (Director, music director, choreographer, set designer, costume designer, etc.)

- **\$6,600** — Professional orchestra

- **\$6,650** — Travel costs for out-of-town staff (choreographer and choreographer’s assistant, set designer, light designer)

- **\$6,585** — Rental fee for use of stage at Paramount Center for the Arts

- **\$32,784** — Paramount Center for the Arts ticket surcharges

- **\$19,400** — Direct mail, social media, email, brochure, print and radio marketing, including marketing done with the St. Cloud Times

- **\$2,800** — Audience program printing

- **\$7,437** — Rehearsal space (Helgeson Learning Lab Theatre and downtown studios,) utilities and insurance

- **\$9,500** — Set materials

- **\$8,000** — Costumes

- **\$5,200** — Light rental

- **\$600** — Two American Sign Language interpreters for one rehearsal and one performance

- **\$800** — Volunteer (cast) appreciation including t-shirts, meals and photos

- **\$47,040** — Programming staff salaries (Artistic director, technical director, costume designer, etc.)

- **\$15,716** — Administration staff salaries (Executive director, communications manager, education director, etc.)

EXPENSES TOTAL: \$211,556

PROJECTED INCOME:

Estimated, based on previous September musical income data.

- **\$48,600** — Subscription ticket sales

- **\$105,000** — Single ticket sales

- **\$13,000** — Sponsorships

PROJECTED INCOME TOTAL: \$166,600

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