



Photo: Chicago Tribune

## Maurine Dallas Watkins

July 27, 1896 – August 10, 1969

Maurine Dallas Watkins was an American journalist and playwright. She was a crime reporter for the *Chicago Tribune* who went on to write the play, *Chicago*, which was produced on Broadway for the first time in 1926.

Maurine was born in Louisville, Kentucky, and attended Crawfordsville High School in Indiana. She attended a total of five colleges, including Hamilton College (Kentucky), Transylvania University, Butler College (now Butler University), and Radcliffe College. While at Butler, she joined Kappa Alpha Theta Women's Fraternity and was initiated in 1919. That year, she graduated first in her class from Butler, and moved to Radcliffe in Massachusetts to pursue graduate studies in Greek. In 1924, she moved to Chicago and landed a job as a reporter with the *Chicago Tribune*.

She worked for the *Chicago Tribune* for seven months, where she covered the murders of the trials of Belva Gaertner, a twice-divorced cabaret singer, and Beulah Sheriff Annan. Watkins would often use amusing coverage that focused on the farcical, cynical, and sensational aspects of the two cases, the press and public interest, and the legal proceedings. She highlighted two attractive "jazz babies" claiming to be corrupted by men and liquor. She characterized Beulah as the "beauty of the cell block" and Belva as the "most stylish of Murderess Row." Both women, after months of press coverage, were found not guilty at trial even though Maurine believed they were guilty.

Maurine later returned to her graduate work; and, as a class assignment, she wrote a thinly fictionalized account of the two murders, which eventually became the play, *Chicago*. The play opened on Broadway in December 1926. It was then adapted into a silent film in 1927 and as *Roxie Hart* in 1942, starring Ginger Rogers. Maurine left Hollywood in the 1940s and in the 1960s, Watkins was approached by Bob Fosse, who unsuccessfully sought the rights for a musical adaptation of her play. Following her death, her estate sold him the rights, which he then adapted into *Chicago: A Musical Vaudeville*. It became a successful musical, running on Broadway from 1975 to 1977. The musical was revived on Broadway in 1996 and then was adapted into a 2002 film, starring Catherine Zeta-Jones and Renée Zellweger, which won that year's Academy Award for Best Picture.



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References available at the end of Women's History Month