

She's razzle-dazzling it out of there

VALERIE LAWSON

As the flashiest, trashiest, high-kicking killer in town, Caroline O'Connor's been knocking 'em dead for more than a year. Now she's muscling in on the silver screen, writes VALERIE LAWSON.

Every night she opens the show with so much zest and zing the hairs spring up on the nape of your neck. "Come on, babe, why don't we paint the town, and all that jazz." Her big blue eyes scan the audience, her hips twist this way and that into the sharp and sexy lines of Bob Fosse's diamond-sharp choreography.

Every night for more than a year, Caroline O'Connor has zapped the audience with her unique combination of talents. She moves like an angel, delivers her lines with a knockout punch, and belts out her songs like a latter-day Ethel Merman as she plays "Chicago's own killer diller, Miss Velma Kelly".

The scintillating sinner, Miss Kelly is a vaudeville dancer who shot her husband and her sister when she found them in acrobatic "position number 17, the spread- eagle". For Velma, it was an act of desperation (well, as much as she can remember). For Caroline O'Connor, 36, it has been one of the greatest roles of her life.

After he saw the show, Baz Luhrmann offered O'Connor the featured role of Nini Legs-in-the-Air, a cabaret dancer in his new movie *Moulin Rouge*, now in production at Fox Studios. She leaves Chicago on Sunday after a 13-month, three-city run which has seen her perform eight shows a week, with only a few nights off due to illness and none for injury.

On the strength of a high- protein diet, aerobic workouts and the discipline born of a background in Irish dance and ballet, O'Connor revs herself up every day to prove every night that she is Australia's greatest musical star. The Herald said: "As charismatic a turn as audiences are likely to experience on the musical stage."

How tough has it all been, though, not only physically, but emotionally? "Very, very hard. But this is my 17th year [in the theatre] and a lot of that has been eight shows a week. I've graduated gently up the ladder." Still, "now that I'm here, that old line keeps going through my head: You're only as good as your last show. Which is a terrible thing, but it does keep my standards up. If I don't leave the stage thinking I've done a good performance, I punish myself. My husband [musician Barrie Shaw] says, 'Let it go, let it go'." O'Connor was talking before one of her last shows in her Capitol dressing room suite, in shimmery grey pants and a jumper decorated with a sparkly cross. Like a skittery cat who can't sit still too long, she leapt to her feet to show me the way she dances her showstopper, *I Can't Do it Alone*.

Chicago's original producer and choreographer, Bob Fosse, was once a drummer. "His timing of things with the music is so amazing. He used to create steps to go with certain rhythms and relished certain moments,

drum noises. My number is almost like doing a double act with the drummer; I have to be in total sync with him."

It's not a matter of singing then dancing I Can't Do it Alone. She does both at the same time and must know exactly when to gulp in the big breaths. "It's all completely planned." O'Connor goes "doodily-oo, doodily-eye" and "ba-ba, dee-ah", making the swish, splish sounds of a drum as she demonstrates.

Her accent is just as twisty as it segues from cockney to Yorkshire to Aussie twang to Sloane Square and then to pure sweetie, darling showbiz as she loudly instructs "Entrez-vous!" to a knock at the door.

It's co-star Maria Mercedes with a remedy for O'Connor's poor sore skin. "I've developed fungal dermatitis from my costume" - the briefest little black dress in captivity, wrapped around its own built-in leotard. The silky stretch fabric of the dress "falls beautifully but it does not breathe. I've got a vicious rash on my arms. I can't wear deodorant". She covers herself with perfume and changes costumes "about two or three times during the show".

As for O'Connor's way with accents: "I'm a bitser," she explains, "born in Lancashire, Irish parents, with an Australian upbringing." Then more than a decade in London and a cockney husband. Her parents were £10 immigrants to Australia in the 1960s, settling first in Adelaide when O'Connor was four.

As a tot, she excelled at Irish dancing. When she won a State championship aged six, the entire family (Mum, Dad, two boys, two girls) moved to Sydney so little Caroline could have the best Irish dancing teachers. At the Ransley Studios in Liverpool Street, she tackled all kinds of dance: Irish, tap, jazz and ballet. The last she took to a high level, passing her Royal Academy of Dancing advanced exam.

She excelled at turns and jumps, her Irish dance technique always a help. "It's very quick, precise and neat, very musical. You can't play with the music, you have to be on the music. That was great training."

O'Connor, though, was unsuccessful in an audition for the Australian Ballet School. But after coming third in the world Irish dance championships in Dublin when she was 15, she passed an audition at the Royal Ballet School in London, where she took up a full-time course aged 17.

All this time, O'Connor knew she could sing as well. The family had the boxed vinyl sets of all the old musicals like South Pacific. "My biggest inspiration was listening to Ethel Merman singing Gypsy. I taped myself singing with Ethel at the top of my lungs. I'd sing ditties and harmonies to the radio and my Mum would say, 'Would you be quiet?'"

In 1981, O'Connor returned to join the Australian Opera's ballet corps but quickly moved on to musicals, first in the chorus line of Oklahoma! Most of her career on the musical stage has been in the West End, where she has starred in nine shows. She met her husband in Eastbourne 13 years ago; they married in 1996 in Mauritius. Playing sax and clarinet in Chicago, he's on stage in the band every night, but, she says "he never tells me about my performance. I ask him and he says, 'I didn't notice.' He's totally focused on what he's doing."

During the show's run, O'Connor has lost weight but "retained quite a lot of muscle and that has helped me keep my strength. Muscle makes people look younger, more toned. I must be the oldest dancer on the [Chicago] stage. Some people in the show are celebrating their 21st birthday."

Before they began, the producers suggested the dancers go onto a high-protein diet of fish, chicken, salads, vegetables and protein shakes with milk, protein powder and a flax-seed oil. ("I never want to see another protein shake in my life.")

O'Connor has her own pre-show regime, beginning with a gentle stretch. During noisy numbers when she's not on stage, she runs around backstage and does cartwheels to "get my heart pumping".

For *Moulin Rouge*, which stars Nicole Kidman and Ewan McGregor, O'Connor is about to begin a new dance training regime. She is planning "serious aerobic workouts" and tango lessons for the central tango scene in the movie.

As *Chicago* completes its Sydney run then moves to Perth with Sharon Millerchip as Velma, O'Connor will do three performances of *Funny Girl* in Melbourne, then go full-time into the movie. She has hopes for another major stage show in Australia after that.

And on Sunday? "We might have a party. We might go a bit crazy." And so will the audience - again - as they do every night.

As they say in *Chicago*, "Give 'em an act with lots of flash in it, and the reaction will be passionate."