

The Drowsy Chaperone: A Gay Old Time – John Threlfall

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Back in the old days, as we're reminded right off the top of *The Drowsy Chaperone*, a gay old time "just meant fun"—which, simply put, is exactly what you can expect with Langham Court's latest. Absolutely the theatrical coup of the season (how did a community theatre company in its 83rd season manage to scoop this one ahead of the Belfry?), *The Drowsy Chaperone* may well be the perfect show for the Victoria Theatre Guild; not only does the fictional musical of this show-within-a-show-with-commentary hail from the same era as Langham Court itself, but it's also symbolic of the new life that's been blowing through the Rockland institution of late. Trite as it sounds, if you haven't been to Langham Court lately, *The Drowsy Chaperone* offers you the perfect excuse to see how things have changed.

There's not a lot that can be said about the plot without giving away many of the hilarious surprises wrapped up in this delicious, 90-minute, no-intermission package. Suffice it to say it's a musical lover's ode to musical theatre, as a fan of the genre simply named *Man in Chair* puts on a record and narrates a forgotten Broadway gem from the '20s—the titular *Chaperone*, which is all about a young couple getting married. Keep that point in mind when you consider the backstory to this Canadian sensation: originally penned by famed Toronto writer/director/actor Don McKellar (*32 Short Films About Glenn Gould*) as a wedding gift for actor friends Bob Martin and Janet Van De Graaff, *The Drowsy Chaperone* soon morphed into a boffo Fringe show, then a Toronto stage hit until it finally hit Broadway and won five Tonys (out of 13 nominations) plus eight Drama Desk Awards. Since then, it's toured the U.S., played the Vancouver Playhouse, Theatre Calgary, Edmonton's Citadel, Ottawa's National Arts Centre and had international productions in England, Australia and Japan. In other words, it's a hit, a very palpable Canadian hit.

McKellar is known for his quick-witted writing (*Highway 61*, *Twitch City*), as is Bob Martin (*Slings & Arrows*), who played the original *Man in Chair* and was in fact the groom for whom the show was written. (And if you want to get utterly metatheatrical, Bob Martin and Janet Van De Graff are both the show's nuptial inspiration and characters in *The Drowsy Chaperone* itself.) All of which is by way of saying, prepare yourself for a wild, weird and wacky ride with this one, which is filled with insider theatre jokes about actors, audiences and the art form in general. (Quips the *Man in Chair*, "At that time, theatre was the only place stupid people could earn a living—that was before television.") True, the more you know and love musicals, the more you'll enjoy this show—especially given Lisa Lambert and Greg Morrison's bang-on period music and often ridiculous lyrics—but you'll also dig it if you're simply looking for a tight, light 90-minute laugh-fest.

It's tough to pick any standouts from this roundly solid cast playing a who's-who of 1920 caricatures (the star, the millionaire, the ditz, the gangster, the butler, the lush). Featuring a mix of local professionals, Langham Court regulars, VOS veterans and CCPA grads, it's a testament to the popularity of the show that it could attract such a strong lineup of talent—and skilled director Roger Carr (*The Laramie Project*) earns a well-deserved nod for whipping up such a

frothy confection . . . and on such a notoriously small stage! (Seriously: 16 actors, three musicians, a piano, a set and one whopper of a Miss Saigon-esque surprise, and it doesn't really seem that crowded.) Kudos to set designer Bill Adams for once again coming up with a few uber-clever ways of making it all work—talk about a space-saving apartment! But Carr clearly knows when to play it big, when to rein things back and when to pull out all the stops; there were only a few soft spots on opening night—and far more moments when so much was going on that it was easy to miss a gem or two.

Top marks go to leads Kyle Kushnir (Elizabeth Rex) as the cheeky charming Man in Chair, an almost unrecognizable Karen Lee Pickett (Influence) as the saucy, sauced Chaperone, and Alison Roberts as Busby Berkeley belter Janet Van Der Graff (who truly knows how to show off when she tackles an exhausting musical number of the same name); there's also keen supporting work by the always reliable Alan Penty (Sin City), Dylan and Cameron Northover (who do a dandy tap duet), and Alf Small as a way larger-than-life Latin lover. And while he's not personally on stage, master choreographer Jacques Lemay is also one of the stars here, making every scene leap off the stage as he puts the cast through a dazzling dance display that's unparalleled in Langham history. Bravo all for making difficult choreography look so effortless!

Thanks to Carr's deft direction, Lemay's nimble footwork and some stunning costumes by Susan Ferguson and Di Madill—plus a well-deserved round of applause for Sally Crickman's props and decor, Donna Williams' mix of live and recorded music, and Alan MacKenzie's top-notch miking—this Chaperone looks and sounds as great as it reads; the only surprise for me was Karrie Wolfe's lighting, which was bright and colourful but otherwise unremarkable.

Never in danger of taking itself too seriously (not many musicals tell their audience to “ignore the lyrics”), but with enough heartwarming theatrical bon mots to make it memorable, *The Drowsy Chaperone* stands as an ode to anyone who has ever sat in a chair and listened to a complete musical . . . on vinyl . . . repeatedly. (“Hello, my name's John, and I'm a musicaloholic.”)

Already held over to February 11 (before opening night, no less), *The Drowsy Chaperone* is absolutely the must-see musical of the season for fans of all ages. Forget about the *Mamma Mia* tour—neither snow nor sleet nor rain nor ho-hum attitudes about either Langham Court or musicals should keep you from seeing this soon-to-be-locally-legendary production.