

Lawyer lights up theatre stage
Karrie Wolfe practises law by day, lights the stage by night

Adrian Chamberlain, Times Colonist
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ON STAGE

What: The Drowsy Chaperone
Where: Langham Court Theatre
When: Opens tonight, continues to Feb. 4
Tickets: \$19, \$17 (250 384-2142)

Karrie Wolfe has designed the lighting scheme for Langham Court's The Drowsy Chaperone.
Bruce Stotesbury, Times Colonist



A Victoria lighting designer worked on inaugural performances of Canada's most successful musical in Broadway history.

Now, Karrie Wolfe is back - this time overseeing lighting for a community theatre revival of The Drowsy Chaperone.

The musical, opening tonight at Langham Court Theatre, ranks as one of this country's big theatre success stories. And one of the most unlikely.

The Drowsy Chaperone was originally hatched as a lark by Toronto theatre types Don McKellar, Lisa Lambert and Greg Morrison. They created it as a wedding gift for a pair of actors who'd gotten engaged: Janet Van De Graaf and Bob Martin. The show was originally mounted as a one-off for Martin's stag party at Toronto's Rivoli bar.

Everyone loved it so much, the creators decided to revive it at the 1999 Toronto Fringe theatre festival. Wolfe served as lighting technician for those early fringe shows.

"Word of mouth went out like wildfire," she recalled. "We had people lined up for hours, waiting for tickets."

David Mirvish subsequently booked The Drowsy Chaperone at Theatre Passe Muraille, then Toronto's Winter Garden Theatre. Fast-forward to 2006 - the Canadian musical opened on Broadway. It ran for 674 performances and ended up scooping two Tony awards.

Bob Saget, star of America's Funniest Home Videos and Full House, had a lead role in The Drowsy Chaperone toward the end of the Broadway run. Saget, who performs his stand-up comedy at Nanaimo's Port Theatre on Saturday, has fond memories of the musical.

"Drowsy is a beautiful play. It's a perfect play. I would recommend anybody to go see it. It's so smart," he told the Times Colonist.

Certainly *The Drowsy Chaperone* is not as famous as Broadway favourites such as *West Side Story* (which had a shorter original run).

Yet in Canada's theatre community, it's a beloved musical. Roger Carr, directing the Langham production, says that's why Jacques Lemay consented to sign on to oversee choreography. A pre-eminent Canadian choreographer who has collaborated with major professional companies across Canada, Lemay until recently ran the Canadian College of Performing Arts.

"Most people in the theatre world know [*The Drowsy Chaperone*]. That's what drew Jacques in - I think he knew," Carr said.

The musical is about a reclusive fellow, known as the "Man in Chair," who speaks to the audience about his love of theatre.

When he puts on his 1928 record of a fictitious musical called *The Drowsy Chaperone*, his grim flat transforms into a glitzy Broadway-style stage populated by razzle-dazzle performers. The show is an unusually challenging project for the Victoria Theatre Guild. The community company, which started in 1929, is based at Langham Court Theatre, a converted carriage house and barn off Rockland Avenue. *The Drowsy Chaperone* calls for "triplethreats" the ability to sing, dance and act. The 20-member cast - including a musical trio - must shoehorn itself onto Langham's small stage.

There are 162 costume pieces. Wolfe says there are more than 140 lighting cues (the Guild's recent production of *The Melville Boys*, required only 50).

Langham's equipment is augmented by lighting gear recently donated by a Royal Caribbean cruise ship that underwent renovations in Victoria. The cache includes so-called intelligent lights, that is, advanced automated lights.

"Some of the lights were from the ship's outside. Some we got were encrusted with salt," Wolfe said.

Wolfe worked on the Toronto Fringe production of *The Drowsy Chaperone* as head lighting tech for George Ignatieff Theatre at the University of Toronto. She worked at the theatre through college.

Wolfe once harboured dreams of becoming a professional lighting designer. However, she ended up completing a law degree at the University of Victoria instead. A lawyer by day, she works for the provincial attorney general's office, specializing in constitutional and administrative law. One of her cases was the battle over the legality of the Insite safe-injection clinic on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

Early on, a mentor gave Wolfe good advice. She told her less than a dozen people in Canadian work full time as theatre lighting designers.

"She said, 'If you keep it as a hobby, you'll always have something with joy that you can go back to.' "

Wolfe says she never had aspirations to perform. She likes the behind-the-scenes side of theatre.

It is rewarding. One of Wolfe's favourite theatre memories was sitting beside a couple who noticed a sunrise she'd designed.

"The fellow sitting beside me said, 'Oh my God. Did you see that? The sun rose!' I thought, 'Sweet.' "

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