

Chaperone oodles of fun on one small stage

By Adrian Chamberlain, timescolonist.com January 20, 2012

ON STAGE

What: The Drowsy Chaperone (by Lisa Lambert, Greg Morrison, Bob Martin and Don McKellar)

Where: Langham Court Theatre

When: To Feb. 11

Rating: 4.5 stars (out of five)

Langham Court Theatre seems an unlikely venue for big song-and-dance extravaganzas. I'm not sure how large the stage is, but suspect some of the more affluent theatregoers possess living rooms of a similar size.

That's why it's impressive that the Victoria Theatre Guild has successfully shoehorned in a razzle-dazzle musical, *The Drowsy Chaperone*, with its cast of 17. And that doesn't include the little band stuffed into the corner.

On opening night, curtain call resembled a shoulder-thumping square dance, with performers good-naturedly jostling one another to acknowledge a standing ovation. *The Drowsy Chaperone* is the Guild's second large-cast home run within a year, by the way. Twelve months ago the company enlisted a cast of 33 for an excellent drama, *The Laramie Project*, also directed by the talented Roger Carr.

The Drowsy Chaperone is oodles of fun and I suggest you get your tickets pronto. The production is selling so briskly, the run was extended before opening night.

This show is smart and funny. Staging it is huge task right across the board: set, props, costumes, lights, the works. Much hard work has gone into *The Drowsy Chaperone* — the results are clearly evident on stage.

There's lively, well-executed dance routines overseen by one of Canada's notable choreographers, Jacques Lemay. The singing was often very good (and even when it wobbled, once or twice, it added to the campy fun). The champagne-bubbly exuberance such a musical requires was freely flowing.

The Drowsy Chaperone is the little Canadian show that could — and did. Its first run was at the Toronto Fringe Theatre Festival in the late '90s. It ended up with a Broadway run and two Tony Awards.

The show is a love letter to the frothy musicals of the 1920s. The premise is that a poofy, cardigan-wearing fellow (identified only as Man in Chair) is playing a scratchy recording for us, the audience. The record is his favourite musical, *The Drowsy Chaperone*, staged in 1928.

Having such a narrator is a wee touch of genius. Without it, *The Drowsy Chaperone* would be just another night at the dinner theatre. Kyle Kushnir does a wonderful job as a likable musical queen. His catty asides are softened by an endearing giggle. It's certainly a linchpin performance.

The addition of a narrator gives the piece a slightly hip, post-modern feel. We're part of the inside joke. Man in Chair relates funny footnotes about the performers — we learn, for instance, that Adolpho the Latin lover ended up dying alone and was discovered five days later partially devoured by his poodles.

The notion we're listening to a record results in passages of Brechtian hilarity. At one point, the record skips, causing the cast to repeat the same phrase over and over. Earlier, the narrator mistakenly puts on the wrong recording. For a few minutes we're treated to a pastiche of an "oriental"-style musical, complete with period tropes that are unapologetically racist.

Almost every performer shined at some time or another. Alison Roberts — who is just 19 years old — confidently inhabits the role of Janet, the ingenue. Her greatest sequence is the song Show Off, when Janet contemplates sacrificing her showbiz career for marriage. While singing, Roberts does cartwheels, "plays" the flute (while a cobra arises from a basket) and spins plates. A remarkable, bravura routine.

Real-life brothers Dylan Northover (Robert) and Cameron Northover (George) also earned cheers for a clever tap-dancing routine. In a hilarious performance, Alf Small, sporting a curiously turban-like wig, ably captured lover-man Adolpho's hip-thrusting excesses. Karen Lee Pickett convincingly plays the drowsy chaperone, so called for her gin-swilling lifestyle. Also in lead roles: Cam Culham, Linda O'Connor, Sue Wilkey, Alan Penty, Jeffrey Stephen and the amusing Lindsay Robinson.

Set designer Bill Adams impressed with novelty tricks that work very well. They include a giant fridge and a Murphy bed from which performers emerge — and a wonderful fold-out biplane. The latter is commandeered by aviatrix Stephanie Sartore, who also provided solid piano accompaniment throughout. A small quibble — the other members of her musical trio, one sporting dreadlocks, look like refugees from a Tofino jam band. It just doesn't look right.

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