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From the San Francisco Chronicle

'Drowsy Chaperone' was a surprise hit

By Edward Guthman
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In the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers movies of the 1930s, the cast of characters usually read like this: a debutante or dizzy chorine, a tycoon, a gangster, a male ingénue and a European lothario of ambiguous extraction. Mistaken identities, thwarted romance and 11th-hour nuptials were inevitable.

Take that formula, factor in Marx Brothers tomfoolery, toss in tunes inspired by Jerome Kern musicals and you've got "The **Drowsy Chaperone**," a musical pastiche that opens Tuesday at the Orpheum Theatre. The winner of five 2006 Tony Awards - but not best musical, which went to "Jersey Boys" that year - "**Drowsy**" is a musical about musicals and people who adore musicals.

The show opens in the dark. A disembodied voice says, "I hate the theater," and when the lights come up we see a fussy, middle-aged man in a cardigan. He's identified only as Man in Chair, an opinionated recluse who admits to a case of "nonspecific sadness."

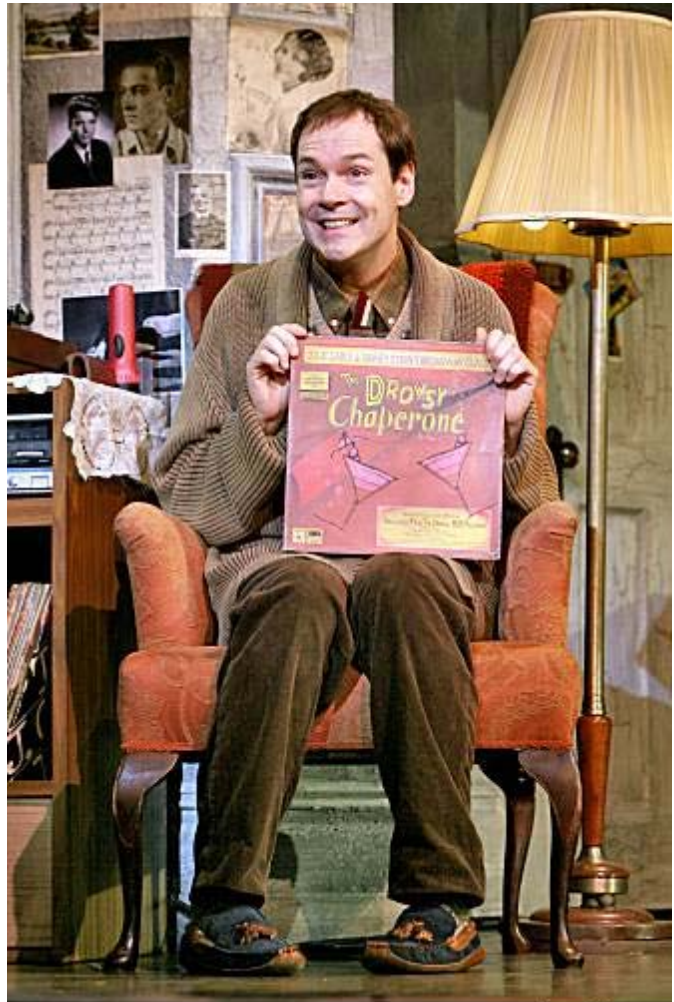
Although it's never made clear in the show, the implication is that Man in Chair, like so many musical-comedy fanatics, is gay. He's passionate about vintage musicals and cringes at the thought of "written-by-Elton John" extravaganzas that pass for entertainment today.

Man in Chair is the show's framing device. We're in his drab apartment, but when he lowers the needle onto a scratchy LP - the cast album of a fictitious 1928 show called "**The Drowsy Chaperone**" - we're transported. Characters emerge from the Man's refrigerator door, as if from a treasure chest of memories, and the musical plays out as he remembers it.

"The **Drowsy Chaperone**" had the strangest of beginnings. In 1998, it was the centerpiece of a bachelor party that Lisa Lambert, the show's lyricist, organized for Bob Martin, the show's co-scenarist and a former director of the Toronto branch of the improvisational comedy troupe Second City.

"I was the best man at Bob's wedding," Lambert said during an interview in New York. "I was in charge of the bachelor party, so I thought, 'We're all performers. Why don't we make it sort of a half-party, half-show?'"

That first "**Drowsy**" production, held at Toronto's Rivoli nightclub, was just 35 minutes long. The response was so tremendous that Lambert, Martin and their high-school friend, Canadian actor-writer Don McKellar ("Slings & Arrows") decided to retool it with Martin playing Man in Chair. Lambert and composer Greg Morrison wrote the songs; McKellar and Martin wrote the book.



Joan Marcus

Jonathan Crombie plays the Man in Chair in "The Drowsy Chaperone," opening Tuesday at the Orpheum Theatre.

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Bob Martin, *on the unexpected success of “The Drowsy Chaperone”*

They took it to the Toronto Fringe Festival and the 160-seat Theatre Passe Muraille the following year, where again it was a huge audience hit. “**Drowsy**” expanded into a full-length, big-stage production at Toronto's Winter Garden Theatre in 2001, then went into a four-year-limbo as the producers shopped it around.



A successful reading at the National Alliance for Musical Theater Festival for New Musicals in 2004 brought “**Drowsy**” to the attention of New York producer Kevin McCollum (“Rent,” “Avenue Q”), who decided to bring it to Broadway. After a successful Los Angeles tryout, it opened at the Marquis Theatre on Broadway in May 2006, and played 674 performances before closing in December 2007.

“It started as a drunken lark,” says Martin, who played Man in Chair in Toronto, New York and London. “It started as small as a show can possibly start. And then it just grew and grew until we had this \$10 million-plus budget and won five Tonys and seven Drama Desk awards. It was this huge success ... in a way we could never have imagined. I can talk about it frankly, because it seemed so surreal to me.”

Lisa Lambert co-wrote the music and lyrics for “**The Drowsy Chaperone**,” which began as a bachelor party skit.

Lambert, Martin and McKellar all went to Lawrence Park Collegiate Institute in Toronto, where they cut their teeth on Shakespearean productions. As they got older and their gang of fellow actors grew, they created cabaret and sketch-comedy shows. “All Hams on Deck” was a send-up of “On the Town” and “Anchors Aweigh.” “People Park” spoofed “Hair,” “Godspell” and “Jesus Christ Superstar.”

“We’d been kicking around the idea for “**The Drowsy Chaperone**” for years,” Lambert says. “We had the title of the show, we had song titles and weird characters we thought we’d like to use.”

When Martin announced his forthcoming wedding to fellow performer Janet Van De Graaff, Lambert and pals had the impetus they needed.

More than any of her “**Drowsy**” collaborators, Lambert sees herself in the show and its nostalgia-fixated central character.

“Of all the writers, Bob is the least like Man in Chair,” she says. “I’m probably the most like him. Not answering the phone. Putting on old records.”

And yet, for the eight years that Martin played Man in Chair, audience members assumed he and the character were interchangeable.

“There were a few times at the stage door when people said to me, ‘It’s so brave of you to tell your story,’ ” he said by phone from Toronto. “I can totally understand why people would be confused, but I’m really not that guy at all.”

Over and over, Martin says, “people assumed I was gay. Even my own relatives. On opening night in New York, my aunt, who I hadn’t seen in a long time, was sitting at the same table with my mother and my two sisters. She leaned over to one of my sisters and said, ‘Does your mother know that Bob is gay?’ People also assumed that I had an encyclopedic knowledge of musical theater, which I don’t have. Lisa does. She’s the expert on musicals in my life.”

In her teens and early 20s, Lambert was a “drama geek” with an obsession.

"Musicals were escape," she says. "I'd go home, and I'd need to study for something at school. But I'd put on a record and dance around my room to, like, 'Mack and Mabel,' for 20 times and then go back to my homework."

Following its unexpected, Toronto-to-Broadway juggernaut, "**Drowsy**" seemed like a can't-miss hit. And yet, when it transferred to London in June 2007, with a cast that included West End star Elaine Paige (the original "Evita"), the show closed after just two months.

"It was a horrendous time," Martin says. "The production itself was an extremely strong production. The cast was amazing. It was simply the wrong show at the wrong time. "We were up against a lot of competition in the West End, particularly from very-big-budget musicals with reality-show casting programs behind them."

One of those shows, in which the TV audience chose the star for Andrew Lloyd Webber's "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat," ended just days before the "**Drowsy**" opening.

"Because of the TV show, 'Joseph' sold *huge* amounts of tickets," Martin says. "And '**Drowsy**' really suffered because of that. There are many things like that that happened throughout our run. Also, a lot of resentment toward Americans at that time" - largely because of the Iraq War - "and the American dollar was very low. So there were no American tourists. Even though it's a Canadian show, it was identified as an American show."

Martin played Man in Chair for close to nine years.

"It was a huge part of my life," he said. "It certainly boosted my confidence as a performer. ... And it was great to play a sort of brutally honest, very flawed character who's so desperately trying to be happy."

THE DROWSY

CHAPERONE runs Tuesday through Aug. 17 at the Orpheum Theatre, 1192 Market St., San Francisco. \$30-\$99. (415) 512-7770, www.shnsf.com.