

The Drowsy Chaperone Plumbles Into TAG

Posted: June 22nd, 2012



The drowsy chaperone (diane regan) is all eyes for her latin lover, aldolpho (shawn jolemore), in the musical comedy the Drowsy chaperone, running until july 8 at pond playhouse. photo credit: bruce goodick.

I find the experience going to a community theatre like the Theatre Arts Guild utterly fascinating, mostly because of the audiences. I am not entirely sure what it is, but Community Theatre audiences are uniquely terrific. Last night at TAG's Opening of Bob Martin and Don McKellar's production of *The Drowsy Chaperone*, the audience was howling with laughter and generous with their hearty applause, it was distinctly clear that the entire house was having a terrific time and seeing the theatre, especially the Canadian theatre, have this effect on people always makes my heart joyful.

The Drowsy Chaperone is a Canadian theatre success story that began as a gift to celebrate the wedding of Toronto-based performers Bob Martin (*Slings & Arrows*, *Puppets Who Kill*) and Janet Van De Graaff and ended up Opening on Broadway and winning Tony Awards for Best Book and Best Score in 2006. The show holds the record for the longest running Canadian musical on Broadway.

The show is centered on a reclusive figure in a chair who is playing one of her favourite records, an obscure Original Broadway Cast album of the fictitious 1928 production of Julie Gable and Sidney Stein's *The Drowsy Chaperone*, in attempt to escape from the drudgery and oppression of the real world. In classic musical theatre style, as the record plays the musical comes alive around her, but instead of becoming a part of the story, *The Woman in Chair* remains on the sidelines, regaling the audience with an ongoing and passionate commentary about the history and the artistic merit of the show. Bob Martin and Don McKellar have filled the entire 90 minute musical with witty lines and silly situations and Lisa Lambert and Greg Morrison's score is a perfect pastiche of the music of the early musical comedies from the 1920s that were still transitioning out of the Follies and Vaudeville.

The fictitious musical *The Drowsy Chaperone* has been constructed to be a flawed show but one that has such a naive joy to it that it provides a perfect escape for its anxious Fan in Chair. In the TAG production, director Jacqui Good captures this energy perfectly. She is also good at layering the different dynamics in the cast, *The Chaperone*, for example, is both a character in the play, but also an aging and alcoholic Dame of the Theatre, insecure about being upstaged by a young, up and coming starlet. The acting throughout was very "theatrical", which in many of the larger crowd scenes added to this joyful exuberance and was historically accurate for musicals of this time. I would have liked to see that

theatricality toned down a little in a few of the more intimate scenes so that the truth of the emotions, Robert's love for Janet, for example, and the subtle romantic chemistry between Mrs. Tottendale and Underling, were given a chance to shine through a little clearer. It is a delicate balance in this show because it is written in such a grandiose way, and *Woman in Chair* makes reference to certain points of extreme melodrama, but when pushed too far to the clownish extreme we risk losing the heart of it.

In the same way, Sherri Bezanson, as *Woman in Chair*, has all the perfect exuberant passion but I think she could benefit from rooting her character in a bit more humanity. There really are people who have encyclopedic knowledge of musical theatre, and while this woman in particular is certainly an eccentric example, her inherent sadness and loneliness becomes much more riveting and poignant when she is played less as a stereotype and more as an individual.

There are a lot of lovely moments in this production; Jolene Pattison as Mrs. Tottendale is bursting with mesmerizing stage presence, Brian Hart, as Robert, has a beautiful singing voice, Mike Chandler, as Feldzieg, has great gusto and panache, Lyndsay Anderson is beautifully endearing as Kitty, Karen Myatt, as Janet, has a beautiful voice, especially singing "Bride's Lament," Diane Regan has a great snarky aloofness as the Chaperone and Lise Renault's voice soars as Trix the Aviatrix, who comes in to save the day. For me, the highlight of this production was Shawn Jolemore's portrayal of womanizer Aldopho, usually the scene stealer, who was absolutely pitch-perfect in sleaze and broad racial stereotypes.

The *Drowsy Chaperone* is a Canadian theatre gem and I am always thrilled to see it reaching audiences, especially ones as eager to be spellbound as the crowd was last night. It is wonderful to see that TAG is continuing a strong tradition of fostering a love of performing and attending theatre in our community and I hope that this will lead to more impassioned members of the public finding their way to Halifax's fantastic independent theatre productions and theatre festivals as well.

Theatre Arts Guild's production of *The Drowsy Chaperone* plays until July 8th, 2012 at the Pond Playhouse (6 Parkhill Road) in Halifax. Tickets are \$16 General Admission or \$13.00 for Members, Students and Seniors. You can purchase tickets at all Ticket Atlantic Outlets, including the Metro Centre Ticket Atlantic Office and participating Atlantic Superstores. You can also order by phone 902.451.1221 or online (with a \$2 charge per transaction). The tickets are flying and some performances are already sold out, so book your tickets in advance so you won't be disappointed.
