The Drowsy Chaperone

Music and lyrics by Lisa Lambert and Greg Morrison

Book by Bob Martin and Don McKellar

A Guide to the Play

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Contents

How to use this guide ........ 3
A history of the play ........ 4
The Jazz Age ....... 5
Meet the artistic team ........ 6
Synopsis ........... 8
Discuss and explore ........ 10
How to Use This Guide

This guide is intended for anyone who would like to enhance their appreciation and understanding of the Globe Theatre's production of *The Drowsy Chaperone*. The guide contains background information about the play, an introduction to the Globe's artistic team, a summary of the action in each scene, a few questions intended to encourage open-ended discussion, and some links to additional resources for those who wish to explore further.

Some of this guide's content may give you information about the play's plot that you'd rather discover yourself while experiencing the show. If you'd like to avoid any potential spoilers, you might want to wait until seeing the play before reading any further.

**Teachers** who are preparing their students to experience the play can provide them with this guide's discussion questions ahead of time -- or first allow them to see the production and then use the questions or other sections of the guide to facilitate further thought and discussion.

I hope this guide is both helpful and enjoyable to read. I welcome your comments and suggestions at mark.claxton@me.com.
A history of the play

Pre-wedding stag parties have a reputation for occasional short-term after-effects; the 1997 stag party of Canadian actors Bob Martin and Janet Van De Graaff, however, produced a remarkable and enduring legacy - one of the most critically and popularly acclaimed musicals of recent decades.

_The Drowsy Chaperone_ began life as a musical spoof created by a few of the couple's friends - Don McKellar, Lisa Lambert, and Greg Morrison - and performed at their stag party. The piece was such a hit, though, that the groom signed on as a co-writer for a version that would go to the Toronto Fringe Festival.

When eminent theatrical producer David Mirvish saw _The Drowsy Chaperone's_ fringe production, he put up the money to stage it at Toronto's Theatre Passe Muraille. Audiences in the relatively small theatre loved the show and Mirvish was inspired to finance a further expansion in a still larger venue - the Winter Garden Theatre.

By this time, four years had passed since the fateful stag party. But _The Drowsy Chaperone_ was just getting started. New York producer Roy Miller came to see the Winter Garden Theatre show and immediately purchased the rights to bring it to the Big Apple.

On May 1, 2006, _The Drowsy Chaperone_ opened on Broadway to audience raves and critical applause. During its run, it won five Tony Awards, including Best Book and Best Original Score. The play has since been staged in Toronto, London, Japan, Australia, and by a growing number of theatres across Canada and the United States.
The Jazz Age

*The Drowsy Chaperone* is an affectionate send-up of the Broadway musical – particularly that style of musical that predominated in the 1920s. While you could argue that stage musicals have never specialized in plot or character development, the “Jazz Age” musical was especially frothy, with a heavy emphasis on recycled, romantic storylines draped in lavish spectacle and high-energy song-and-dance.

Like the popular art of any era, the musical of the “Roaring Twenties” was a reflection of its times. The devastations of the First World War and the Spanish Flu pandemic were still fresh in the minds of North Americans; at the same time, the continent was embarking on a new era of prosperity and predominance on the world stage. The economy was booming, the stock market was soaring, and a good number of people were becoming very rich - and not always legally. When prohibition legislation outlawed the purchase and sale of alcohol, an underground network of gangsters, bootleggers and rum-runners was only too happy to profit from a thirsty market.

Young adults of the 1920s were witnesses and survivors of war and disease. They seemed determined to embrace life; at the same time, they were well aware of its darker corners, and their value systems and rejection of many traditions was a complex mix of heady optimism and deep-rooted cynicism. Writers such as Ernest Hemingway depicted aimless characters hurling themselves into the pleasures of travel, romance, wining, and dining, and yet unable to escape an emptiness at their core.

Broadway audiences, however, were not interested in seeing their demons on the stage. They embraced and demanded more bright lights, exhilarating music, slapstick comedy, and fairy-tale romance. The Jazz Age musical, as the Man in Chair rightly points out, was an escape, a getaway, a temporary reprieve from the pressures and problems of modern life.

Interestingly, stage musicals have made a remarkable comeback in popularity in the past two decades. While many of the genre’s enduring works feature darker themes than the typical 1920s fare, Broadway and Broadway-style musicals still harness the power of music and spectacle to usher their audiences into an alternative universe.

Even with the mockery and cynicism resting at its core, *The Drowsy Chaperone* has succeeded because its audiences leave the theatre smiling. In true 1920s fashion, the show refuses to take itself seriously and is unabashedly, relentlessly fun.
Meet the artistic team

**Robb Paterson** (Director) has been Associate Artistic Director at the Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre since 2004. Over the past 31 years, he has been involved in more than 150 productions across Canada.

**Michael Scholar Jr.** (Assistant Director) is Globe Theatre’s Artistic Associate. Born and raised in Regina, Michael trained in the University of Regina’s Theatre Department before graduating with a BFA in Acting from the University of Alberta.

**Stephanie Graham** (Choreographer) recently completed three seasons as the Director/Choreographer of the Young Company at the Charlottetown Festival. She also choreographed *Next to Normal* (directed by Robb Paterson) at the Manitoba Theatre Centre.

**Brian Perchaluk** (Set Designer) was born and raised in rural Manitoba and graduated from the University of Winnipeg and the National Theatre School of Canada. Over the last 25 years, his designs have been featured on stages across the country.

**Emma Williams** (Costume Designer) is a winner of the 2009 Olivier Award for her work on the Royal Shakespeare Company’s productions of *Henry IV Parts I & II* and *Henry V*. She is the Globe’s resident costume designer for the 12|13 Main Stage season.

**Scott Henderson** (Lighting Designer) is the resident lighting designer at Winnipeg’s Rainbow Stage. He has worked as a lighting designer for the Shaw Festival and been a sessional lecturer, teaching design students at the University of Winnipeg.

**Kathryn Ball** (Stage Manager) is calling the cues for her first Globe Theatre production after assisting and apprenticing stage management for numerous productions with the Manitoba Theatre Centre, including *Steel Magnolias, The Shunning*, and *The Melville Boys*.

**Esther Howie** (Assistant Stage Manager) is a graduate from the U of R Stage Management program. She has stage-managed numerous Globe productions in recent years, including *Buddy - The Buddy Holly Story, Robin Hood, and Doubt: A Parable*. 
Cast

Greg Campbell  Man in Chair
Lindsay Croxall  Janet
Tim Gledhill  Robert
Diana Coatsworth  Kitty
  Jennifer Lyon  The Drowsy Chaperone
  Vince Staltari  Aldolpho
  Kevin Rothery  Underling
Stirling Karlsen  George
Murray Furrow  Feldzeig
  Jenni Burke  Trix
Duff Macdonald  Gangster #1
  Scott Perrie  Gangster #2
Anne McGrath  Mrs. Tottendale
Synopsis

Prologue
In the darkened theatre, a lone man in a chair confesses his hatred for theatre and his generally blue state of mind. In order to cheer himself, he pulls out a cherished old record, an original recording of the jazz-age musical *The Drowsy Chaperone* from 1928. The man invites us to listen along and sets the needle to the record.

Tottendale’s Entrance Hall, morning
We are introduced to each of the characters as they gather for the wedding of Robert Martin and Janet Van De Graaff. The affair is being hosted by Mrs. Tottendale with the help of her Underling. Also present is Follies producer Feldzieg, wanna-be starlet Kitty, and Robert’s best man George. Also entering the stage are Gangster #1 and Gangster #2, disguised as pastry chefs, eminent ladies’ man Aldolpho, an Aviatrix, and Janet’s chronically tipsy and drowsy Chaperone.

Janet has announced that after her wedding she is retiring from show business. Feldzieg is being threatened by the gangsters, whose client is a significant investor in the Follies. Feldzieg is determined to stop the wedding at any cost.

Robert’s Room, morning
George is trying to calm a nervous Robert, who is trying to ease his nerves by tap-dancing. Horrified that his friend might break a limb, George sends him off roller-skating - blindfolded, in case he sees the bride. The scene is interrupted by the ringing of Man in Chair’s phone.

Tottendale’s Pool, early afternoon
Janet concludes a news conference confirming her impending retirement from show business. She remains impervious to Feldzieg’s pleas. The desperate producer whispers into Aldolpho’s ear that Robert has been slandering his good name and the best revenge would be for Aldolpho to seduce Robert’s bride-to-be.

Entrance Hall, afternoon
A classic bit of spit-take shtick between Mrs. Tottendale and her Underling. Man in Chair explains the scene as necessary to allow the scenery change for the big upcoming musical number.

Janet’s Bridal Suite, afternoon
Janet is experiencing last-minute wedding anxiety, doubting Robert’s love for her. At her Chaperone’s urging, she wanders out to find him and ask if he truly loves her. Soon thereafter, Aldolpho enters the suite and assumes the Chaperone to be his target of seduction. He proceeds with his mission.
Tottendale's Garden, afternoon
Janet locates the blindfolded Robert. Assuming a French accent and calling herself “Mimi”, she questions Robert about his love for Janet. Unfortunately, caught up in the romantic memories, Robert kisses “Mimi.” Enraged, Janet stalks off.

Tottendale's Salon, afternoon
Feldzieg has managed to buy some time by promising the gangsters their own stage act. Suddenly, though, Janet appears and announces the wedding is off due to Robert’s dallying with “Mimi”. Feldzieg is euphoric, Janet and Robert are shattered, and they all join together for a rousing dance number.

Intermission Monologue
Man in Chair munches on a Powerbar and complains about intermissions. He also starts up the music that introduces Act Two before heading off for a pee break.

Oriental Palace, day
We find ourselves momentarily in an Oriental palace listening to a painfully degrading libretto, until the Man rushes back on stage and stops the music.

Act II Intro Monologue
The Man apologizes for the mix-up and replaces the Enchanted Nightingale record with Act II of The Drowsy Chaperone.

Courtyard, afternoon
Janet is tormented, caught between her love for Robert and her determination not to need anyone. She sings an appropriately tormented song, accompanied by the Man until he is again interrupted by the telephone.

Hallway, late afternoon
As the Man struggles violently with his telephone, Tottendale and her Underling sing about love.

Janet’s Bridal Suite, late afternoon
Suddenly, a series of engagements: Aldolpho to the Chaperone, Mrs. Tottendale to the Underling, Feldzieg to Kitty. Robert appears and convinces Janet of his love for her.

Tottendale’s Garden, sunset
The cast is assembled for a grand mass-wedding finale and one note away from the finish when the power goes out in the Man’s apartment. The Superintendent arrives to explain the situation, quizzes the Man about his record and declares his love for musicals before the Man closes the door on him. Disheartened at the ruin of the finale, the Man regains his stride as the company joins him on stage for a final number.
Discuss and explore

1. The first line in *The Drowsy Chaperone* is, “I hate theatre.” After seeing the play, and thinking about other plays you have experienced, what are your feelings and thoughts about theatre?

2. Imagine you are the theatre critic for your local newspaper and write a 2-3 paragraph review of the show. What were its greatest strengths? What did you see as weaknesses?

3. Throughout *The Drowsy Chaperone*, the “Man in Chair” remains outside the story, filling in the gaps and narrating for the audience. At the very end, however, the story’s characters join him on the stage and he seems to become a part of the musical. What might be the “point” of ending the play this way?

4. *The Drowsy Chaperone* is commonly described as a “parody” of the Broadway musical of the 1920s. What is a parody, and can you think of examples of books or movies that are parodies of other books or movies?

5. Which of the show’s musical numbers was your favourite, and why?

More information and resources:

It was American writer F. Scott Fitzgerald who popularized the term “the Jazz Age” and his 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby* is still considered one of the greatest American novels of the 20th century. Fitzgerald's depiction of personal crisis and despair in the midst of general prosperity still resonates for readers in the new century.

Film writer and director Rob Reiner has created some critically and popularly acclaimed screen parodies. *The Princess Bride*, based on a book by William Golding, is an affectionately tongue-in-cheek reinvention of the fairy tale, while *This Is Spinal Tap* is a hilarious roast of the heavy metal scene.

Australian 20’s aficionado Robert Scott has created a website, [www.1920-30.com](http://www.1920-30.com), with a host of images and articles from books and magazines of the period. “In many ways, the 1920’s are very similar to the world today. The parallels are numerous,” Scott says on his site. “When you read many of the articles on the web-site you will think you are reading about today.”