



REVIEW: UA production breathes fresh life into satirical play "The Drowsy Chaperone"

By Mark Hughes Cobb / Staff Writer

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The currently running "The Drowsy Chaperone" could be seen as an act two. Theatre Tuscaloosa performed it, same script, same music, same basic comedic beats, same choreographer and even the same lead actor, Gary Wise, as agoraphobic old-style-musical-fan The Man in Chair, a little under eight years ago, in 2011. It was sweetly satirical then, both an ode to musical theater and jab at some of its conventions, and it's much the same now.

But that's not a full or fair assessment, as the University of Alabama Department of Theatre and Dance production features an otherwise new cast and crew, inflating this unlikely hit back to goffy, thoroughly enjoyable light and life. And Stacy Alley added director to her list of jobs, along with again choreographing the high-flying tap and other dance moves.

"The Drowsy Chaperone" isn't Wise, but the 1928 musical (not lost to time; a fiction of the writers) he introduces, crackling to life first on his antique phonograph, then bursting into 3-D song and dance across The Man's airy apartment, the kind of speciously spacious New York domicile only "Friends" could afford. No mention's made of the Man in Chair's name or source of income, but the mystery's intentional, to steer focus away from him and onto the show, and to allow for a slow, blue trickle of The Man's personal revelations.

It opens on the darkened Marian Gallaway Theatre set, with a shadowy figure talking about the anticipation of sitting in a darkened theater, waiting for a show to begin. There's never a fourth wall to break, as The Man talks with the audience from the top. His first words: "I hate theater." It gets the laugh it deserves, thanks to Wise's wry delivery, which tells us The Man truly does and does not mean that. Blessedly, The Man also hates actors gallivanting into the audience. From his

opening rant: "I didn't pay good money to have the fourth wall come crashing down around my ears. I just want a story, and a few good songs to take me away. I just want to be entertained. I mean, isn't that the point? Amen."

He bemoans the lack of Gershwin-level composers in modern day Broadway, the lack of showbiz and glamour, then as he ponders the musical question "My God. When are they going to bring up the lights?" up come the lights, on Wise, comfily shabby in cardigan and sneakers, planted in cozy chair next to a stack of wax. Because Wise has been a beloved, justly acclaimed actor here for more than 40 years, another sly joke brews beneath: In real life, the former The Globe Restaurant co-owner is an avid record collector, and though pulled into the occasional musical, more a straight-theater man.

To say "Drowsy Chaperone" is meta is to say "Aquaman" was damp.

His apartment might seem familiar, as both 2011 and 2019 shows were designed by Andy Fitch. There's necessity of similarity built in, as the chair and record player have to remain downstage right of the action; the Murphy bed has to pull down from a stage left wall; and the central double-door 'fridge swing wide to become a magical portal into musical theater-land. With craft lighting by Therrin J. Eber, projecting the "Drowsy Chaperone"'s world onto towering windows, it's a 180-degree wide-open breath of air spin from the insular, insulated world of The Man.

Though UA's program teems with triple threats — equally adept at acting, singing and dancing — the kids leap giddily into the hammy over-the-top style. The Man picks up the needle time to time, freezing action, to explain and comment. Backgrounds show through. Though everything's played large, to the back rows, Zion Middleton cranks it to yet another silliness dimension, as the actor he's playing, Roman Bartelli, broke through in silent film. Such details make "Drowsy Chaperone" work on multi-levels, even after the more obvious visual gags and punchlines.

Each of the "Drowsy Chaperone" — the musical within the comedy — performers brings the goods. Megan K. Hill's got the wisecracking, heavy-drinking dame down cold, or hot, depending on the gag. As male leads charged with much of the song-and-dance leads, Jonathan Bryant and Desmond Montoya seem born to trip fantastically over the earth. Emma Cooper's showoff Janet whips out the stunts and ego-driven asides like a veteran, and as her ditzier wanna-be counterpart, Grace Arnold squeaks it along at just the right earnest oddity. You could believe Shaeffer Diebolt and

Evan Hart are a real-life couple, as *The Man* tells us, with their nicely slow-burning George-and-Gracie repartee. Kyle Van Frank and Parker Reeves cook up thugs-in-disguise yuks in part due to spot-on timing and physical shtick, and partly because the compact pair could just about, together, make up one of Dylan Guy Davis, the hilariously blustery producer they're ostensibly threatening, via escalating bakery puns. Desiree Wilkins zips in with a late-second-act number that, were you to examine it, wouldn't make a lick of sense, but sells the spectacle with airy, glowing conviction.

Kudos to director-choreographer Alley; musical director Terry Moore, conducting a crisp, bright orchestra; costumer Cecilia Gutierrez, tempering delicious eye-candy Broadway dazzle with *The Man's* depressed-Mr. Rogers attire. That the show works on all levels is credit to boss-lady Alley, of course, her team, and an outstanding, joyously idiotic group of kids. With all those weapons, it could have played out just fine with another actor in the chair. But Wise proves, again, a master, a non-specifically wounded king on the throne. Impossible to pinpoint what's changed, but his work here exceeds in sensitivity and attention to detail even that earlier show, for which I wrote in 2011: "It's a masterpiece of ease and transformation, and I can honestly say that, in a career of wonderful performances, it's possibly the best work I've ever seen the very talented Wise do; almost certainly the most fluid and sweet-natured."

Ditto. Only, somehow, by measures and degrees, even more so. Silly musicals might grown even warmer, more delightful, more poignant, with the years. Obviously, so can actors.

Performances of "The Drowsy Chaperone" continue at 7:30 p.m. Friday, and conclude with a 2 p.m. Saturday matinee, all in the Gallaway. The production's ending on a Saturday, instead of UA's usual Sunday, as it's packing up and heading to a Montgomery run early next week. Tickets are \$20 general, \$17 for seniors and UA faculty and staff, and \$14 for students. For more, call 348-3400, or see www.theatre.ua.edu.



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