

*The Drowsy Chaperone is anything but drowsy.
Think the hi-jinks of the Roaring 20s.*



A *Passing* Parade

BY CHRISTOPHER BREYER

The stars and supporting players of 20s musical comedy were not actors (or trained singers), but specialty artists who had risen through vaudeville, where success came from devoting one's career to perfecting a specific persona and 12 minutes of material.

The Drowsy Chaperone was born ten years ago in the back room of a Toronto restaurant. The occasion was a “bachelor” party for Second City actors Bob Martin and Janet Van De Graaff whose special fondness for musicals of the 1920s prompted their friends to dream up a 40-minute “entertainment” set in the Roaring 20s. It was enough of a hit that they and Martin decided to develop it over the next six years, until Broadway producers took notice and took it on.

In this tongue-in-cheek fantasy, a modern-day musical theatre fanatic, known as “Man in Chair,” cues up his favorite cast album and presto, Drowsy Chaperone bursts to life onstage, telling the tale of a celebrity bride and her frenzied wedding day—and transporting the audience to an era of silliness, shtick, sprawling dance numbers, earnest romance and good, old-fashioned fun.

To put this mock period romp into the proper context for us, Los Angeles-based writer Christopher Breyer fills in the background...

When what we think of as the “Modern” appeared with unprecedented suddenness in the 1920s, the “Modern” walked, talked, sang, dressed, danced and made love American. The United

States emerged from World War I as the world’s preeminent power and, fittingly, the subsequent decade marked the full emergence of two art forms considered uniquely American: Jazz—it was the Jazz Age!—and a theatre with a lot of jazz in its DNA, the Broadway Musical Comedy, aka the musical.

The 1920s was the Golden Age for Broadway and the musical, at least in terms of sheer numbers. Never again would New York City, the center of the country’s entertainment business, have so many shows: some 200 legit productions every season (an all-time record of 264 was set in 1927-28) and nearly a quarter of them musicals. To put the numbers in context, the 2004-05 Broadway season, which was the fullest in a generation, saw only 39 productions and 11 new musicals.

The musicals of the 1920s made stars of a generation of songwriters still considered the giants and Founding Fathers of American pop music: Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, George and Ira Gershwin, Richard Rodgers, Lorenz Hart, Oscar Hammerstein II, Cole Porter, etc. The shows introduced hundreds of songs that are not only standards but set the standard for all that have come after. The grand productions were created by legendary producers such as Florenz Ziegfeld and Charles Dillingham and featured—in some cases, made the repu-

tations of—performers who would dominate stage and screen for the next half-century.

The 20s musical comedy evolved from a variety show tradition, a heritage apparent in its emphasis on “bits” and “numbers” and spectacle and songs that had no integral relationship to a plot or character or its dependence on a specific kind of performer. For the most part, the stars and supporting players of 20s musical comedy were not actors (or trained singers), but specialty artists who had risen through vaudeville, where success came from devoting one’s career to perfecting a specific persona and 12 minutes of material. You did not ask Al Jolson, the Marx Brothers, Ed Wynn, W.C. Fields, Fanny Brice or Adele and Fred Astaire to play a character; they had already created their characters. You built your musical around them and got out of the way.

No one really cared much about the story, either. Consider *Lady, Be Good!*, George and Ira Gershwin’s first full-length book musical. It was created for brother-sister dance duo Adele and Fred Astaire and was about—surprise!—a down-on-their-luck brother-sister dance duo, both of whom find love. The show, which featured a driving score and the iconic Jazz Age tune, “Fascinating Rhythm,” was a big hit in 1924 and this is what the *New York Times* wrote about the libretto: “The book of the piece contains just enough story to call Miss Astaire to the stage at frequent intervals, which makes it an excellent book.”

(As hard as it may be for the generations dazzled by Fred Astaire’s films to believe, on Broadway Fred was second banana and straight man to his big sister Adele; she must have been amazing.)

Broadway in the 1920s offered another sort of musical entertainment, one which was in many ways the opposite of musical comedy: Operetta, sometimes called Viennese Operetta to indicate its Middle-European origins, musi-

cal stylings and, often, story settings. Operettas had compositional sophistication and narrative integrity, with the score and songs serving and advancing the plot. The music was classical, Old World and old-fashioned, lush and beautiful, but devoid of American “jazz.” The stories were as ridiculous as those of musical comedy, but their melodrama and romance were fully developed and, to many, deeply satisfying. Prominent among them: *The Vagabond King*, *The Student Prince*, *The Desert Rose* and *Rose-Marie*.

Theatre historians like to claim it was “inevitable” that someone would apply the aesthetic standards of operetta to the streetwise comic style and new music of musical comedy. As it happened, someone did and that someone was composer Jerome Kern. Kern wanted to “apply modern art to light music” and make musicals that had musical and dramatic integrity but were all-American. In the 1910s, working most often with librettist Guy Bolton and the brilliant lyricist P.G. Wodehouse (both of whom, ironically, were British), he created a series of small-scale comic “musical plays” that were groundbreaking in their naturalism, emphasis



PETER RIOPELLE, CLIFF BEHNS AND PAUL RIOPELLE

on plot and character, and the sophistication and modern sound of the lyrics and music. Kern’s Princess Theatre musicals, as they are known, were not huge hits but had a huge influence on young songwriters such as Richard Rodgers and the Gershwins, who, along with many of their peers, entered the 1920s inspired to do more than what Guy Bolton called “mere vaudeville entertainment.”

But the culture of musical comedy wasn’t altogether ready for the “integrated” musical. Nor is it clear that

anyone really knew, despite the Princess Theatre examples, how to make dramatically effective musicals. Even Kern floundered through the 20s, until he teamed up with Oscar Hammerstein II in 1927 to create the greatest musical of the decade—and, for many, the greatest musical ever—*Show Boat*. But *Show Boat* is the exception that tests the rule and the rule (seemingly as much in force today as it was in the 1920s) is that “integrated” musicals are very hard to do while “vaudeville entertainments” are both easier and, on their own terms, delightful. (Note in this context the recent fashion for “jukebox” musicals, essentially review shows built from the songs of pop and rock artists of the 1960s and 70s.)

While the hit musicals of the 1920s were great theatrical experiences, many of the elements that made them great were ephemeral. Is *Lady, Be Good!* really worth doing without the Astaires? Or *The Coconuts* without the Marx Brothers? So it’s not surprising that when producers have wanted to do a 20s (or 30s) musical, whether for stage or screen (see *Drowsy Chaperone*), they have not “revived” an actual 20s musical but done what producers did in the 20s: taken the great songs of the era—or written new ones—and made a new musical entertainment exploiting the talent of today’s performers, librettists, choreographers and designers. Which is, arguably, more true to the dynamic theatrical spirit of the 20s than any faithful revival would be. ■



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