

The Drowsy Chaperone

The Drowsy Chaperone: What's in a Name?

By now, the story of The Drowsy Chaperone's origins are the makings of modern musical legend.

Second City performers Bob Martin and Janet Van De Graaff fell in love, got engaged, and asked their songwriter friend Lisa Lambert to be a best man at their wedding. Lambert was reluctant to organize a stripper-laden bachelor party, so instead she enlisted Don McKellar, Greg Morrison and a team of theatrically-minded colleagues to create and perform a 40-minute original musical called *The Drowsy Chaperone*, and named the lead characters 'Bob Martin' and 'Janet Van De Graaff' (the show's bride and groom).

There was hardly anything of the real Bob and Janet in the show as their cohorts endeavored to have it be as little about their friends as possible. The point was to bring all of them together to perform a pastiche of the 1920s musicals they all loved.

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After the presentation, Bob joined his cast of friends on stage and, now famously, quipped: “What a wonderful show. I have some notes.” Those notes would be the beginnings of the “Man in Chair,” the character who comments on what would become The Drowsy Chaperone.

“I knew when we were watching it in 1998, at my wedding party, that there was something about the exuberance of a 1920s musical - that seemed like the type of thing that we should go with and expand,” Martin explained. “We knew though, that we couldn't just present a musical of another era, a fake musical. That wouldn't be enough. We needed to add some kind of a framework, some sort of perspective on it. We realized the value of having a very human, recognizable, iconic character, who presents the audience's perspective on what we were watching, which would allow us to comment on it, to deconstruct it. Sort of a more post-modern approach.”

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With no source material for their story-within-a-story to provide a template for them, except for the early Marx Brothers or Fred and Ginger movies that they loved, the four writers developed their

totally original “musical within a comedy” at the Toronto Fringe Festival. It was an instant hit; the show quickly transferred to Theatre Passe Muraille and then to the Winter Garden Theatre in Toronto, where New York producer Roy Miller was invited to see it. Miller saw the final weekend of performances in July, 2001. “It was unlike anything I had ever seen before,” recalls Miller. “I was completely taken by its wit and originality.” After securing the rights, Miller shared the script with his colleagues, but no one would read it because of the title.

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Producer Kevin McCollum recalls the first thing he said after Miller sent him the script: “I would never produce a show called The Drowsy Chaperone!” Miller agreed, assuring him that the authors were open to changing the title. “The Drowsy Chaperone sat on my desk looking back at me with that terrible title, until somehow, a year passed,” explained McCollum.

Miller knew it was time to deliver the Man In Chair in person. In October 2004, he co-produced a staged reading in New York at NAMT (National Alliance for Musical Theatre), where he invited McCollum and other colleagues to witness Bob Martin and the show’s overwhelming reception.

“I attended the presentation, and finally met ‘Man In Chair,’” said McCollum. “I went to find Roy after the presentation. He was mobbed (unbeknownst to me, our future partner, Bob Boyett, was also at that reading, and had gotten there first). I caught Roy’s eye and said ‘I see what you’re talking about now,’ and gave him the international sign of a thumb and pinky to the right side of my head that screams the cliché, ‘Call me.’ Thirty minutes later, he did, and that night we were having dinner with Bob Martin, Don McKellar, Greg Morrison and Lisa Lambert to talk about the hilarious show with the terrible title. After that dinner it was clear I had to work on this project. Of course, the title would have to be changed. We all agreed.”

For the next few months, the authors, McCollum and Miller met with many directors, all of whom loved what they saw and heard. McCollum suggested Casey Nicholaw, whom he had worked with before, but who was not at that time widely known as a director. Nicholaw was busy choreographing Spamalot so it was difficult to coordinate a meeting with the authors and producers. The first time that everyone was available was the morning after Spamalot opened on Broadway. “Casey showed up with a completely fresh, newly energised take on the show,” McCollum remembers, “how The Drowsy Chaperone could come to life, and what changes were needed immediately. The authors loved him and he was hired.”

The timing proved to be perfect. The week before Nicholaw met with everyone, the producers had made a deal with Michael Ritchie, the incoming artistic director of The Ahmanson Theatre in Los Angeles, to produce the American premiere. It was at this time that the aforementioned Bob Boyett came onboard as a producer along with Barbara Freitag, Stephanie McClelland, Jill Furman, and Sonny Everett.

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“After Roy and Kevin teamed up and Casey came on board,” Martin continues, “we realized that we could really do it right. With us all moving as a team, we said, okay, let’s commit to this framework as a way of presenting the show. And once we made that commitment, it led to a whole bunch of other decisions, like the intrusions into Man in Chair’s world. ...and coming up with a new title for the show.”

“The material was really entertaining,” Nicholaw says now. “But we all realized it was about fleshing out the show-within-a-show a little bit more. We knew that Man In Chair’s material was strong, but we needed to work out the numbers and make the show dance more. Early on, a lot of the comments that I got from people were that they wanted to get to know more about the people in the show, and to care about them. We wanted the show to seem less like a sketch and more like a full-blown musical – to bring to Broadway.”

With Nicholaw at the helm, the creative process was all about enjoyment. “We all wanted to put in bits and pieces of the musicals that we love,” Nicholaw recalls, “the things that entertain us and make us laugh.” This approach extended to the casting. “We imagined that they took these vaudeville performers and just plunked them into the show, and said, ‘Let’s get all these great performers and put them in it,’ which is where the Jane Roberts/Beatrice Stockwell rivalry came from, and the Pastry Chefs, and Ukulele Lil -- as if some crazy producer from the 1920’s said, ‘I love that shtick, I love them, let’s put ’em all in there.’ And in a way, that’s what we have in our cast. And that’s what I think people really respond to,” Nicholaw suggests. “It’s that these people are truly musical theatre performers doing an original, musical theatre show. That’s what they love about it.”

The show opened on Broadway on 1 May, 2006 at the Marquis Theatre, and went on to win the most Tony Awards of any musical that year. Since you have this article, you know how it worked out from there.

“It feels like our little show has really come full circle,” said Martin. “Somehow it made its way from a backroom in Toronto to Broadway, and now it feels like we’re bringing the baby home.”

As McCollum has often said: “A musical should start on the earth and end in the heavens.” With *The Drowsy Chaperone*, it does exactly that. A show that began as a celebration of love, that in turn celebrates the love of musical theatre - it’s no surprise that audiences are laughing, cheering and, in the end, being moved as well.

“And one more thing, Roy,” added McCollum, “the title is perfect.”