

arts

Madcap comedy a marvel in Matunuck

THEATER REVIEW

'THE DROWSY CHAPERONE'

Music & lyrics by Lisa Lambert & Greg Morrison; book by Bob Martin & Don McKellar

Through Sept. 4

Theatre By The Sea, 364 Cards Pond Road, Matunuck

BY DAVE CHRISTNER

Don't let anyone tell you that "they don't write Broadway musicals like they used to." It just isn't so. "The Drowsy Chaperone," now playing at Theatre By The Sea, is a nostalgic throwback to a time when men were men, damsels were in a position to put men in distress, gangsters were chefs? (yes, chefs), aviators flew into scenes from out of nowhere, and villains were so humorously inept they were loveable.

Musical comedy in the days of Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, and the Gershwin brothers presented romance as a parody. The genius of Bob Martin and Don McKellar's "Drowsy Chaperone" is that it takes parody a step further, lampooning parody itself; and it does so with the class, style, and skill that we've come to expect from the Ocean State's, and perhaps New England's, finest venue for musical theater.

It all starts with a plot about as convoluted as a piece of deficit reduction legislation; there's something in it for everyone: lust, villainy, love (lost and found), seduction, mistaken identity and enough comic routines right out of vaudeville to tickle everybody's funny bone, young and old alike. Lisa Lambert and Greg Morrison's music and lyrics are right at home alongside the legendary composers already alluded to, and Michael O'Steen's direction and choreography make the show so full of belly laughs and foot-tapping songs that you'll want to

see it again and again.

Lennie Watts as the Man in Chair narrates the story, reminiscing about the glory days of the Broadway musical and playing an old LP record to take us back in time to his favorite show: "The Drowsy Chaperone." As the record plays, the musical comes alive in his apartment. Watts' is the ideal narrator; the matter-of-fact, friendly delivery of his monologues immediately draws us into the story as it unfolds layer by layer, song by song, and joke by joke.

The story begins at the estate of Mrs. Tottendale (Phyllis Lynn), who aided by her underling (Mark L. Colbenson), is hosting a wedding for Broadway star Janet Van De Graaff (Erin West). Janet is impulsively leaving the stage to marry Robert Martin (Sean Montgomery), a man with whom she fell in love on a cruise. Their union doesn't sit well with the gangster investors of Janet's currently running hit; two thugs (James Wells and Derek Johnson) posing as chefs are pressuring the show's producer, Feldzieg (Ron Sarro) to stop the wedding or "suffer the consequences." Felzieg's classic "dumb blonde" mistress, Kitty (Arielle Kook), is pressuring the harried producer to let Janet marry, so she can assume Janet's role on Broadway. Only thing is, outside the boudoir, Kitty has no talent. Add to this mix a swarthy European seducer, Aldolpho (Tony Castellanos) and an alcoholic chaperone (Happy McPartlin) and you have all the ingredients for a screwball comedy of epic proportions.

West, Montgomery, Lynn, Colbenson, Sarro and Kook take madcap comedy to new heights. West has the voice of an angel and Montgomery is as nimble afoot as Fred Astaire. McPartlin, whose voice is as agile as a maestro's baton, is extraordinary. Her seduction scene and duet with Aldolpho is a show stopper.

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'Chaperone' is musical comedy at its best

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And never was there ever a more comical seducer than Castellanos whose gift for comedy is apparent in every look, gesture, and vocal intonation. If laughter is, as they say, the best medicine, then Castellanos could be a physician.

The shows in the

Matunuck barn just keep getting better; I knew very little about "The Drowsy Chaperone" and I certainly didn't think anything could top Theater By The Sea's just completed run of "Hairspray," but on a purely entertainment level, this show is superior. While lacking Hairspray's social conscience, "The Drowsy Chaperone"

does what musical comedy does best; it provides a temporary escape from the mundane into a dazzling world of glamour and fantasy where everybody gets what they want. To experience the joy of musical theater in all its nostalgic splendor, "The Drowsy Chaperone" is the show to see.

Dave Christner is a South County playwright and novelist.



Performances are Tues. through Fri., 8 p.m., Thurs. 2 p.m., Sat. 4:30 & 8:30 p.m. and Sun. 5 p.m. Tickets \$39-\$54. (401) 782-8587. www.theatrebythesea.com.