

'Man in Chair' hits close to home for Drowsy Chaperone director



By Brock Weir

When the curtain rises on the Drowsy Chaperone, the first thing you see is a man sitting in a simple chair. He lives in a relatively small apartment, alone, with his record albums to keep him company – specifically his albums of Broadway shows.

As the play unfolds, his apartment becomes the backdrop of a musical as he plays music from The Drowsy Chaperone, a long-forgotten 1920s musical that holds a special place in his heart.

The resulting production, which opened Thursday night at Theatre Aurora, is a joyous production that is sure to put a smile on anyone's face – and director Bob Riddell is no exception.

'I AM the Man in Chair,' says Mr. Riddell with a laugh, when asked why the opportunity to direct the show appealed to him. 'I have always collected show albums. If it said 'original cast' on it, I bought it even if I hadn't heard it because I thought it had to be good – they recorded it! Over the years, I have really gained perspective on musicals and the Man in Chair is a character that definitely leaps out at me.'

Mr. Riddell was excited by movie musicals from a very young age. If he ever came across a variety show on TV with singing, dancing and just 'pure entertainment with movement, costumes, colour,' he had to sit and watch for the 'energy and excitement.' 'I really love that expression of artistic endeavour that they are able to put on and it all comes together,' he says. 'The neat thing about it is it all looks so seamless. The ones you really enjoy, it looks like it took no effort and just happened naturally. I really appreciate all the things that go into it. On the other side, you know how much time and effort it takes just to make those magical moments look so seamless.'

'I was always the kid who was putting shows on in the neighbourhood and gathering up friends to put on something. For the longest time it was my little secret, if you can say that. It wasn't until I was in my early 20s and a friend from high school and I went to see a production in Ottawa [that I first thought about] going out for it. We dared each other, thinking we were really stepping off the high diving board into something unknown, but when we both got into the show, that we said, 'Okay!'

It was a bit of a learning curve as he grappled with new dance moves, but he had the passion and it came relatively quickly to him.

'It just takes over and it fuelled those flames that were underneath there on being involved in doing musicals,' he says.

Musicals are what brought Bob Riddell to Theatre Aurora. His first show with the local company was Stephen Sondheim's 'Gypsy' in 1989, and he hasn't looked back. His first exposure to The Drowsy Chaperone, a musical penned and first produced in Canada before hitting it big on Broadway, happened here at home with the touring company and local productions.

He instantly loved the show, describing it as a 'gem' in that it simply had so much packed into it.

Directing the show was always in the back of his mind and when he heard it was on the docket for Theatre Aurora's 60th anniversary season, he seized the chance.

One of the previous productions he experienced placed the show on a very large stage, although the action, as it is written, takes place in the confined atmosphere of the Man in Chair's apartment. He wanted the challenge of staging it in a smaller space like Theatre Aurora.

'I marvelled at how much they could cram into such a tiny space when I first saw it in South Simcoe and create all that magic,' he recalls. 'Thinking about Theatre Aurora and knowing it is a smaller, intimate space, I thought this would be a great challenge. The

charm of the show is making all these things happen as quickly as possible and lead the audience to wonder how we did it.? For such a comparatively small space, Mr. Riddell describes the characters in *The Drowsy Chaperone* as 'larger than life,' inspired by the MGM Dream Factory musicals from the Golden Age of Hollywood ? from the perky ingenue, to the matinee idol, to the Latin lover, to the grand dame leading lady.

'These changed the shape of musicals, and when the Beatles coming in, it was sort of the last heyday,' he says. A lot of musicals bit the dust or almost broke the studios because that wasn't what the audience was looking for. These characters are painted in broad strokes and there's a charm in that. I think *The Man in Chair* definitely takes people on the ride with him. You can understand all his personal demons, his anxieties and what gets his juices going, so to speak. It is nice to have that escape and he definitely has that going through his show albums, especially *The Drowsy Chaperone*, his favourite musical.?

The Drowsy Chaperone runs at Theatre Aurora on select dates and times through December 8. For more information, including tickets, visit www.theatreaurora.com or call 905-727-3369.