

Classic comedy has been a journey for first-time director Cluff



A black-and-white film from 1944 might not be the most obvious thing to capture the attention of a 16-year-old, but *Arsenic & Old Lace* is no ordinary movie.

Nor was Chris Cluff an ordinary 16-year-old.

Encouraged by his dad to sit down and watch the Cary Grant classic, directed by Frank Capra and based on Joseph Kesselring's popular play of the same name, Cluff had his doubts, but ended up sticking around, taken with both its unconventional story of two elderly ladies poisoning lonely men who just happen to come through their garden gate and the broad physical comedy that goes with it.

Now a secondary school teacher in the York Region District School Board, Cluff is at the helm of Theatre Aurora's final production of its 2025-2026 season, bringing to life the classic play that started it all and revisiting what he describes as some *'really cool memories'* about his dad.

'Get ready for a wickedly funny romp in Joseph Kesselring's Arsenic & Old Lace,' says Theatre Aurora. *'Meet the delightfully eccentric Brewster sisters who believe their charitable calling involves adding a rather lethal ingredient to the elderberry wine they serve lonely gentlemen. When their unwitting nephew Mortimer stumbles upon his aunts' particular pastime, he scrambles to keep their secret under wraps ' while dealing with a brother who thinks he's Teddy Roosevelt and another with a notorious past. Filled with rapid-fire wit and unexpected twists, this classic comedy proves that sometimes family ties can be downright deadly ' and hilariously so!'*

A veteran of previous Theatre Aurora productions, Cluff is making his directorial debut with *Arsenic & Old Lace*. Ironically enough, his last acting gig in the theatre was as director Lloyd Dallas in the popular comedy *Noises Off!*

As the Board began piecing together the 2025-2026 season, Cluff wanted to use his skills in a new way and jumped at the chance to direct the show.

'Going through the text, what struck me right off the jump, is it is like a true crime story ' this is like those voyeuristic, pulp Netflix streaming stories, but we get to kind of look in the fishbowl like we're watching a respectable story,' said Cluff when asked why the basic story has endured for generations of theatre-goers.

He had the initial concept to add these contemporary true crime elements into the production, including nods to popular true crime podcasts, but came to realize the play didn't need these extra 'adornments.' He satisfied his podcast itch through promoting the show, but got back to basics in building up the production alongside his team of actors.

'I'm a high school teacher in the York Region District School Board and my style of teaching is highly collaborative and I don't really mirror a traditional director because I'm constantly taking feedback, constantly taking suggestions, constantly taking the actors' perspectives into view,' he says. 'It's a big, big beast of a play. One of my baselines is you want to do your best on the stage, but in order to do your best, you have to feel like you're a part of a whole, making time to listen to the actors and spend time trying out their suggestions and sometimes just saying, 'Show me.' The actors have been trusting, they allow me to do the story, I listened to them, we put it back together'and that's been pretty fantastic as a first-time directing experience that everybody has a small piece of leadership of the group and the group listens well to each other as well.'

Ahead of the show's opening night this Friday, May 1, the entire team is 'firing on all cylinders' and director Cluff hopes the audience is prepared to come along on a fun ride.

'The great thing about farce is that it is designed to keep the energy up,' he says. 'The energy keeps building, the energy breaks, it constantly, intentionally by design, resets the audience's palate for another laugh. My hope is that the audience kind of leaves winded from the ride and I hope that the audience also comes in well-rested, fresh, ready to kind of un-notice stuff going on onstage because we've intentionally tried to layer in more of the story [so that it's] a full stage performance.'

'I also hope they come wanting to like the play. I want them to be there because they appreciate the craft. I say that smiling because I do know that the community that comes out to Theatre Aurora are there for the show, they're there for the community, they're there for the actors. They're there for a lot of great reasons that are entirely supportive. I'm so grateful for the individuals that keep coming back to see new shows and without a doubt that are willing to come and see a show from a first-time director!'

For more information on Theatre Aurora's production of *Arsenic & Old Lace*, which runs on select dates and times May 1 - May 9, including tickets, visit theatreaurora.com, or call the box office at 905-727-3669.

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