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THE DROWSY CHAPERONE

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WOW!

The Tony-winning 2006 Broadway musical *The Drowsy Chaperone* makes for a terrifically entertaining Spring Musical over at Cerritos College, starring a trio of Cal State Fullerton triple-threats under the expert supervision of director Patrick Pearson, musical director Hector Salazar, and choreographer Kelly Todd.

Musical theater lovers will surely recognize themselves in the show's giddy narrator, known simply as Man In Chair (Tad Fujioka), who introduces us to the largely forgotten (and entirely fictional) 1928 Broadway musical which shares its title with the one we are seeing. There having been no bootleg videos back in the Roaring Twenties, all that remains of "The Drowsy Chaperone" are black-and-white photos and its Original Cast Recording on vinyl, part of Man In Chair's extensive library of LPs. No matter that the first complete OCR wasn't in fact recorded till 1938's *The Cradle Will Rock*, Man In Chair has spent countless hours listening to *The Drowsy Chaperone* at 33.3 rpms, and this time we get to join him.



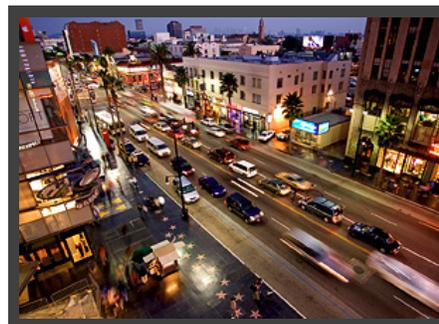
As the strains of the scratchily recorded

Overture are joined by a full pit orchestra, Man In Chair is transported to the foyer of Tottendale Manor, with guests arriving for the wedding of Broadway star Janet Van de Graff (Rebecca Fondiller) to oil tycoon Robert Martin (Jacob Patrick Thomson). There's Robert's best man George (Sean Casey Flanagan), "Feldzieg Follies" impresario Mr. Feldzeig (Skylar Johnson) and his dumb blonde girlfriend Kitty (Elyssa Alexander), a mismatched pair of gangsters masquerading as pastry chefs (Mitchell Turner and Mitchell McCollum), Latin lothario Adolpho (Spenser Micetich), and Janet's Drowsy (i.e. tipsy) Chaperone (Victoria Sasso). Completing the cast are lady of the manor Mrs. Tottendale (Sheridan Audrey Elmer), her loyal Underling (Felipe Echerrí), an aviatrix named Trix (Jovan Green), and a merry band of servants, reporters, aviators, etc.: Lacy Beegun, Eric Boone, Elizabeth Campbell, Matthew Cruz, Jolene Gazmen, Taylor Henderson (Reporter #1), Brandon Jones (Superintendent), Jae Won Kim, Maya Ohayon, and Rachel Lee Pence (Reporter #2).



As we meet this sparkling cast of

performers, Man In Chair gives us some biographical tidbits about the 1920s Broadway performers who originated them, showbiz legends like "world class alcoholic" Roman Bartelli (Adolpho), "the man of 1,000 accents, all of them offensive"; Beatrice Stockwell (*The Chaperone*), "an alcoholic, her character was I mean. To be honest she drank too"; and "Oops Girl" Jane Roberts (Janet), "billed as the girl whose sexual energy was so great that it caused men around her to spill their drinks, drive their cars into trees," thereby causing her to go "Oops!"



Since 2007, Steven Stanley's StageSceneLA.com has spotlighted the best in Southern California theater via reviews, interviews, and its annual StageSceneLA Scenies.

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The 1920s musical's wisp of a plot (they were all wispy back then) has that pair of pastry chef gangsters hired by a wealthy Broadway investor to "persuade" Follies' Feldzeig to put a stop to Janet's wedding, thus insuring that she will stay right where she belongs—in Feldzeig's Follies. An ingenious Feldzeig comes up with a plan for Adolpho to ruin Janet's relationship with Robert by seducing her. Unfortunately, Adolpho confuses Janet's chaperone for the bride-to-be, who's out in the garden pretending to be a French girl in order to test Robert's love. In the words of Man In Chair, "We have a bride who's giving up the stage for love, her debonair bridegroom, a harried producer, jovial gangsters posing as pastry chefs, and an aviatrix – what we now call a lesbian."

Confused? No matter. You'll be so thoroughly entertained by The Drowsy Chaperone (Tony-winning music and lyrics by Lisa Lambert & Greg Morrison, Tony-winning book by Bob Martin & Don McKellar) that plot pickiness will be the last thing on your mind.

Director Pearson, musical director Salazar, and choreographer Todd elicit some terrific performances from their student cast, a number of whom clearly have successful musical theater careers in the cards.

It's hard to imagine a more fabulous Man In Chair than Fujioka, the graduating CSUF senior giving a performance that pays affectionate tribute to every "drama queen" who's ever waxed poetic over his favorite Original Broadway Cast Recording (and wouldn't let you dare call it a "soundtrack"). Fujioka not only gives us the character's many endearing quirks and foibles, he gives Bob Martin's Tony-nominated Broadway original a run for his money—and he's still barely in his twenties.

Fondler is glamour and vivaciousness personified as Janet, and makes the Broadway superstar's showcase "Show Off" every bit the show-stopper it's supposed to be, cartwheels, encore, and all. Fellow CSUF triple-threat Thomson couldn't be more matinee idol handsome, debonair, or downright likeable as Janet's tap-dancing/roller-skating finance Robert. As for The Drowsy Chaperone herself, it's hard to believe that Sasso is a mere eighteen, so scene-stealingly assured is she in the role that won Beth Leavel the Tony, and just wait till you hear Sasso belt out a rousing anthem, even when pretending to be soused to the gills!

Micetich is deliciously over-the-top as the outrageously full-of-himself Latin lothario Adolpho, which is precisely how the role should be played. Johnson's hilariously harried Feltzig and Alexander's delectably dumb Kitty are standouts as well, and the same can be said for Turner and McCollum doing their best Abbott and Costello as a pair of puntastic gangster/pastry chefs. Elmer and Echerrí make for a delightful duo as ditzzy Mrs. Tottendale and her long-suffering Underling, and their spit gag is once again priceless. Flanagan's George is a lanky, fleet-footed charmer, while Green belts out a sassy "I Do, I Do In The Sky" in the show's oh-so satisfying grand finale. Beegun, Boone, Campbell, Cruz, Gazmen, Henderson, Jones, Kim, Ohayon, and Pence add considerable pizzazz to the proceedings in ensemble tracks.

Pearson's as always inspired direction makes this Drowsy Chaperone seem fresh and new, while Todd's snappy choreography brings out the best in her cast of dancers and "movers." Under Salazar's expert musical direction, harmonies are great and the pit orchestra sounds every bit as splendid as you'd expect from a professional production.

Though hardly on Broadway, touring, or regional theater scale, this Cerritos College production looks surprisingly spiffy. Scenic designer David Ward divides Man In Chair's apartment into two halves, one on each side of the proscenium arch, leaving the main stage for the show-within-a-show, with special props for the Chaperone's "Murphy divan" and The Enchanted Nightingale's mid-show "Chinoiserie." Phoebe Boynton has created a beautiful bevy of 1920s costumes, while Christine Stahl deserves snaps too for her make-up and wig design. Amyanne Tafolla's lighting design transitions effectively from Man In Chair's real-world drab to The Drowsy Chaperone's fantasy-world glitz. Brad Williams' sound design does a mostly excellent job of mixing live instrumentals and amplified voices. Manny Bravo is stage manager.

Those who might be wondering if a community college production can do justice to a musical as magical as The Drowsy Chaperone can rest assured. Pearson, Salazar, and Todd bring out the very best in their student cast, making for a Drowsy Chaperone that even nit-picky Man In Chair would likely give his thumbs-up.

Burnight Center Theatre, 11110 Alondra Blvd. Norwalk. Through May 11. Thursday, Friday, and Saturdays at 8:00. Sunday at 2:00 Reservations: <http://cms.cerritos.edu/theater/shows/playfourposter.htm>
www.cerritos.edu/theater

—Steven Stanley
May 3, 2013

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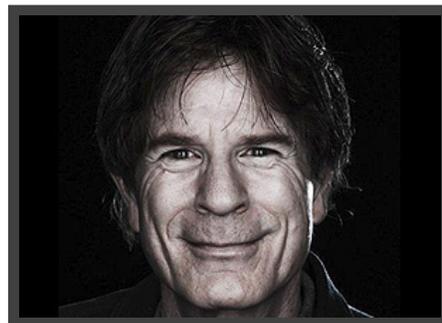
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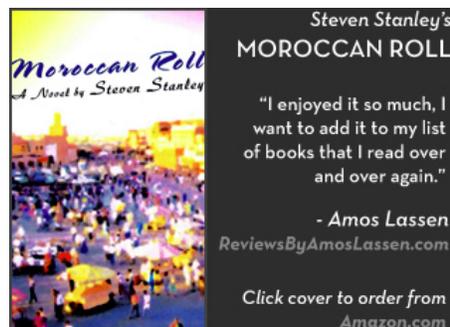
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As editor of StageSceneLA.com, Steven Stanley is one of Los Angeles' most prolific theater reviewers. He is also the author of *Moroccan Roll*, and an ESL instructor in the English Language Program at California State University, Los Angeles since 1979. ([read more](#))

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