

# The **DROWSY** Chaperone

THE FUNNIEST MUSICAL ON BROADWAY.

Music and Lyrics by  
Lisa Lambert and Greg Morrison

Book by  
Bob Martin and Don McKellar

Directed and Choreographed by  
Casey Nicholaw

July 8–20, 2008  
Ahmanson Theatre

DISCOVERY GUIDE



# DISCOVERYGUIDE

## The Drowsy Chaperone



**THE DROWSY CHAPERONE** at the Ahmanson Theatre is an affectionate tribute to musical theatre in the 1920s. A narrator known only as “The Man” plays a recording of a fictional 1920s musical titled “*The Drowsy Chaperone*,” and the stage comes to life with the show’s larger-than-life characters, mistaken identities and **whimsical** songs. The Man stays on stage throughout the musical, commenting on the action with biting irony, sometimes even taking part in the action, but always reminding us of the time when musicals were pure entertainment, created to take the audience to “another world, a world of brilliant performers in spectacular costumes, singing and dancing and **mugging** shamelessly.”

*The Drowsy Chaperone* features a song called “Show Off,” in which the bride, Janet Van De Graaff, tells the world that she is done with show business and no longer wants to be a “show off.” Theatre in the 1920s, when *The Drowsy Chaperone* is supposed to have been written, was all about being a “show off,” with each new production trying to outdo the others with bigger stars, more spectacular sets and more elegant, humorous and inventive lyrics. This competition to be the best created more theatre than had ever been produced before; it also laid the foundation for the creation of the art form known as the American musical.

This Discovery Guide has been created to add to your experience of the play. The Discovery Guide contains historical material and a summary of the play. At the end of each section there are opportunities for you to respond to the play’s themes, events and characters.



Evelyn Laye, personifying the glamour of 1920s operetta at its grandest, at the center of a panoramic full stage shot of the first act finale of Romberg and Hammerstein’s *The New Moon*, as seen in its 1929 London production (John Kenrick Personal Archive)

### OBJECTIVES OF THIS DISCOVERY GUIDE



Provide an overview of *The Drowsy Chaperone*’s historical and dramatic events

Take you behind the scenes as co-book writer Bob Martin discusses the inspiration and creation of *The Drowsy Chaperone*

Investigate the history, importance and magic of the American musical

Direct you to resources that will help you continue to explore *The Drowsy Chaperone*

NOTE: The words in **bold** are vocabulary words. Definitions of these words are listed at the end of every section.

#### DISCOVERY GUIDE CREDITS

**Peter Royston** (Discovery Journal Writer): A writer and teaching artist, Peter is the creator of over 35 study guides for Broadway, Off-Broadway and touring productions, including *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Rent*, *The Lion King*, and most recently, *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, *All Shook Up* and *Lennon*. He has written the P.L.A.Y. Discovery Journals for *Like Jazz*, *Topdog/Underdog*, *Little Shop of Horrors*, *Nothing But The Truth*, *A Perfect Wedding*, *Play Without Words*, *Chita Rivera: A Dancer’s Life* and *all wear bowlers*.

Rachel Fain, Managing Editor   Jean Lamborn, Proofreader  
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# SYNOPSIS

## The Drowsy Chaperone



**AS THE SHOW OPENS,** a voice calls to us from the darkness: "I hate theatre."

The lights come up, and we see the Man in Chair on stage. He explains that he actually *loves* the theatre, but feels that theatre today, especially musicals, has become grim and dreary rather than the spectacular shows he remembers. He has been feeling a little **blue**, and listening to music always cheers him up. "Let's have a treat!" he cries, and he invites us back to the **decadent** world of the 1920s by playing a record album of "The Drowsy Chaperone," a fictional musical from the 1920s by the fictional songwriting team of Gable and Stein.

The story of *The Drowsy Chaperone* is simple, exciting and fun, just like musicals of the 1920s. Young bride-to-be Janet Van De Graaff, a former showgirl, is about to marry Robert Martin. Martin's best man, George, will not let them see each other before the wedding. Janet's former producer, Mr. Feldzieg, stands to lose millions (and perhaps his life to two gangsters posing as pastry chefs!) if she leaves show business, so he tricks Aldolpho, a vain romancer of women, into seducing her. Aldolpho mistakenly sets his eye on the Drowsy **Chaperone**, Janet's world-weary companion, while at the same time, Robert kisses a French woman named Mimi, unaware that she is actually Janet. The show moves at a **madcap** pace towards an ending that delightfully matches the life-affirming joy of the 1920s musicals.

**JANET VAN DE GRAAFF**  
(*Andrea Chamberlain*): A former showgirl who is ready to give up show business to get married



**ROBERT MARTIN**  
(*Mark Ledbetter*): The groom



**ALDOLPHO**  
(*James Moya*): A womanizing cad



**MAN IN CHAIR**  
(*Jonathan Crombie*): Our narrator who describes the action and music of *The Drowsy Chaperone*



**THE DROWSY CHAPERONE**  
(*Nancy Opel*): Janet's companion



**MRS. TOTTENDALE**  
(*Georgia Engel*): The wealthy widow at whose estate the wedding is to take place



**PASTRY CHEFS**  
(*Paul Riopelle and Peter Riopelle*): Twin gangsters disguised as pastry chefs who are demanding money from Feldzieg



**UNDERLING**  
(*Robert Dorfman*): Mrs. Tottendale's butler



**KITTY**  
(*Marla Mindelle*): A chorus girl



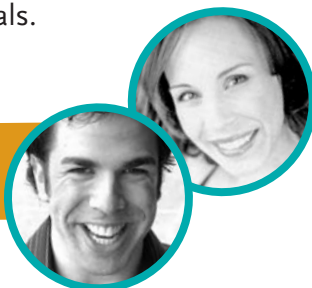
**GEORGE**  
(*Richard Vida*): Robert's best man



**MR. FELDZIEG**  
(*Cliff Bemis*): Janet's former producer who hopes the wedding will fall apart



**ENSEMBLE**  
(*Kevin Crewell and Taylor Farrell*)



**TRIX**  
(*Fran Jaye*): An aviatrix



# ACTIVITY

## The Drowsy Chaperone



Parody • Whimsical • Mugging • Blue

### Vocabulary

**Blue:** Sad

**Chaperone:** A person, especially an older or married woman, who accompanies a young unmarried woman in public

**Decadent:** In a state of decline or decay; self-indulgent

**Madcap:** Behaving impulsively or rashly, often seeming silly

**Mugging:** To make exaggerated facial expressions for comic effect

**Whimsical:** Containing a degree of unpredictability



Decadent • Chaperone • Madcap



### Questions & Exercises

1. *The Drowsy Chaperone* begins in a unique manner: we hear a voice from the darkness say, "I hate theatre." How do you feel about musical theatre? Is *The Drowsy Chaperone* the first musical you have ever seen? Before seeing *The Drowsy Chaperone*, write down a list of 10 words you would use to describe musical theatre (e.g. exciting, emotional, great, dumb, boring, etc.). Keep your list. After seeing *The Drowsy Chaperone*, look at your list again. Would you change any of the words on your list? Why or why not?

2. RECORD VS. CD

The Man listens to *The Drowsy Chaperone* on a record player. Although record players were the dominant device for listening to music through most of the 20th century, the growth of CDs and digital recording devices has become so common that many young people have never heard music from a record player.

Run a comparison test. Find someone in your school or community who still owns some records and a record player. Play the same or a similar recording (see Resources section for suggestions) on both the record player and a CD player. Make a chart and note the differences in tone, clarity, quality of the sound.

Did the sound of recordings improve with the advent of the CD player?

Was anything lost?

Do you prefer the sound of records or CDs?



I would describe musical theatre as...

Exciting DUMB BORING FUNNY Emotional

## He's "The Man": Meet Bob Martin



**BOB MARTIN** is not only the co-writer for *The Drowsy Chaperone*—he also originated the role of Man in Chair!

### P.L.A.Y.: WHAT WAS THE INSPIRATION FOR THE DROWSY CHAPERONE?

**MARTIN:** There's a community in Toronto of comic performers, and we have an affection for the musicals of that era. When my wife and I got married, a few people in that community put on an original musical called *The Drowsy Chaperone* for my stag party! I don't know if any of the songs from that staging ended up in the final production, but my wife, Janet Van De Graaff, and I said, "let's take that material and create a show and put it on at the Fringe Festival in Toronto," and that was the first staging of it. It was a big hit with the Toronto theatre community and grew from there. We were all reacting against a type of musical that was very popular at that time: **overblown**, content-oriented musicals like *Miss Saigon* or *Les Misérables*. We missed the way you could connect with a performer like **Fred Astaire**, who entertained you in a very pure way. We decided to create a show that was a love letter to that type of performance.



Bob Martin

### P.L.A.Y.: I KNOW YOU PLAY THE MAN IN THE SHOW, BUT WAS THAT CHARACTER BASED ON YOU?

**MARTIN:** There's a little of all of us in that character in that we're people who long to be transported by this type of entertainment. I really consider *The Drowsy Chaperone* to be an affectionate homage of that style of musical rather than a **mockery**.

There're really three different fictional lives going on throughout the show: the plot of

"So what did *The Drowsy Chaperone* teach us? Nothing. And that's just what a musical should do—it should transport you to another place, entertain you, and then bring you back again ... that's what shows used to do; give you a little tune to carry with you in your head. Something to transport you when you're feeling blue. You know?" -Man in Chair in *The Drowsy Chaperone*

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*The Drowsy Chaperone* itself, the history of the performers in the show that The Man reveals, and then the history of The Man himself, my own personal history that comes out.

**P.L.A.Y.: THE FIRST LINE OF THE SHOW IS “I HATE THEATRE.” DO YOU FEEL THAT WAY?**

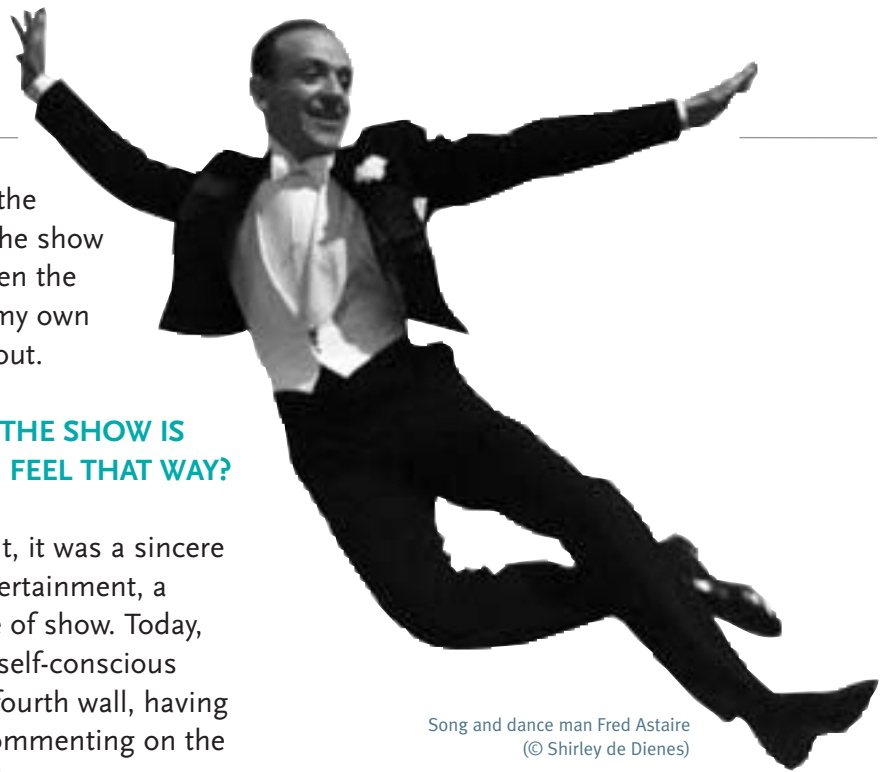
**MARTIN:** When I first wrote it, it was a sincere plea for a simpler type of entertainment, a more pure, life-affirming type of show. Today, what I see on stage is a very self-conscious entertainment, breaking the fourth wall, having characters in the audience commenting on the fact that they’re watching a show.

**P.L.A.Y.: YOU TALK ABOUT THESE TYPES OF SHOWS BEING LIFE-AFFIRMING, AND I AGREE. AS THE MAN SAYS IN *THE DROWSY CHAPERONE*, YOU LEAVE ONE OF THOSE MUSICALS FEELING BETTER. AND THERE’S NOTHING WRONG WITH THAT!**

**MARTIN:** No, there’s nothing wrong with that. That’s exactly what we feel. There’s something very healing about being transported by a romantic fantasy. That’s what we’re saying in that opening **monologue** from The Man: “Take me away. Take me to another place, and then take me back.” That’s the journey of the show: we start in a dreary apartment and literally escape into the world of the musical.

**P.L.A.Y.: WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO YOUNG PEOPLE INTERESTED IN WRITING FOR THE THEATRE?**

**MARTIN:** The big lesson for me from this experience was really be true to your own particular voice. We didn’t write *The Drowsy*



Song and dance man Fred Astaire  
(© Shirley de Dienes)

*Chaperone* with a market in mind; we wrote it to entertain ourselves, and to say something we believed was worth saying. This project has been the most successful I’ve ever been involved in, and the lesson I take away from it is to be conscious of your voice—whether it’s your comic voice or dramatic voice—connect to it, and people will react to it.



Souvenir postcard from Florenz Ziegfeld’s hit *Rio Rita* (1927). The back urges patrons to “let one of your friends know how much you enjoyed *Rio Rita*.” (Bruce Levy Personal Archive)

## Vocabulary

**Fred Astaire** (1899-1987): An American dancer and actor noted for his elegant style

**Mockery:** An act of ridicule

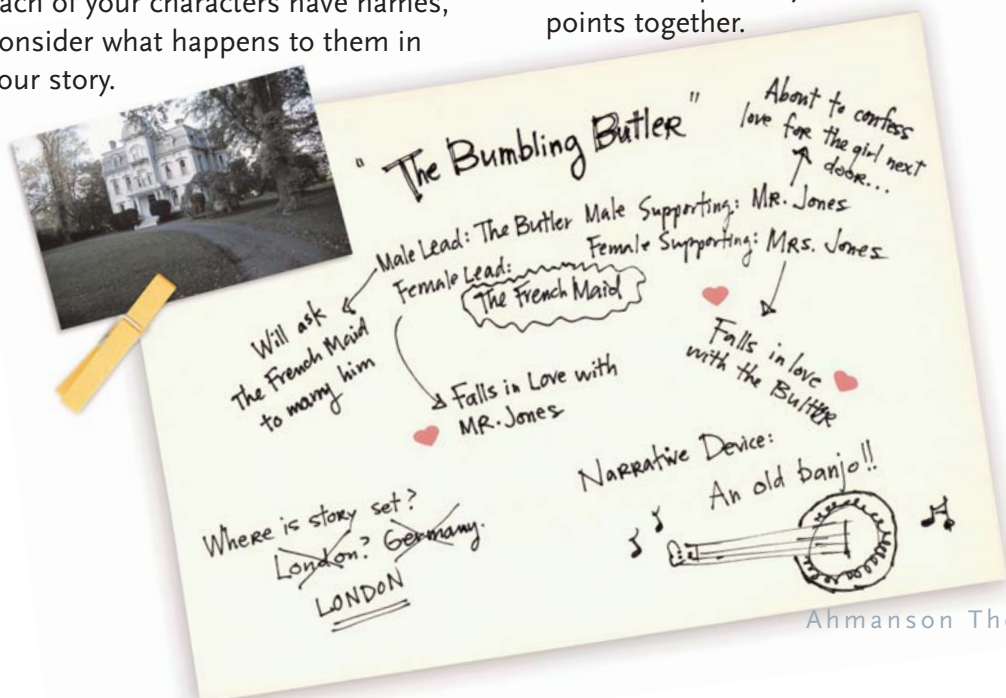
**Monologue:** A speech made by one actor, usually alone on stage

**Overblown:** Done to excess

FRED ASTAIRE

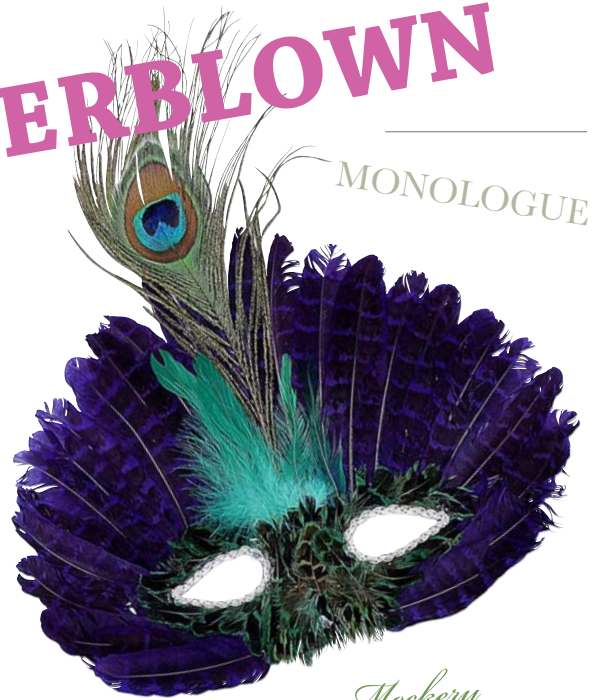
## Questions &amp; Exercises

1. WRITE YOUR OWN 1920s MUSICAL!  
The creators of *The Drowsy Chaperone* took the elements of a 1920s musical comedy and used them to create their own show. Now you can do the same. First, create your different characters. As at the beginning of *The Drowsy Chaperone*, introduce us to your players: your MALE LEAD, your FEMALE LEAD, your MALE SUPPORTING CHARACTER, your FEMALE SUPPORTING CHARACTER, and your COMIC CHARACTERS. Once each of your characters have names, consider what happens to them in your story.



## OVERBLOWN

MONOLOGUE



Mockery

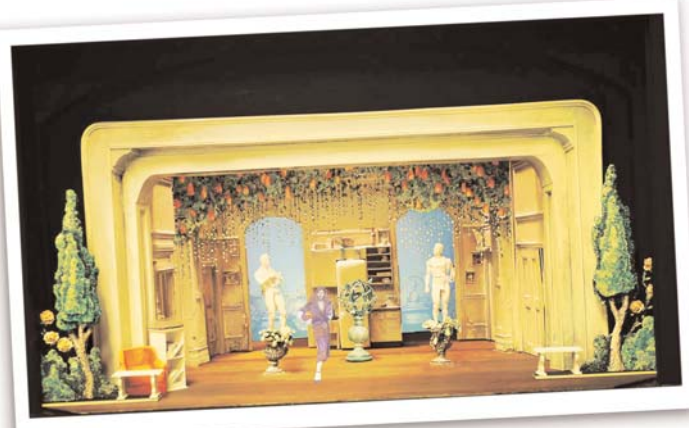
*The Drowsy Chaperone* takes place on a beautiful estate with many rooms and parks where madcap adventures can take place. Where is your story set? In *The Drowsy Chaperone*, the story is driven by what The Man calls "a flimsy narrative device to set the plot in motion": the fact that Bob cannot see Janet before the wedding. What narrative device can you use to start your story rolling? Find an ending that matches the ending of *The Drowsy Chaperone*, in which a character arrives unexpectedly and ties all the plot points together.

# ACTIVITY

## The Drowsy Chaperone



Costume Design by Gregg Barnes



Set Design by David Gallo and Associates



Set Design by David Gallo and Associates

### 2. HEY, MR. PRODUCER!

In the creation of any musical or play, funds are raised and staff is hired by the producer. Like Mr. Feldzieg in *The Drowsy Chaperone*, a producer can lose millions if a show does not do well. Now that you have created your own 1920s musical, take on the role of producer and hire your staff. First, write a list of each job in the theatre, from producer to stage manager,

from actor to lighting designer. Start off your production with 10,000 points, each point representing a certain monetary amount. It is your job to allocate fractions of your total to each member of your staff, making sure you stay within your 10,000-point budget. Remember that although theatre is an art form of collaboration, each member of your staff is a highly trained individual and will want his or her fair share!

WRITER  
 DIRECTOR  
 PRODUCER  
 SET DESIGNER  
 COSTUME DESIGNER  
 LIGHTING DESIGNER  
 SOUND DESIGNER  
 CASTING  
 ASSOCIATE PRODUCER

ACTORS  
 ACTRESSES  
 DESIGNERS  
 PHOTOGRAPHER  
 MARKETING  
 TICKET OFFICE  
 USHERS  
 CONCESSION WORKERS

Total \$10,000 (points)



Set Design by David Gallo and Associates



# “Show Off”: The American Musical in the 1920s

## SETTING & CONTEXT

### The Drowsy Chaperone



**THE 1920S** were a decade of cultural instability in the United States. The world had been horrified by the tremendous loss of life during World War I. Generations of young men had died, and the old conventions of behavior seemed outdated in the face of so much death. The American people wanted rest; they wanted entertainment, frivolity and fun. And they got it, in their music and especially their theatre. It is no wonder this decade became known as “the Roaring ’20s.”

America found its voice in this period. During the 19th century, theatre had been influenced by the European model, and for the musical, that meant the operetta. The operetta was similar in musical elements to an opera, with a story told completely in song, but much lighter in tone and content. During the 1920s, musical writers began to break away from the operetta. As Prince Dorough says in *Popular-Music Culture in America*, “The 1920s musicals ... avoided the **sentimentality** and slightly **aristocratic** tone that came from Viennese operetta. American musical comedies were brassy and **brash**, lively and spicy, **colloquial** and earthy. They employed



Prohibition, coupled with the younger generation’s more rebellious attitude, led to a new moral standard during the 1920s. Here, a flapper reveals her secret hiding place for illegal liquor – an ankle flask (Library of Congress)

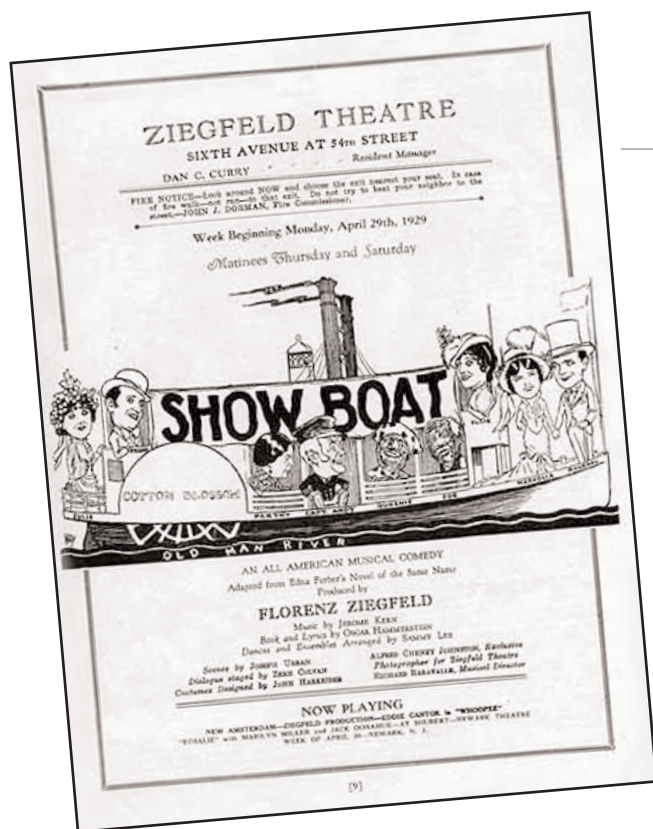
more of the elements of dance and music that were identifiably American, and they accurately reflected the optimism and **hedonism**, the **frenetic** energy, and the abandoned, carefree attitudes of the postwar-boom era.”



“Still we bumble our way through life’s crazy labyrinth barely knowing left from right or right from wrong and the best that we can do is hope a bluebird will sing his song as we stumble along”

- from *The Drowsy Chaperone*

Costume Designs by Gregg Barnes



Left: A caricature of *Show Boat*'s original stars, on the title page of the 1927 program for the Kern-Hammerstein hit (John Kenrick Personal Archive)

Above: A couple demonstrates the Charleston, a complicated dance that became popular among flappers (Bettmann/CORBIS)

During the 1920s, such **luminaries** as George and Ira Gershwin, Jerome Kern, Cole Porter and Richard Rodgers were writing music for the theatre. They were greatly influenced by jazz, the popular music of the time. Swinging, optimistic, moving forward, jazz seemed to mirror the era's wild **defiance**.

But while the tone of American musicals was becoming more independent during the 1920s, full of what theatrical genius George M. Cohan called "The American Idea," more changes were still on the horizon. Musicals in the '20s were full of extraordinary music, clever and unforgettable lyrics, but their stories were what H. Wiley Hitchcock called, in *Music in the United States*, "essentially a garland of songs, and dances, strung on a thin plot line, with occasional spectacular 'production numbers' planned at strategic points." This is why, although we remember and revere songs like "Let's Do It," "You Do Something to Me" or "Fascinating Rhythm" from 1920s musicals, the shows themselves are rarely ever revived.

All this changed in 1927 with the arrival of *Show Boat* by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II. For most musical composers in the 1920s, the story was secondary, but for Kern it was the spine of the show. All music, dance, sets, costumes and songs should serve the story and help define the characters. Kern insisted that song and story be joined together in a tight partnership. It wasn't enough for a song to be simply beautiful or clever; it needed to support the story in some way.

With this mixture of song and story, Kern and Hammerstein were able to address darker issues in *Show Boat*, such as racism, inter-racial marriage and dysfunctional marriage. The show's extraordinary success pointed the way for future musical creators like Rodgers and Hammerstein and Stephen Sondheim to tell more "adult" stories. The American musical had grown up, and the reckless fun of the 1920s musicals that *The Drowsy Chaperone* so affectionately parodies, was lost forever.

# ACTIVITY

The Drowsy Chaperone

*Sentimentality*

**BRASH**

## Vocabulary

**Aristocratic:** Part of a ruling or upper class

**Brash:** Bold

**Colloquial:** Conversational

**Defiance:** A readiness to resist

**Frenetic:** Wildly excited or active

**Hedonism:** The pursuit of or devotion to pleasure

**Luminaries:** Successful people who are an inspiration to others

**Sentimentality:** False or extravagant emotion



LUMINARIES

COLLOQUIAL

FRENETIC

DEFIANCE

Hedonism

ARISTOCRATIC

## Questions & Exercises

1. In real life and in his stage persona as The Man, Bob Martin decries the changes he has seen and heard in musicals since the 1920s. What does he mean? How have musicals changed?



Listen to some musicals. Choose two songs from musicals of the 1920s (see Resources section for suggestions). Then listen to two songs from contemporary musicals (check out [www.broadway.com](http://www.broadway.com) for current Broadway listings). In a brief 1-2 page essay, describe how the songs have changed in content, tone and viewpoint. What about use of detachment or irony? Use of technology in production?

Florenz Ziegfeld as he appeared in the program for *Show Boat* (John Kenrick Personal Archive)

2. In *The Drowsy Chaperone*, we meet a producer named Mr. Feldzieg, obviously a pastiche of the famous Broadway producer Florenz Ziegfeld. Using library or Internet resources (see Resources section), research Ziegfeld's life, focusing especially on his influence on the creation of the American musical.



# RESOURCES

The Drowsy Chaperone

**INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE** about the people and events of *The Drowsy Chaperone*? Here are some books, websites and films to check out.

## Websites

[www.drowsychaperone.com](http://www.drowsychaperone.com)  
Official site of the touring and Broadway productions

[www.musicals101.com](http://www.musicals101.com)  
Extraordinarily detailed site about musical theatre history

[www.pbs.org/wnet/broadway/index.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/broadway/index.html)  
The website for the PBS documentary, "Broadway: The American Musical"

## Books

*The Musical: A Concise History* by Kurt Ganzl  
(Northeastern University Press, 1997)

*Broadway* by Brooks Atkinson (Macmillan, 1974)

*At This Theatre: 100 Years of Broadway Shows, Stories, and Stars* by Louis Botto  
(Applause, 2005)

*Musical: A Look at the American Musical Theater*  
by Richard Kislán (Applause, 1995)

*Popular-Music Culture in America* by Prince Dorrough  
(Ardsley House, 1992)

*Music in the United States* by H. Wiley Hitchcock  
(Prentice Hall, 1999)

## Recordings

*The Drowsy Chaperone Original Broadway Cast Recording* (Ghostlight Records, 2006)

*You're Sensational: Cole Porter in the 20's 40's & 50's* (Koch Int'l Classics, 1999)

## Film & Video

*Broadway: The American Musical*  
(Paramount, 2004)

*Broadway: The Golden Age* (RCA, 2003)



Costume Design by Gregg Barnes

# P.L.A.Y.

*The Drowsy Chaperone*

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