Hello, and welcome to your Actor Packet!

As your dramaturg, I’ve attempted to fill this bad boy up with information to illuminate the play for you and help you ground yourself in the world of the play. On this side of the folder, you all have the same information: prohibition, relationships in the 1920’s, and an article on how music affects our brains.

On the right side of your packet, please find information tailored to your role in The Drowsy Chaperone, applicable to the actor you’re playing AND/OR the character playing the actor you’re playing. I hope that makes sense. 😊

Stapled to this letter, you will find:
- What inspired the authors/lyricists
- What happened in 1928
- Quotes
- Movies/You-Tree videos you may find helpful.

Enjoy your journey into 1928, you wonderful cast you!

Affectionately,

Ashley Leamon
Production Dramaturg
INSPIRATION
(with a little production history thrown in!)

Musicals emerged in the 1920’s that introduced American audiences to songwriters and composers that remain masters of the genre: Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, George Gershwin, Ira Gershwin, Richard Rodgers, Lorenz Hart, Oscar Hammerstein and Cole Porter. The style of musicals created during this period didn’t depend completely on plot; instead, characters and plot lines were created for/by the performers, many of whom began their career in Vaudeville. The genre of musical comedy evolved to showcase performers who then performed an act or characterization that they specialized in. The same can be said for Drowsy Chaperone. This play was written as a Valentine to 1920’s American musicals without the intention of parody. The authors of the book, Bob Martin and Don McKellar, did substantial research into plays and movies of the time period, which influenced their writing. However, they also relied heavily on the talents and character interpretation of their actors. Like many musicals of the 1920’s, the plot creates a skeleton, but character work by talented actors makes this musical soar.

INFLUENCES FROM THE ERA

1920’s musicals were a primary source for Martin and McKellar, and Vaudeville was a primary source of talent for 1920’s musicals. Vaudeville was a light entertainment popular in the U.S. in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. A Vaudeville show consisted of 10–15 unrelated acts featuring magicians, acrobats, comedians, trained animals, singers, and dancers. The form developed from the bawdy variety shows held in beer halls for a primarily male audience. Tony Pastor established a successful “clean” version of a Vaudeville show at a NYC theatre in 1881, which then influenced other managers to follow suit. By 1900 chains of theatres around the country portrayed cleaner Vaudeville shows, of which New York’s Palace Theatre was the most famous (1913–32). Among the many entertainers who began in vaudeville were Mae West, W.C. Fields, Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, the Marx Brothers, Abbot and Costello, and Milton Berle.

Shows in this period still had this review quality to them, such as the Marx Brothers antics. Martin and McKellar stuck to a simple, light plot, which was typical to the era, and then focused the action on-stage to mirror this review quality. They researched broadly at first, finally settling on 1928 as the year to set this musical in. They loved that there isn’t a lot of documentation of the shows from this period and that there aren’t many surviving, intact cast albums. In fact, the cast albums that do remain are only highlights of the musicals; Drowsy Chaperone’s cast album, however, is the complete show. This was liberating for them as writers because it allowed them to reference the past while creating new material. They said that they were heavily influenced by musicals and movies; they only specifically mention movies they watched for inspiration, including
Good News, Heads Up, Coconuts, and Animal Crackers. Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers movies inspired the lighthearted feel of the book and the choreography of the show. However, Martin and McKellar are clear that *Drowsy Chaperone* is not an archival, academic piece. Man in Chair is thus imagining what might have been rather than exactly what was staged. The title was designed to be forgettable and archaic, like a 1920’s musical that has slipped through the cracks of time.

*The Drowsy Chaperone* plays like an authentic 1920’s show on-stage, especially because the writers have created an entire back story for the show, complete with writers, the fictional Gable and Stein. In the souvenir program created for the show, Gable and Stein are said to have authored 11 other immensely popular musicals in the era. All were steeped heavily in melodrama and included spectacle, in addition to the rousing performances by some of Vaudeville and Broadway’s greatest performers.

1920’s Vaudeville acts and Broadway musicals provide the style for *Drowsy Chaperone*, but the performers provide the plot.

**INFLUENCES FROM THE ACTORS/CHARACTERS**

Just as 1920’s musicals' plots were dictated by their performers, Martin and McKellar utilized the strengths of *Drowsy’s* actors by writing for them rather than asking the actors to fit into their writing. Martin, a comedian, actually plays a lead character in the show, Man in Chair. The character developed out of Martin’s desire to portray a super fan character that guides the audience through the world of the musical. Man in Chair portrays an avid theatre fan deconstructing the entertainment of the 1920s while comparing it to modern entertainment. McKellar says that *Drowsy* could even be considered a “one man show with a musical in it,” with the Man in Chair as the main character. This character was created, written, and work-shopped by Martin, who organically shaped his dialogue in response to the action on-stage around him. He put his own idiosyncrasies and anxieties into the role to add dimension to the character.

Martin, McKellar, and director Casey Nicholaw had the cast watch an array of 20’s and 30’s musicals to inspire character. They led exercises so that the actors could realize who their Vaudeville characters were, to come from a truthful place, and to learn style. Beth Leavel, who played the Drowsy Chaperone on Broadway, said that before the character exploration process, her character was very two dimensional, just delivering lines and singing because it was in the script. The cast did an exercise called Hot Seat in which they were deeply interviewed in character, and another exercise which involved the characters reading scenes from modern day soaps. Leavel said her character completely opened up for her throughout these exercises. As a result, Nicholaw was able to amp up Leavel’s role, resulting in the song “As We Stumble Along.”
McKellar said the actors playing Kitty and Ziegfeld on Broadway were a couple, so the writers could capitalize on their chemistry. The relationship that evolved between the two characters became much more valuable than each singular character on his/her own. Feldzieg is based on producer Florenz Ziegfeld, famous for his Ziegfeld Follies. It’s possible that Kitty is based on Ziegfeld’s common-law wife, Anna Held, who was a comic actress. It is also possible that Janet Van De Graff (named after Bob Martin’s wife) is based on Fanny Brice, another actress associated with Ziegfeld (just professionally, in this case.) While these associations may have provided a basis for character, the actresses portraying them added their own talents and character work to each, creating dynamic stage roles.

The production team was consulted that they should change the name of the musical for various reasons: it wasn’t catchy enough, no one would recognize it, and it wouldn’t stick in anyone’s mind. They considered changing the name to “The Oops Girl” in reference to Janet Van De Graff, but they decided that wouldn’t work because the show wasn’t about her. The show is about Man in Chair, and his favorite character is Drowsy Chaperone, so they simply couldn’t bring themselves to change the name. Even the title of the show was influenced by its actors.

Historical research provided a crucial backdrop for the writers and actors to create rich, dynamic characters. McKellar said that it was imperative for the actors to portray their characters as authentically as possible so that the audience would believe they were watching a 1928 musical and understand Man in Chair’s love for the show. This goal was accomplished through historical nods and stellar characterization, making The Drowsy Chaperone a hit on Broadway in 2006.
1928! Holy Cats!

- 1928 Winter Olympic Games occur in St. Moritz, Switzerland.
- Charles Lindbergh completed his first trans-Atlantic flight.
- The first regular schedule of television programming begins in Schenectady, New York.
- The Kellogg-Briand Pact is signed in Paris (the first treaty to outlaw aggressive war).
- Aviatrix Amelia Earhart becomes the first woman to fly in an aircraft across the Atlantic Ocean (a man piloted the plane).
- The animated short *Plane Crazy* is released by Disney Studios in Los Angeles, featuring the first appearances of Mickey and Minnie Mouse.
- The first machine-sliced and machine-wrapped loaf of bread is sold in Chillicothe, Missouri.
- An iron-lung respirator is used for the first time at the Children’s Hospital in Boston.
- The Republic of China is recognized by the United States.
- The Threepenny Opera by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill opens in Berlin.
- In the 1928 presidential election, Herbert Hoover wins by a wide margin over Alfred E. Smith.
- *The Drowsy Chaperone*, starring Beatrice Stockwell and Janet Van De Graff, opens at the Morosco Theatre in New York City (in the world of the play!)

**Notable Births:**

- Vidal Sassoon (Jan. 17)
- Fats Damino (Feb. 27th)
- Edward Albee (March 12th)
- Maya Angelou (April 4th)
- James Garner (April 7th)
- Shirley Temple (April 23rd)
- Burt Bacharach (May 12th)
- Jack Kevorkian (May 26th)
- Stanley Kubrick (July 16th)
- Adam West (Sep. 19th)
- Elie Wiesel (Sep. 30th)
- Anne Sexton (Nov. 9th)
Quotes to Consider

“Music is so naturally united with us that we cannot be free from it even if we so desired.” – Boethius

“Give me control over he who shapes the music of a nation, and I care not who makes the laws.” – Napoleon

“Music is what feelings sound like.” – Anonymous

“He who sings frightens away his ills.” – Miguel de Cervantes

“Most convicted felons are just people who were not taken to museums or Broadway musicals as children” – Libby Gelman-Waxner

“I don’t think today’s younger audience…would even know what 1920s musicals were like.” – Julie Andrews

“We all sing about the things we’re thinking; musicals are about expressing those emotions that you can’t talk about.” Anthony Stewart Head

“Musicals are, by nature, theatrical, meaning poetic, meaning having to move an audience’s imagination and create a suspension of disbelief, by which I mean there’s no fourth wall.” –Stephen Sondheim

“All the best stories in the world are but one story in reality—the story of escape. It is the only thing which interests us all and at all times, how to escape.” –Arthur Christopher Benson
Suggested Media
(for all that free time you have!)

**YouTube:**
- “Fit as a Fiddle” from *Singing in the Rain*
- Burns & Allen: Lambchops
- Clips from *The Cocoanuts*
- Clips from *Top Hot*
- Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, “Night and Day” from *The Gay Divorcee’*

**Movies (* means we have them available for you)**
- *Good News* (1947) *
- *Heads Up!* (1930)*
- *The Cocoanuts* (1929)*
- *Animal Crackers* (1929)*
- *Singing in the Rain* (1952)*
- *Top Hat* (1935)
- *The Artist* (2011)