

Drowsy Chaperone hits the BH Playhouse stage

By Mary Garrigan Special to the Pioneer Jul 12, 2023 Updated Jul 12, 2023 0



Jeff Kingsbury plays the lead role of Man in Chair in The Drowsy Chaperone at the Black Hills Playhouse
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CUSTER STATE PARK — “The Drowsy Chaperone,” playing now through July 23 at the Black Hills Playhouse, allows audiences to have their musical theater cake and eat it, too.

This spoof on the silliness of old-time musicals pokes fun at romantic comedy archetypes – star-crossed lovers, mistaken identities, gangsters in disguise, ditzzy blondes, and even a Latin lothario — while still allowing its audience to indulge in the guilty pleasures of its over-the-top song and dance numbers.

Longtime local actor Jeff Kingsbury reprises the lead role of Man in Chair, the show’s modern-day narrator that he first played at the summer theater in 2012. Kingsbury delivers his usual comedic timing and some spot-on satire. He’s a lonely, depressed theatre fan with keen self-awareness who brings a Jazz Age musical to life in his imagination by listening to his favorite recording of show tunes.

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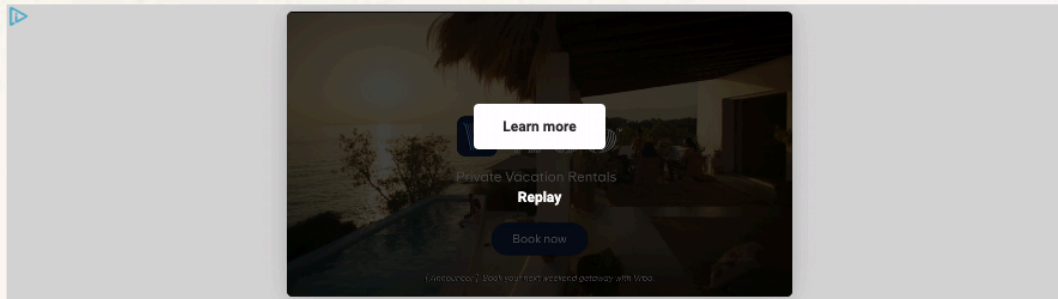
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We meet the rest of the cast as Man in Chair and his drab, tiny apartment suddenly roll away, replaced by a delightful art deco set created by scenic designer Jacee Casarella. Lighting designer Luke Granholm dresses it all in changing jewel-toned colors as the set transforms into a stately staircase, a bride’s chambers, a garden setting, a poolside press venue and more, even an airplane-turned-wedding chapel.

The large cast is led by the bride (played by Sarah Elizabeth Grosse) and the groom (played by Ethan Nehls), both of whom bring strong vocal performances to their musical numbers. The best of the play’s songs may be “Show Off,” where Grosse gets to vamp as a leading lady of the Broadway stage who clearly loves the spotlight but claims that she’s ready to give it up for the quieter role of a wife and marriage. Her zany performance makes it clear that no one watching the number believes a word she’s singing.

We meet the groom and his bumbling best man (played by Carter Hoffer) in a terrific tap-dancing duet, “Cold Feet.” The two may not be Fred Astaire and Gene Kelley, but Hoffer, especially, manages to convince us that his tap-dancing skills are anything but cold in his homage to that dance form. And each time he opens his mouth to sing, Nehls proves he can hit the bullseye when he belts out a show tune.

As its name implies, the show features a chaperone who likes her liquor (played by Mary-Catherine Jones). She proves to be bad at her job and ends up in her own romantic entanglement with Adolpho, a misguided Italian playboy (played with joyous abandon and near-elastic hips by Jey Young) who is manipulated by darker forces wanting to prevent the wedding from happening. Add in two gangsters posing as pun-wielding pastry chefs, a dim-witted hostess, a dry-witted butler, a female aviator name Trix, and a producer and his ditzzy girlfriend. Don't think too hard about the plot or the reasons for the characters who populate it. It's a musical comedy, after all. Just know that chaos ensues.



Neither should you expect the entire cast to sparkle. There are one or two disappointments, but the vibrant energy that Choreographer Andrea Moore and her young song and dance ensemble brings to the stage makes up for those deficiencies.

In the first of the two acts, Man in Chair keeps his distance from the action on stage, providing witty dialogue about musical theater, astute nuggets of social commentary, and descriptions of upcoming scenes that allow the performers to exceed our expectations. Kingsbury begins the shorter second act with a delightful complaint about intermissions at the BHP.

But by then, the lonely narrator can no longer contain his need for connection, breaking the invisible wall between himself and the characters he's created for us. The show, which begins in complete darkness as Kingsbury offers a witty prayer to the theater gods, ends with the darker realization that the Man in Chair moderator will, sadly, choose an escape into his musical fantasy life over a real life connection.

The play runs about two hours with a 15-minute intermission and drew a standing ovation from its audience in a nearly packed house at the opening performane. It ends Sunday, July 23, and is followed by the final show of the summer season, "9 to 5: The Musical," which runs July 30 through Aug. 12.

Tickets are available online at blackhillssplayhouse.com.

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