

# An Interview with **BOB MARTIN**

*Writer/performer Bob Martin has been a fixture in Canadian theatre, film and television for three decades, including a long association with Toronto Second City. At the same time he was creating and appearing in *The Drowsy Chaperone*, Martin was also the creative producer and a co-writer of *Slings & Arrows*, a TV series about life at a large not-for-profit theatre company, which *New York Magazine* recently named one of the decade's ten best TV shows. Martin can next be seen in the new CBC comedy series "*Michael; Tuesdays and Thursdays*" being developed with the "*Slings & Arrows*" writing team and creative producer/director Don McKellar, his longtime friend and co-book writer of *The Drowsy Chaperone*.*

## **The *Drowsy Chaperone* started out in 1998 as stag party entertainment. Why did your friends write a mini-musical for you?**

Our friends are all writer/performers. We'd worked together on shows of different kinds, including several little pastiche musicals—all comedies, of course. We always look for a deadline to motivate us to complete something so a stag party was perfect for Lisa Lambert (*Drowsy* lyricist) who is my oldest friend and was my best man at the wedding. She spearheaded the whole thing and, knowing me, knew that a fake 1920s musical would be more appropriate than strippers.

## **How much of the original party entertainment is still in the show?**

The Aldolpho song is almost word for word what ended up in the Broadway show and most all the Aldolpho scenes are pretty well intact, strangely enough. And I believe "Accident Waiting to Happen" survived all the way. The show changed dramatically over the years, but the story is the same: a showgirl bride giving up the stage for love and the producer trying to scuttle the wedding.

## **Who had the idea to continue working on the show and submit it to the Toronto Fringe?**

We created shows every year, if we could because, again, the Fringe was a deadline that we had to meet. It's a great way to develop material because you have a guaranteed audience with very little financial investment. When I saw the show, there was so much good stuff and it was a fully choreographed, fully costumed performance. A lot of work had already been done. It was actually Janet, my wife, who produced it—got the money together to get into the Fringe. It ended up being one of the most successful shows in the Toronto Fringe Festival history which is so funny because, for us, it was just something to work on, something we created to make ourselves laugh. It was never really intended to have a larger audience.

## **You weren't shopping for a producer by going to The Fringe?**

No, not at all. In fact, right before the first performance I was convinced the whole thing was going to fail because I didn't understand how people would want to see this guy—me—commenting on a show. I was really thinking the concept was flawed—that I would be really irritating to people. As the show developed I started finding that *Man in Chair* is kind of the audience, the soul of the show in a way. Over time we were able to craft the conceit.

## **But it was the success of the Fringe performance that attracted a Canadian producer?**

Yes, tickets were selling like crazy. People were scalping them. David Mirvish [Canada's largest theatrical promoter] got secretly involved and financed an expanded restaging of the show at Theatre Passe Muraille, a small, alternative theatre in Toronto. That was also successful



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so Mirvish came out of the shadows to officially produce the show at the Winter Garden Theatre as part of their season.

**I was surprised to read that it was done on an almost empty stage with six doors.**

We went through various staging concepts before we realized what the show had to be. Of course we had very little money. The budget of our largest Canadian production was less than a tenth of what it was on Broadway. We were embracing that by creating a show where the blank stage—his empty existence—became filled with colorful characters. After the Toronto run we knew it would have to be a full musical with real dancers and an orchestra, but we didn't have the resources so we just assumed it was dead.

**But it wasn't the end of the story.**

Luckily, this guy came along [Roy Miller] who saw the Toronto production closing weekend in July of 2002 who wanted to bring it to New York and, eventually, they got the money.

**You were doing “Slings & Arrows” during this same period. Does the musical Don McKellar’s character directs have a connection to your *Drowsy Chaperone* experiences?**

Both projects overlapped so they definitely informed each other. We were actually filming that fake musical at Theatre Passe Muraille—where we did our first production of *Drowsy Chaperone* after the Fringe—with Don McKellar playing Darren Nichols [in “Slings & Arrows”] and Greg Morrison and Lisa Lambert creating the music for it, when we got the call that we had a Broadway theatre for *Drowsy Chaperone*. It was hilarious to be filming one fake musical and having another fake musical going to Broadway. It was a remarkable time, really exciting. I'm very proud of both of those projects.

**Are Lisa and Greg continuing to write musicals—“real” ones?**

They were working on a show with Blake Edwards for a long time, a musical adaptation of an early film of his they're calling *Big Rosemary*. It was quite far along when he died. And we have a bunch of things we're working on together as a team including the *Drowsy* film adaptation. That came about when we went to Australia to see Geoffrey Rush play *Man in Chair*. He was championing a film version of the musical so, with his weight, we were able to move it along. I'm still kind of reluctant because it's such a theatre project, but I think we have a way of doing it so we're working on that.

**Would Geoffrey Rush be *Man in Chair*?**

Yes. He has said this in the press so I can confirm that. He's fantastic in the role.

—by Suzanne Bixby