

Drood Dude: Will Chase's Au Courant Broadway Venture

BY MELANIE BAKER

As you sink into your seat at Studio 54, you might want to grasp the armrests firmly because you're about to tumble down Rupert Holmes' musical rabbit hole, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, full-throttle. It's a journey riddled with mystery, scandal, bewildering hobnobbing, and meaty amounts of metatheatrical pushes that push the theatrical convention over the edge. Did I mention it's both Victorian era and a hoot-and-a-half?



Will Chase and Stephanie J. Block in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*

This first Broadway revival of the 1986 Tony-winning musical not only shatters the fourth wall between actor and audience, it runs deliciously amok, playing with the tradition of British pantomime while handing the ultimate power over to theatregoers. Yes, dear friend, it's the audience who puts forth the crucial vote that determines whodunit at each performance. (Think of it as a mash-up between a blood-pumping round of *Clue* and the eleventh hour of Election Day in Florida.)

Holmes's *Drood* (the show's original moniker) came to fruition by way of its own perplexing fate. Inspired by Charles Dickens' final novel (unfinished due to the author's death in 1870), it's a deliciously

convoluted tale centering on young Edwin Drood and the Dickensian bounty of characters affected by his sudden—and ominous—disappearance.

Over the decades (not surprisingly), many writers have hypothesized various endings to this famously challenging literary enigma, but it wasn't until Holmes' musical first appeared at the Delacorte Theatre in the summer of 1985 that it reached cultural relevancy, thanks to his clever play-within-a-play structure under the guise of "The Music Hall Royale's Premiere Presentation of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*."

And, as in all rowdy musical hall backdrops, the players take on the eclectic roster of characters originally introduced by Dickens, the key ones being Miss Alice Nutting (Stephanie J. Block), the highly regarded male impersonator who assumes the role of Edwin, playing him with charm, gusto, and vocal zeal; Princess Puffer, the stylish opium den proprietress (legendary Tony winner Chita Rivera); the Reverend Chrisparkle (Gregg Edelman); Helena and Neville Landiss, the Ceylonese brother-and-sister duo (Jessie Mueller and Andy Karl); and, at the crux of the plot, the beautiful Rosa Bud (Betsy Wolfe) and Edwin's cousin, John Jasper (Will Chase), the music teacher obsessed with her.

"When I really started reading the story, I realized [Jasper] is the obvious bad guy," says Chase, a Kentucky native whose

resume includes a string of major Broadway credits (*Billy Elliot*; *Rent*; *Aida*). "I like playing non-obvious bad guys because I like to give them some humanity," he continues, adding "but this role is fun because he's the obvious villain...and it's been fun to literally twirl the mustache."

As the musically inclined Jasper, Chase is able to let his vocal and playful acting prowess fly in numbers like "A Man Could Go Quite Mad" and the reprise of "Moonfall"—one of the more somber yet popular tunes to gain favor on Broadway. He even overlays a softer, more human layer onto his fuse-lit Jasper during an important choreographed sequence in Princess Puffer's opium den.

Like the rest of the show's characters, Jasper's dastardly flaws put him on the

chopping block in the show's final act as the music hall players break from their Dickensian alter egos to review plotlines and present evidence.

And then it's up to theatregoers to weigh in—not only regarding who's responsible for the "disappearance" of Drood, but to also provide a romantic ending between two chosen lovers.

"I think they like to go against the obvious," observes Chase after having witnessed frequent madcap pairings, including the incestuous coupling of siblings Helena and Neville Landless and septuagenarian Princess Puffer to "the Deputy" played by 14-year-old Nicholas Barasch.

No judgment calls here, just a convivial invitation to take part in Broadway's most off-the-wall musical free-for-all. Cheers!

The Mystery of Edwin Drood is playing at Studio 54, 254 W. 54th St. For tickets, call 212-719-1300 or visit roundabouttheatre.org. To keep up with Will Chase, follow him on Twitter: @WillChaseMe.

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