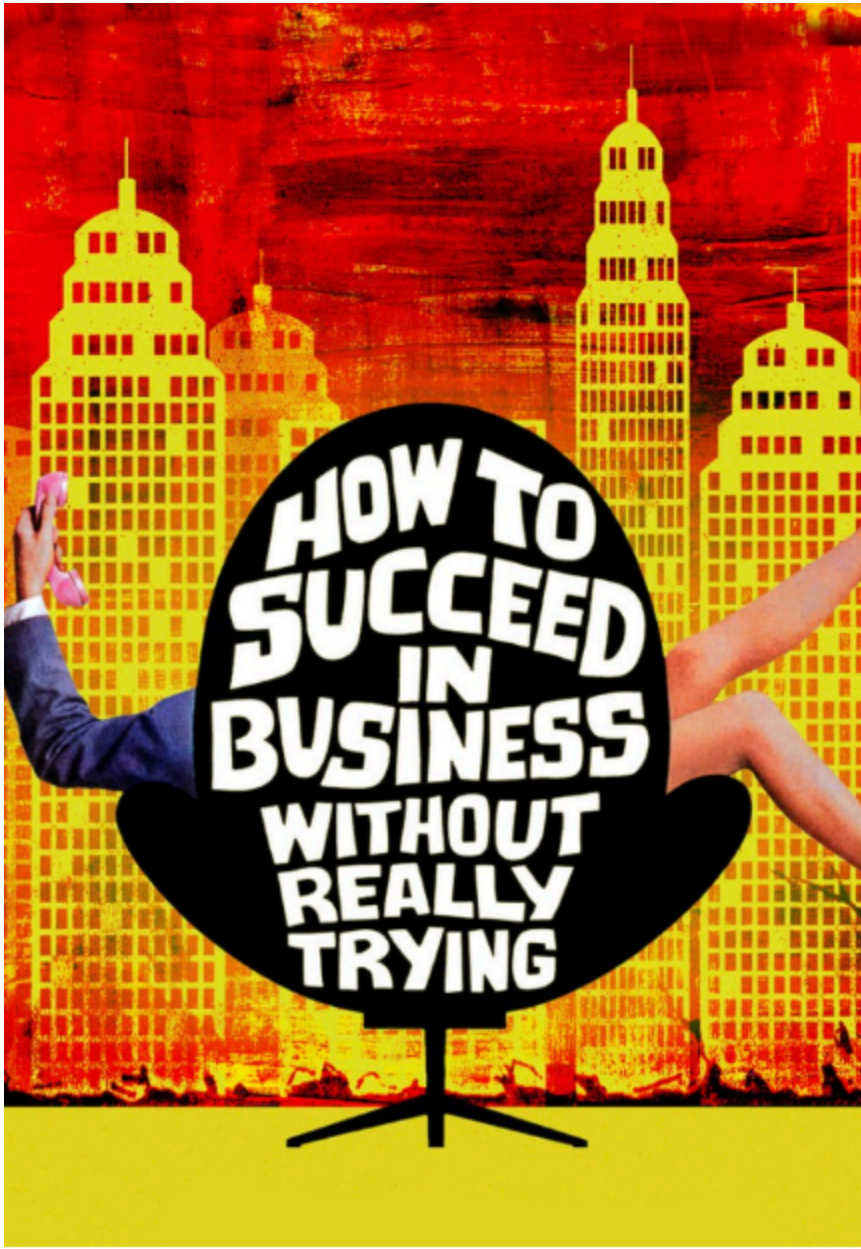

THE DALTONIAN

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ARTS

Dalton's Fall Mainstage: How to Succeed!

NOVEMBER 12, 2025 BY MIKA HIGGINS-WOO

This year, the Dalton theater department's mainstage musical is *How To Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. The musical, which is based on a 1952 satirical book by Shepherd Mead, premiered on Broadway in 1961 and features choreography by the legendary Bob Fosse. In her Dalton High School musical directorial debut, theater teacher Isabel Thornton is bringing the story to the Martin Theater stage, and her vision of it has a fresh feminist twist. Whether you're excited by 60s beehives, curious about Thornton's reimagining of an older show, or just in search of a good laugh, *How To Succeed* is the musical for you.

How to Succeed tells the story of an ambitious young window washer named J. Pierrepont Finch who comes across a book titled *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. Using the book, Finch cons his way up the corporate ladder at the Worldwide Wicket Company without any knowledge of what the business does. He lies about where he went to college, manipulates the boss's nepo-baby nephew, and falls in love with his secretary Rosemary, played by Amalia Locker-Olesker ('26), all before the end of Act I.

This show is not just a hoot; it is also a clever stab at the corporate world, as is exemplified perfectly by one of the lines in the book that Finch finds: "Before applying for a job, make sure that you have chosen the right company....it should be at least big enough that nobody knows exactly what anyone else is doing." Those lines, while hilariously setting up the tone and premise of the entire show, also communicate something more profound by using comedy to comment on the inefficiencies of corporate society and the empty suits that run it.

As this show is almost 65 years old, there are parts of it that are quite dated. Perhaps they were hilarious in the time of Bob Fosse but in the current day they are plainly misogynistic. One example of this is the song "A Secretary is Not A Toy." In this song, all the junior executives are fawning over the new secretary named Hedy LaRue and jokingly swearing that they wouldn't let their sexual impulses interfere with their work ethics. This song is dated. Instead of cutting it or not doing the show because of it, Thornton switches the meaning of the song through blocking alone. Instead of having the men poke fun at their own masculinity, Thornton has the secretaries themselves sing part of the song, emphasizing their lack of agency in this situation. In allowing the women to share their point of view in this song, it becomes less of a dirty joke and more of a self-aware reality check, something that is much more appropriate for 2025.

Regarding the small tweaks she's added into the production, Thornton explains that she has "seen other productions (including the 2011 Broadway revival with Daniel Radcliffe) and the satire was clear . . . [because it was presented] as a period piece with contemporary relevance. [My] new lens will hopefully allow viewers in our community to focus on the aspects of this show that are under-explored in other productions."

The biggest change Thornton is making in Dalton's production, however, is the genderbending of the main character. Originally, the main character Finch is a man with hopes and dreams to

succeed in business. Dalton's production however is flipping this narrative around and making it so that Finch, played by Elsa Dees ('26), is actually a woman who longs to enter the world of business and disguises herself as a man in order to succeed. This adds onto the already apparent theme of cunning trickery in the original, and brings much more nuance to the story, bringing into play not only the new gender dynamics but also queer relationships.

Speaking about her decision to genderbend Finch, Thornton remarks: "In our current time period, there are many essentialist and outdated (I would say, dangerous) views about gender and sexuality that are being circulated in popular culture. The production hopes to send a message that our society should not go back to the 1960s. Every person deserves to be able to live as their authentic self and not conform to society's expectations in order to 'get ahead.'"

The aforementioned Hedy LaRue is another challenging character to recreate for this production. She is originally a "dumb blonde" stereotype who gets sent from office to office by executives to "sabotage" each other. In this production, however, Thornton is working with Stella Miller ('26), who is playing Hedy, to reinvent this character, bringing more agency to her motivations. Miller observes that in comparison to other roles in which she has been cast in the past, this role is "difficult at times to play. Textually, [Hedy] perpetuates a lot of misogynistic tropes and stereotypes, which we're trying to change for this production of the show, but it's been a little hard for me both as a performer and as a person.... It's taken a little more self-reflecting and character work to feel okay about this production, and a lot of thinking about how I feel playing this character and how I can take care of her and do her justice."

Another cast member, Oliver Katz ('26), who plays Bud Frump (the boss's nepo-baby nephew) remarked on the rehearsal process and the off stage cast bonding during this show:

"Rehearsals for *How to Succeed* have been such a blast! It has been so insane to see not only how far the show has come in just one month, but also how tight we've gotten as a cast...my favorite parts of rehearsals have been the small moments between the cast. This has been probably one of the most collaborative shows I've ever worked on at Dalton and I think it's all the better for it."

While the casting and motivations behind some of this show are changing, some other design elements such as set and costume aren't shifting at all. From secretary beehives and matching skirt suits to percussive typewriters, this production's design elements exude the 1960's in every way. Whether you want to see a bold new interpretation of a classic, or wish to enjoy 60's costumes and sets, this show is worth seeing. Come see Dalton's rendition of *How to Succeed* on November 12th and 13th at 4:00 p.m. and November 14th and 15th at 7:00 p.m.!

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