



Speak Easy

Catherynne M. Valente

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"If you go looking for it, just about halfway uptown and halfway downtown, there's this hotel stuck like a pin all the way through the world. Down inside the Artemisia it's this mortal coil all over. Earthly delights on every floor."

The hotel Artemisia sits on a fantastical 72nd Street, in a decade that never was. It is home to a cast of characters, creatures, and creations unlike any other, including especially Zelda Fair, who is perfect at being Zelda, but who longs for something more. The world of this extraordinary novella—a bootlegger's brew of fairy tales, Jazz Age opulence, and organized crime—is ruled over by the diminutive, eternal, sinister Al. Zelda holds her own against the boss, or so it seems. But when she faces off against him and his besotted employee Frankie in a deadly game that just might change everything, she must bet it all and hope not to lose...

Multiple-award-winning, New York Times' bestselling author Catherynne M. Valente once again reinvents a classic in *Speak Easy*, which interprets "The Twelve Dancing Princesses" if Zelda Fitzgerald waltzed in and stole the show. This Prohibition-Era tale will make heads spin and hearts pound. It's a story as old as time, as effervescent as champagne, and as dark as the devil's basement on a starless night in the city.

Speak Easy Details

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Author : Catherynne M. Valente

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From Reader Review Speak Easy for online ebook

Christina says

Speak Easy is a retelling of one of my favorite fairy tales, featuring my favorite literary couple, in one of my favorite time periods, by one of my favorite short story authors. Needless to say, I bought this ebook the minute I saw on Goodreads that it had been released so that I could read it right away.

I had SUCH high hopes for this, but I didn't love it as much as I thought I would. The story has a clear focus in probably the first and last quarters of the book, but it really flounders in the middle- Valente introduces so many fascinating characters at the beginning, but nothing ever happens with any of them. For example, Zelda and Frankie Key's roommates all sounded so interesting, but the only story that ever progressed was Zelda's, so this cluttered cast of characters kind of just... exists in the pages, not really doing anything. I also had an issue with the narration: Valente's writing is always so striking and pretty (although her style is very much something you'll either love or hate), but the narrator was too intrusive as a character and, IMO, fought for attention too much with Zelda's story. (I also have no idea why this is billed as a retelling of the Twelve Dancing Princesses, because I saw very little of that plot.)

However, there were a few aspects of this story I really loved. The story provides a new, more unique take on F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald's relationship, and I thought it successfully portrayed the feel of the earlier days of their relationship, where Zelda is still the golden girl from Montgomery and F. Scott is a poor writer who can't hope to catch her eye. Also, the "Rooftop" chapter is so absolutely beautiful and poignant, it's worth reading the entire story for. Details on that chapter and how it connects to real life, because I loved it so much: (view spoiler)

Overall, I did like Speak Easy, but it seemed like it could have either been half the length or twice as long. Valente should have either fleshed out all the other characters or just cut them out and focused solely on Zelda's story, instead of giving the reader these brief vignettes into other lives.

Margaret says

Zelda Fair finds a door in her closet, opens it with a steak bone, and follows it down and through walls to Al's--a Bacchus-like fairy--party scene in the basement of the Artemisia hotel. And Frankie (F. Scott Fitzgerald) follows her.

The last 3 chapters are the most powerful in the novel--particularly knowing that the real F. Scott Fitzgerald plagiarized parts of Zelda's diary. I almost wish this had been a short story, because the rest, while I could tell was a lot of fun for Valente to write, felt like fluff.

This might be the only Valente I've given less than 4 stars!

Whitney Milam says

SEARING AND STUNNING. In total awe - as per usual when finishing a book by Catherynne M. Valente -

but this one was so specifically everything I could possibly desire from a dark surrealist fairytale about the Fitzgeralds. Killer conceptual execution and prose to die for.

Clare Fitzgerald says

Catherynne M. Valente was the Guest of Honor at this year's Readercon, so, although I was trying to be frugal, I just had to get one of her books -- signed, preferably. I've only read two of her other novels and a few short stories, but that's enough to know that she's an absolutely genius storyteller. Her work varies pretty widely in tone and theme, but it's always dense with allusions and myth and the prose is so gorgeous and vivid it makes you want to read it out loud to somebody.

Speak Easy jumped out at me because of its gorgeous cover, which I know you shouldn't judge a book by, but sometimes I do a bit anyway, because that's how book marketing is supposed to work. The Roaring Twenties party vibe is pretty evident right from the get-go, with the font and the art style depicting a short-haired lady smoking a cigarette in front of a pelican what looks like a busy scene of other partying folk, all framed inside a fancy keyhole like the reader is spying on them. It's a pretty perfect representation of the story inside, which is a lushly written novella about the folks living in the magical Hotel Artemesia, loosely adapted from the fairy tale about the twelve dancing princesses (and also referencing it several times), providing a fictional backstory to the tragic marriage of Zelda and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Our main character is the mysterious Zelda Fair, who came to New York to find out what she is good at, and while everyone else thinks she's perfectly excellent at being Zelda, she's not contented with that. Nearly everyone else at the Hotel Artemesia has a role, sometimes many of them, and Zelda's so far seems to be to turn heads and show up at parties and try a different job every week until she finds the right one. She lives in an apartment in the hotel with three other girls: a dancer, a theater critic, and a costume seamstress. Several of the men in the hotel fancy they're going to marry her, and they're all wrong, at least right up until the end.

Much of this book is an ode to partying -- to dancing and drinking and dressing up and doing outrageous things and meeting outrageous people, and generally to the power of letting loose and having a good time. But it's not shallow at all, and it's not so much that beneath all the dancing on tables and wearing shiny dresses there runs a desire to be seen and to be loved and to create and to be good at things, but that it's all intimately bound up with it. Zelda has some pretty important things to say about the joys of talking when she's sitting around in a silver dress in a bathtub full of gin, eavesdropping on the other partygoers. And Frankie Key ruins the last party in "Canada" (spoiler: it's not Canada) the same way he ruins Zelda's life: by being grasping and entitled and ruining what he loves by holding onto it so hard it breaks, because he's controlling like that even though he seemed so nice at the beginning, just wanting to be good at something just like everyone else did, but he couldn't leave well enough alone when he finally descended into the wintery underground forever-party that belonged to the master of the Hotel Artemesia, a cheerfully awful godlike type of being called, among other things, Al.

The plot seems to get off to a slow and vague start, with a fairly large cast of characters for such a tiny book, but by the time the whole web of drives and desires and attempts at escapism all come together at the end of the story in a deadly, supernatural poker game, it turns out it was all being set up right at the beginning.

I did not know when I picked up this book that the climactic event of the story was going to be a poker game, since I actually read this to take a break from just reading poker books all year, but I was pretty delighted. The game is called Cretaceous Hold'em, which is pretty hilarious to me, and from what I can tell of the gameplay it does seem to be probably a version of five-card draw rather than a hold'em-style game, but that's Al for you. They don't play with chips, instead betting trinkets and personal items that represent bits of their

lives. Frankie essentially wins Zelda in the poker game when he wins all her stuff, including her creativity, because in real life F. Scott Fitzgerald basically stole a bunch of Zelda's writing to use in his own novels and then locked her up in a sanatorium.

I do think the absolute best thing about this book is the language, by turns sumptuous and hilarious, and often both. My favorite line in the whole thing is when Frankie is described as not having "the smooth God gave a porcupine," which is something that I will probably find myself using to insult actual people sooner or later. Basically the whole book is like that. If you don't like paying a lot of attention to the actual words on the page you'll probably despise the book, but if you like to roll around in ridiculous '20s slang and steal new ways to insult people from writers smarter and more creative than yourself, like I do, then it's just about the best thing you could read.

The book cost me \$40 because it's a signed special edition, number 890 of a run of 1250, with a special flyleaf framing Valente's signature in a purple keyhole so that it doesn't have to go on the title page like when a regular book is signed. It was well worth the \$40, as short as it is, because the physical book is a work of art just as much as the words inside.

My only criticism is that it feels vaguely wrong to read it without an adult beverage in hand, and I really just couldn't stand to do that for several days after Readercon, because in real life partying all night leads to hangovers that make you cranky and tired and not want to touch booze again for days, or at least they're starting to with how old I'm getting. But one of these days I'll probably read it again and I'll make sure I have champagne this time, and maybe somebody to read it aloud to.

Originally posted at: <http://bloodygranuaile.livejournal.co...>

Erika says

Fans of Valente will certainly not find themselves let down by this novella. Set in a fantastical Jazz Age New York in the Artemisia hotel, *Speak Easy* follows the paths of a number of characters, but the heart of the story lies in *Zelda Fair*. *Zelda*'s a truly remarkable character--a little unruly, very determined, just the teensiest bit aloof, and beloved by all.

I had the best time reading this book. I was captivated for the few hours I spent reading it, and continue to be fascinated by the world Valente created as well as the questions she left unanswered. As far as I'm concerned you can't beat a 140 page book containing secret doors, Prohibition parties, gangsters, lust, the pursuit of art, and a devoted pelican.

Oh, and did I mention this is a fairy tale retelling (*The Twelve Dancing Princesses*) mashed up with a fictionalized (or maybe not so much depending on which side of the argument you fall on) history of F. Scott & Zelda Fitzgerald?

Do I really need to say anything more?

Cathy says

I feel lucky that my library system got one of the limited edition, signed copies of this book. It definitely has a similar creative and fantastical tone to the *Fairyland* books, but was aimed at an adult audience. It was just

a bit overwhelming, the constant barrage of imagery and allusions didn't give me a chance to breathe. There was a lot about it that was creative and charming and lovely and unsettling and realistic even in the way it described adult emotions and actions. It was just a lot to take it in such a short space.

Lisa says

I am going to exalt an Unpopular Opinion, which I'm sure in Internet will interpret as hate. If you would be so kind, blame my English lit background — if I cannot unpack something, what's the point of living?

Speak Easy is, as foretold by the back cover summary, a mixture of Twelve Dancing Princesses with the origin of Zelda Sayre (here Fair) with F. Scott Fitzgerald (here Frankie Key) love story with a dash of "The Great Gatsby" thrown in, "Flappers and Philosophers" and "The Jazz Age" as finishing touches. Which seems awesome, right? This is my time period! My people! I've been an amateur expert of the Fitzgeralds for years and have read damned near everything written by/about them, yes, even Zelda's book, Save Me The Waltz. So I feel a titch qualified to unpack here.

Much like the Austen vs Bronte debacle, there is an argument F. Scott stole Zelda's inspiration/writings for his books. Strangely, I sit on the fence about this argument as I can see both sides. With that being said, if the argument is to be made Zelda is plagiarized, which this book asserts and to be righted in Speak Easy, it would behoove someone to think Zelda is a fully formed character. But she's not. She's a parody, a pastiche of her truthiness and how Valente think of her and how she should be. Yes, yes, it's a reimagining fairy tale, I know, I know. But I expected — more? Even more specifically, from Valente. It just feels lost and full of filler rather than making the story bloom. More did come, but much later, and not enough to save the book. Valente really gets rip roaring in the last third of the novella. Why couldn't she have done this in the first 2/3rds?

Valente is telling a story in 100 pages which could easily be condensed into 50. The use of overly-flowery language is too much here! My allergies are overzealously asking for Benadryl. e.g. "Zelda Fair rolled back in the tub, water breaking over her tummy, rolling down her throat. She called him with one crooked finger and the boy in the silver meringue suit skedaddled over on the quick. She crooked her finger again. He bent down. The reek of gin snaked up his nose - she was swimming in the booze supply. Her pearly dress stuck like an oil slick to her breasts; the drying liquor on her shoulders made her skin prickle."

Yes, Valente is a beautiful writer. Yes, she has an imagination. Yes, she's got a way with words, but this? This? It just seemed to be a cheap imitation of her talent.

Pros:

- Told in third person omniscient point of view
- Concept of the origin story between Zelda and F. Scott
- Time period / location
- Last half was really well written, engaging, and thought out

Cons:

- First 2/3rds is messy; the crux of the story (fairy tale + origin story) was lost in the beginning, felt disjointed and half-assed. It's like she swallowed a metaphor dictionary and vomited up what worked.

While the pros definitely outweigh the cons, sorry kittens, if the story is the meat and if the meat is full of gristle, down goes the rating.

Giedre says

Nobody came without their sequins roaring. Hell, without sparkle, you were as good as naked in the Artemisia. And oh yes, King Gin and Queen Whiskey and their little bouncing baby Champagne showed up first and left last. Screwing in the bathroom, dancing on the tabletops, giggling on the rug.

Not so much a retelling as a reimagining of *The Twelve Dancing Princesses* set during the prohibition. In a fishtank of a hotel called Artemisia, which is a world onto itself, Valente's smart-mouthed narrator drags us up and down its floors and rooms, introducing key and not-so key players of this tale. The narrator is where this novella shines for me, because *Speak Easy* just begs to be read aloud to be enjoyed to its fullest.

Caro says

After waiting a great deal of time for this book to arrive (you'd think that pre-ordered copies would arrive on time!) I finally got around to reading Valente's new venture into surrealism.

The novella itself is short, and the description already gives everything away without spoiling the entire tale so I won't repeat the content and skip ahead directly to my thoughts.

The writing, as always, was brimming with creativity.

The style, while directed to an adult audience, reminded me a lot of the Fairyland series. The narrator often addresses the reader, sometimes in a tone that I found a tad too self-satisfied and patronizing as opposed to the more unintrusive Fairyland narrator.

Both constantly lament the ill actions of one character or another, but in *Speak Easy*, it seems overwritten, particularly since dialogues are scarce and descriptions are a bubbling mess.

The characters, for the lack of screen time given to them (the furniture always played the main role, it seemed) weren't fleshed out, and empathizing was hard if not impossible.

Also, the narration was descriptive to the point of being extremely distracting.

Worst of all, the book is completely forgettable. I don't see myself re-reading it like I certainly will *Six Gun Snow White*, which was great. In a few years, all I'll remember is that it's about Zelda and F. Scott - and that's ONLY because those two really existed and not because the characters were memorable.

The pages of this \$40 book had too many typos to allow me to believe it had been proofread. It was like reading an indie book, which is very disappointing considering the price and proclaimed quality.

This isn't Valente's fault - it's not her job to look for typos in her own work, but I don't think I'll be buying anything from Subterreanean Press again. I expect quality when I am expected to pay this much for such a short book.

I don't know who edited this novella, but they did an extremely poor job of it. It's like reading a thesaurus inspired fairytale and with typos to boot.

I'm sorry but I just can't give this messy work more than two stars. It was too 'meh' for me to give more than that.

Althea Ann says

Quite certainly, the author had an enormous amount of fun writing this. However, it failed to grab me. I found the dense, faux-1920's slang a slog to get through; it made the short book feel far longer than it actually is; and I didn't feel that the story contained enough of a payoff.

The events take place in a hotel which is a metaphor for the world - paradise up top and the underworld in the basement. In this hotel, along with a bohemian rag-bag of eccentric denizens, lives Zelda Fair, a fictional analogue of Zelda Fitzgerald. Zelda's the 'It Girl' of her day, lovely and wildly talented, but living a carefree and partying lifestyle while she waits for whatever it is she's really good at to reveal itself to her.

Zelda Fitzgerald's own writing has been described as "filled with verbal flourishes and complex metaphors." 'Speak Easy' emulates that, as it echoes the theme of Fitzgerald's novel ('Save Me the Waltz') and perhaps, Fitzgerald's own life, as it talks about women striving to be recognized for their artistic output and too often being squelched by the men in their lives.

It's an ambitious and interesting novella, but ultimately it didn't really work for me.

Algernon says

A novella of the Jazz Age by a master storyteller, or how to make words put on their glad rags and go dancing the charleston, get drunk on illicit liquor and take the reader on yet another wild, exhilarating ride through a world both familiar and incredibly weird. The scene is a town that goes by many names, yet is unmistakable in its energy and deviousness. The time is Christmas week 1924:

There's this ragamuffin city out east, you follow? Sitting pretty with a river on each arm, lit up in her gladdest rags since 1624. She'd tell you she's seen it all, boy howdy, the deep down and the high up, champagne and syphilis, pearls and puke. Oh, she's a cynical doll, nothing new to her.

Don't you believe it.

Treat her right and she'll open up to you, as innocent as Eden and twice as naked. She's got secrets, sure, who doesn't? Pour me a snort and I'll spill, mister. Spot me a meal and I'll show you the goods.

It's party time, and the ballroom is as big as the city or, put another way, the world is a scene and the scene is the Grand Hotel **Artemisia**, a microcosm of society with the owner sitting pretty in the penthouse; going down in the elevator you will get across bankers, business tycoons, flapper girls looking for a good time, young men attracted like moths by the bright lights of the big city, dancers, singer, artisans, actors, clerks ... continue down to service people, maids, bell boys, cooks, right down into the nether regions where the suppliers of bottled dreams ply their prohibited trade:

Up in heaven they call it drinking the soda pop moon. In that jazz-hearted Midgard called the Artemisia it's panther sweat. And down at the bottom of the world if you ask for coffin varnish you'll get what you're looking for.

You might also be looking for trouble, because the underworld is the domain of a dapper man with an ugly scar on his face, a familiar figure from the modern American mythology:

Call him what you want: Scarface, Boss, Big Daddy, King of the Fairies and Lord of the Dead. Most everyone around here just calls him Al.

But who cares about devilish goings on down in the slums when the drinks are plentiful, the swing bands are red hot and the flapper's short skirts are sparkling with a million stars.

Robin Hood knew how to make Sherwood jangle and all the merry men shimmy till their spats popped. I'm telling you, Portuguese trapeze-swinging triplets flew from chandelier to chandelier and four separate

barons – one newspaper, one copper, one railroad, and one baritone sax – played poker on the floor with their socks off. Some bright-blood jazz-daddy pounded that monster grand piano with a tiger-skin draped over his shoulders, striped head on his head, teeth bouncing on his skull like his fingers on the keys, while a ballerina with a missing pinky finger plinked out the high notes for him with her perfect pointed toes. Maid Marian came with two flamingos named Cliquot and Strawberry, one on each arm like a pair of beaux.

... and that, my dear children, is how I met your mother!

(Oops! Wrong fairytale! Let's rewind a little ...)

Valente is on to something more here than wordplay and whimsical evocation, she's got her sights set on the young girls who believed they got the whole world within reach of their fingers, who bought into the American Dream of living in the moment and letting others worry about tomorrow. Her fictional characters are anything but fictional (Scarface as Al Capone, Robin Hood as Errol Flynn?) and who else is more iconic to the destructive nature of the Jazz Age than Zelda Fitzgerald?

You have to work up a real lather to stand out among the sparklers at the Artemisia. When the kids look to be using up all the parties of the next hundred years in one summer, what's another passed out sweetheart in silver fringe? What's one more gamine with her shoes danced to tatters? Nothing but a black bob on a pillow, a bathtub princess with her head in the sink. Unless the girl was Zelda Fair.

Zelda is a smart girl, but she is like everybody else in the Artemisia, putting life on hold for a while so she can drink and party and dance until some future career, some future talent is revealed to her in a gin-tinted dream:

Sometimes funny things happen in this world, don't they, Mr. K? I mean, the world's so damn big everything's bound to happen that can happen, and probably some things that can't. And when funny things happen, you just have to go along, don't you? Because they might never happen again and you'll have missed the joke of it, missed the fun, and then when you're old and your kittens ask you what you did when the world had its glad rags on, you won't have nothing to say, will you?

and,

Don't you just love Not-Yet? It's like waiting to be born. I could be anybody yet. I could be a ballerina or a swimming champion. Or a pocketwatch. Or a Christmas pudding. Or a jackal.

Speak Easy is the story of how this bright girl named Zelda met an ambitious boy from the Midwest named Frankie, who wanted to become a writer. A fairytale, right? Frankie boy is not the only one in the Artemisia with artistic ambitions:

Everybody's writing a book in this joint. It's the thing to do. Furrow your brow over pages and pull your best Keats-face, your best long-tooth Joyce-mug and the girlies just fall all over you. The lads, too. It's a 100% kind of magic, works on everyone. Make me a character, won't you? I was just born for the page. Make me art. Make me alive. Make me real 'cause you're only real if somebody's talking about you, and fiction's the best kind of gossip there is. Everytime some sad sack in the Artemisia thinks say, I oughta write a book, an angel falls flat on its face on 42nd Street and gets a ticket for jaywalking. Frankie is writing for money, not for fame: So up with blood and down with melancholy! Yes sir, hack those throats, fire those guns, furrow those Holmesy brows! It's easy to be lazy when lazy keeps you in gin.

You know, kittens, that fairytales were originally quite scary things, nothing like the princess thing that Disney and his cronies are selling on every street corner? Well now, the blind watchmaker (he is actually living on the top floor of the Artemisia) is probably cackling and crowing at the folly of the partygoers below

him, and Al in his underground den is patiently waiting for the beautiful and the damned to find their way down to his realm:

A cuckoo clock ticking away, little dolls chasing each other round the pendulum, all the parts parting along and no one ever leaves.

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The end of the world already happened. It's happening all the time. It's gonna happen again. And again after that.

Zelda and Frankie are heading for a showdown with Al. How the cards will be played (**The game is Cretaceous Hold 'Em. Everything wild. Play or I bury you here.**) should not be a spoiler to most readers familiar with the Jazz Age: it ain't a pretty picture in the cold light of a new morning.

Parties get quiet towards the end. Only a few folks left, keeping the lights on, keeping the music going, rooting through the bottles for the one that's not empty. Gets quiet. Just before the sun starts straightening the tables and filling the glasses. Gets close and secret and gentle. Truth o'clock. That's where we are now.

The truth for Valente may be considered revisionist and overtly feminist to some readers, but a little further study online will demonstrate that she has solid grounds for her claims (view spoiler).

A final quote serves to remind me not to judge too harshly the frivolity and the dissolution of so much youthful talent in Zelda and Frankie. After all, we are left with a few literary gems as their heritage, and some might argue that we are still living in the Jazz Age:

Who wants to go back to being unseen and unseeable? Besides, hell has the best theater.

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The novella stands out for me not only in the historical context and thinly veiled biographical portraits of the two icons of age, but in the author's signature exuberance and inventivity with the vocabulary. I sort of wish the novella will be eventually expanded into a full novel, where more time will be spent on the other colourful characters inhabiting the **Artemisia** , but as it stands right now the story is an excellent example of the author's style, a good starting point for readers yet unfamiliar with her novels.

Jon says

This is a retelling of *The Twelve Dancing Princesses* set during the prohibition era 1920s and focuses on the lives of the residents and staff of the Artemisia, a New York hotel where movie stars rub shoulders with gangsters, artists and politicians; a beacon of hope for the wannabes of the city - the writers, the chorus girls, the 'stars-to-be' - where anybody who wants to be *somebody* eventually finds themselves; an opulent, hedonistic playground where anything and everything goes.

Zelda Fair wants to find her calling. Her natural beauty gets her plenty of attention, but she wants more than to be just an object of affection. Frankie the bellboy wants to be a writer, but quite possibly even more than that he just wants Zelda. Al, permanent resident of the hotel's mysterious basement, pulls the strings and arranges the best parties, where, if you play your cards right, you can have everything you ever wanted.

Valente's prose is like a drug. Each meticulously crafted sentence just seems to drip off the page and seep into my brain, releasing a wave of specially manufactured 'magical realism endorphins'. There's a flow, almost a lyrical rhythm to it all, and once I get caught up in that steady stream I literally do not want to be anywhere else. I could probably go on to mention how I didn't think that *Speak Easy* was particularly perfect, and how the last quarter felt a bit too rushed and uneven compared to the rest of the book, but instead I'll tell you what I did after I finished it.

Ready?

I went and made a cup of tea, then I picked it back up and read it all over again.

(view spoiler)

Sarah says

I'd been wanting to read this for ages, and then the strangest thing happened: I discovered it on my e-reader. My non-internet-connected, only-downloads-things-i-own-directly-from-my-computer ancient Kobo. Magic is clearly afoot.

Karl says

This is copy 506 of 1250 copies signed and numbered by Catherynne M. Valente.

Vanessa says

"It's... it's so direct, you know? You look at a painting and it fills you up. You read a book and sometimes it's so good you feel like you could live on it. And now we do live on it. Everyone does. It's perfect. You should try it."

Alternate versions of Zelda Fitzgerald (Zelda Fair), Francis Scott Fitzgerald (Frankie Key) and Al Capone (Al) living in an hotel, Artemisia, whose basement is a fantastic reality? + Roaring Twenties, prohibition and "The Twelve Dancing Princesses" reinvented? Completely sold.
