

Hurtlin' Globetrotters

River Cities Reader – October, 5, 2009 - by Mike Schulz

In the back of any Richmond Hill Barn Theatre program, you'll find a chronological listing of which shows have been produced at the theatre over its past 40 seasons. And while this catalog of titles is nothing if not varied, the assorted comedies, dramas, thrillers, and such do share a common link: Not one of these plays is one you'd feel compelled to attend with young kids in tow. (The Barn did house the holiday comedy *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* in 2007, but that was a bonus offering added to the venue's annual six-show lineup and isn't mentioned in the program's inventory.)

Maybe, then, it was just force of habit - or the fact that it was a school night - that kept children away from Thursday's Richmond Hill presentation of *Around the World in 80 Days*, playwright Mark Brown's family adventure based on Jules Verne's literary classic. (The youngest patrons in attendance appeared to be the three twentysomethings sitting in the row ahead of me.) But here's hoping that word-of-mouth spreads on this charming, inventive, and utterly delightful production, because kids should positively eat it up, and it's inconceivable that their adult chaperones will feel at all slighted. Like the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse's recent *Peter Pan*, director Jennifer Kingry's comedy is that rare stage piece that appeals to the child in *all* of us, only instead of flying effects, we're given an elephant fashioned out of a table, a stool, and a length of cloth - and that's meant as the highest of praise.

There are plenty of treats on hand in this *80 Days*: laughs big and small, witty costumes by designer/co-star Mary Bouljon, an endearing five-person cast enacting 30-plus roles between them. Know up-front, however, that one thing you *won't* be treated to is any semblance of a hot-air balloon. As Brown states in the program's author notes, "The *film* had a balloon. It's what everyone remembers. But there's no balloon in the book and there's no balloon in this show. So if you've come to see a trip around the world in a balloon, get out of your seat right now and demand your money back." (In a priceless touch, Brown's notes are followed by Kingry's, in which she implores, "Don't listen to the author. Easy for him to say 'Get up and leave' - we've already paid his royalties.")

I promise you won't miss the balloon. From the show's first moments, with the travelers' worldwide trek mapped I promise you won't miss the balloon. From the show's first moments, with the travelers' worldwide trek mapped out through an ingenious lighting effect, to its last, with the great John VanDeWoestyne delivering welcome news in drag, airborne transport would clearly be superfluous; this *80 Days* carries you aloft on gusts of inspiring cleverness and blissful silliness. The simple storyline - in which stuffy Brit Phileas Fogg (Greg Bouljon) accepts an 1872 challenge to circle the earth - is little more than a pretext for numerous high-comic misadventures, and the intentionally low-rent fun proves (if such proof is still needed) that no amount of technical accoutrements can provide the joy that results from vivid theatrical imagination. Watching Richmond Hill's latest, you oftentimes feel as happily carefree as a six-year-old playing Cowboys & Indians - and that's before the actors, here, actually *do* play Cowboys & Indians.

Brown's script is a dandy little compression of Verne's novel, filled with visual and verbal gags, and boasting running narration in which characters routinely break the fourth wall to comment on their globe-trotting experiences. (Chris White, portraying Fogg's French assistant Passepartout, gets the funniest of these asides.) I'm guessing, though, that the credit for this production's most hysterical bits belongs to Kingry - unless, that is, Brown's stage directions also find the reference to Liverpool followed by the opening guitar chord for the Beatles' "A Hard Day's Night." Like that divinely anachronistic aural joke, many of *80 Days*' best moments are so quick, and so unexpected, that the laughs practically come with a built-in double take, and Kingry's actors fit perfectly with the show's genial, offhanded loopiness.

As the unflappable Fogg, Greg Bouljon delivers throwaway witticisms from under his breath and earns laughs without ever noticeably altering his controlled deadpan; he's a lovably stoic stick-in-the-mud. (Told, somewhat inaccurately, that he's "a man of heart," Fogg sighs and responds, "Well ... when I have *time*.") Bouljon's wife Mary doesn't get a lot to do in her sizable role as the rescued human sacrifice Aouda, but she provides a couple of wonderfully sweet character turns early on - offering a great, quick bit as an apologetic newsie - and Adam Overberg provides more than a *dozen* expert character turns, scoring especially with his ship's captain, his Chinese opium peddler, and his easily provoked cowpoke. ("Take that, Apaches!" Overberg exclaims during *80 Days*' Wild West shootout. "Go back to your *own* country!")

With his exaggerated French accent that brings to mind delightful memories of Peter Sellers, White's Passepartout is a continual hoot, simultaneously the production's most nutty stereotype and the most levelheaded character in sight. And while his brief, bewigged Monty Python bit would've been more than enough to send his fans home happy, VanDeWoestyne precedes this appearance with nearly two hours of infectious goofiness as the dogged Cockney, Detective Fix. More than anything, it was his portrayal that made me miss the absence of kids in the crowd, who no doubt would've giggled long and loud at Fix's ever-growing comic exasperation - though the giggles of the adults in attendance easily made up for the loss.

There were, to be sure, some bumpy patches in Thursday's performance, as the frequent locale shifts resulted in occasional, slightly awkward pauses, and there was just enough stumbling over lines for it to be mildly distracting. (A few accents also came and went; at one point, amusingly, VanDeWoestyne's Cockney sing-song momentarily vanished and returned as a Southern drawl.) But even during its hiccups, Around the World in 80 Days' high spirits and inventiveness never waned, and there were always big laughs to be had. I wouldn't dream of spoiling Kingry's biggest ones, but allow me to praise her for the most entertaining train ride from Iowa to New York imaginable, and to thank her for recognizing that no matter the century, Law & Order's signature DUN-dun!!! music cue is always funny.

Detail, whimsy fill Richmond Hill's '80 Days'

Quad City Times – October 6, 2009 - by David Burke

Richmond Hill Players' "Around the World in 80 Days" is an entertaining study in contrasts.

It's billed as a "family comedy," yet doesn't talk down to its audience. Its main character is the least showy in a five-person cast. And somehow it's an expansive epic of a production - set, obviously, around the world - that plays nicely to the intimacy of the barn theater in Geneseo, Ill.

Jennifer Kingry directs, as well as designing the lights, sound and set, all of which show her eye for detail and a dollop of whimsy. While most of the set consists of a steamer trunk, two chairs and two crates that are used to create everything from a train to a ship to an elephant, large panels built above two sides of the audience serve as both accent pieces and visualizations of Phileas Fogg's 1872 journey.

Fogg is played by Greg Bouljon, a veteran of several Quad-City area theater companies who plays it straight in a rock-steady leading role. The script doesn't allow him much of a sense of humor or much personality, but fortunately three of his castmates fill that void.

Chris White, John VanDeWoestyne and Adam Overberg each present an array of verbal humor and visual slapstick that hit the target.

White glides through his role of Passepartout, Fogg's manservant, with an Inspector Clouseau accent and a thorough commitment to the visual gags.

VanDeWoestyne plays six roles, primarily Detective Fix (pursuing Fogg across the planet on a robbery accusation), with facial expressions and attitude that come straight from the screwball comedies of the 1930s and '40s.

And Overberg pulls a yeoman's task of creating 18 - eighteen! - different characters. Each of them has their own personality and appearance (although Overberg himself has a beard that could have been removed), sometimes changing from one to another in a backstage nanosecond.

Rounding out the cast is Mary Bouljon, also in multiple roles, primarily as Aouda, a Parsi princess who is rescued by Fogg and Passepartout, getting most of her laughs from parts that require her to play a male.

The attention to detail by Kingry and her cast is extremely evident. All pantomime riding a train, an elephant or a ship with an equal amount of commitment, and the lines and motions are done in crisp unison.

The only thing missing from the family presentation was ... families. A decent-sized Sunday matinee crowd the first weekend included less than a handful of school-age children. For a show that youngsters (especially those with vivid imaginations) will enjoy as much as their parents (a couple of the lines enjoyably float over the kids' heads), it's highly advisable to make the trek to Geneseo.

'Around the World' a rousing period piece

Dispatch-Argus – Wednesday, October 7, 2009 - by Julie Jensen

The Richmond Hill Players' production of "Around the World in 80 Days" is a hilarious period piece that received a standing ovation from the Friday night audience at the Barn in Geneseo.

The play is Mark Brown's adaptation of a Jules Verne novel, and director Jennifer Kingry has worked out a perfect pell-mell pace.

Greg Bouljon, who plays Phileas Fogg, the adventurer who made a wager that he could circle the globe in 80 days, is the only member of the cast with a single role.

Most of the others have to look sharp to know who they are at any given moment. This is especially true of Adam Overberg, who plays 19 parts -- everything from the British Consul to a Chinese broker.

Mary Bouljon is Fogg's valet, fired because the temperature of his shaving water was two degrees off; a newspaper man; a priest, and Aouda, the woman Fogg's group rescues in India.

She is succeeded as valet by a Frenchman, Passeportout, played by Chris White, who has the lion's share of funny lines. His pronunciations like "Ill-in-wah" for Illinois also are amusing.

John Van De Woestyne is Detective Fix most of the time, though he does play five other roles, one of them a female.

He wears a Sherlock Holmes hat and screams when he is not addressed as "detective."

He is tailing Phileas Fogg, believing him to be a bank robber, and plans to arrest him after receiving a warrant.

Stovepipe hats are prevalent, and Ms. Bouljon wears a sari and sandals before changing to Victorian garb.

The set is a table, some crates, and a trunk, which the cast move as needed. They even become an elephant, and the passengers rock as they ride.

Fogg constantly is paying money to keep his schedules, and sometimes the prospects of making the deadline seem grim. There's a gun battle and a run-in with a typhoon.

"Around the World in 80 Days" will be performed today through Saturday at 7:30 p.m., with a 4 p.m. matinee on Sunday. Tickets are \$8 and can be reserved by calling (309) 944-2244 or visiting www.rhplayers.com.

This show is a rousing finale to the current season. Don't miss it.

Rock Island actor around the set in 19 characters

Dispatch-Argus – September 30, 2009 – by Jonathan Turner

Adam Overberg of Rock Island keeps very busy in "Around the World in 80 Days," opening tonight at Richmond Hill Players, Geneseo. He plays 19 characters, and -- like the other four actors in the show -- must help change the constantly shifting set.

"As an actor, we get used to creating a single character and then living that character while we're on stage. The thing about this show, you can't rely on that at all," said Mr. Overberg, a 23-year-old graduate of North Scott High School and Monmouth College, where he was a communication and theater arts major.

"In the end, it's really rewarding," he said. "It challenged me to put aside strong skills, and work on the weak ones. I have grown a lot more than I expected to."

In Mark Brown's comic adaptation of the Jules Verne novel, fearless adventurer Phileas Fogg races around the world to save his fortune, after wagering his Reform Club colleagues that he could make it in 80 days. Assisted by his ever-resourceful manservant Passepartout and pursued by intrepid Detective Fix, Fogg encounters an array of transportation disasters, meeting them with Victorian virtue and a precision pocket watch.

Mr. Overberg said he can "definitely see" why Mr. Brown chose a few actors to play many parts, boasting multiple accents.

"It's because of how many roles are just small walk-on characters," he said, noting there are 39 characters in the show. "You'd see them for 5 seconds and they'd be gone." And while the stage crew helps Mr. Overberg with the many costume changes, every single scene change is done by an actor.

"For some people, that's definitely out of their comfort zone," he said. At Harrison Hilltop, where Mr. Overberg has worked, that has been standard procedure. He also appeared in Playcrafters' production of "The Mousetrap."

At Richmond Hill, the cast includes John VanDeWoestyne, Geneseo; Chris White, Colona; and Greg and Mary Bouljon, Moline. Jennifer Kingry of Geneseo directs the show.

"They have lightning-fast changes, sometimes only two lines before they have to come back as someone else," she said of the cast. "The humor lies in the inventiveness in watching actors create all these different people in front of you."

The set is minimalistic, Ms. Kingry said. "There are a few pieces, and we reconfigure them repeatedly," she said. "There are something like 15 or 17 set changes."

The challenge of the show also is reflected in lighting changes needed to cover set alterations, and create the illusion of a 24,000-mile journey. The Barn Theater has a new light board the crew was not used to, and Ms. Kingry has 221 lighting changes.

"There's a lot of changing the locale by means of the light," she said.

"Around the World in 80 Days" will be presented through Oct. 11, Thursdays to Saturdays at 7:30 p.m., and Sundays at 4 p.m. Tickets are \$8, except tonight when admission is \$7. Reservations are recommended and can be made by calling (309) 944-2244 or visiting www.rhplayers.com.