



Theater review: “Harvey”

By Arthur Dorman, April 18, 2016

Elwood P. Dowd, the man at the center of Mary Chase's classic comedy *Harvey*, may be the most well-adjusted person on the Guthrie's Wurtele Thrust Stage. He is polite and pleasant to everyone, is at ease in his own skin, takes adversity in stride, innately draws out the best in people, and because he is fascinated by even the slightest of matters, is never bored. He is a genuinely happy man. Perhaps he drinks to excess. Too, he is financially secure with no need to hold a job. But it is easy to think of people with money and people that drink who are miserable. What is Elwood's secret? Could it be his best friend, a six-foot tall rabbit named Harvey whom Elwood alone sees and hears?

Harvey pits Elwood against his socially ambitious sister Veta Louise Simmons and her daughter Myrtle May, who live with Elwood in the spacious childhood home that was his inheritance. Veta Louise and Myrtle May face constant mortification as Elwood carries on conversations with Harvey, holds doors open for Harvey, sets a place at the table for Harvey, and insists on introducing their would-be society friends to his invisible soul-mate. When Elwood's antics undermine Myrtle May's prospects of meeting any nice young men, Veta Louise finally decides she must place Elwood in an institution.

That institution is Chumley's Rest, run by Dr. William R. Chumley, renowned psychiatrist. A comedy of errors ensue, regarding whether high-strung Veta or easy-going Elwood is the intended patient; bickering between young associate psychiatrist Dr. Lyman Sanderson and Nurse Ruth Kelly that thinly masks their mutual attraction; Dr. Chumley's open-hearted if somewhat dim wife Betty; a rough-mannered orderly named Wilson; and the Dowd family retainer, Judge Omar Gaffney. Things get sorted out in the end, as this is a play supremely designed to leave the audience feeling good, with a take-home lesson in tolerance of those who march to their own drummer—or drink with their own rabbit.

Chase's play premiered on Broadway in 1941 and ran over four years, providing a welcome dose of merriment and optimism during World War II. It is a rare case of an outright comedy winning the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for Drama (besting Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*) and became a hugely popular movie with Jimmy Stewart perfectly cast as Elwood. Though there have been only two Broadway revivals, for over fifty years *Harvey* has been a mainstay of regional, community, and school theaters. People who have never seen *Harvey* know that he is a six foot tall, invisible rabbit. Perhaps



David Kelly and Steve Hendrickson
Photograph © T Charles Erickson

the drawing power of the title character is his unlikely ability to make everything right—an unseen presence that smooths all rough edges, boosts our confidence, and ensures that we are never left alone. Who could resist such a notion?

But any layers of substance that may lie beneath the charm and laughs are largely unexamined in the Guthrie's mounting, directed by Libby Appel. The show is delightful, funny, warm, and life affirming—which certainly makes for a happily spent time at the theater, even if we never dive beneath the sunny surface of Chase's concoction.

David Kelly, an actor with a long resume at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, makes his Guthrie debut as Elwood. Kelly projects boyish enthusiasm and open-faced warmth that suits Elwood's nature. However, he seems to be having such a good time—chuckling over the things he says and the fracas all around him—it appears he is in on the joke that has his family and friends so upended, where the one thing we always expect of Elwood is sincerity.

The two stand-outs in the cast are Sally Wingert (always a stand-out) as Veta, and [Steve Hendrickson](#) as Dr. Chumley. After Elwood, these two characters have the most stage time, and in fact, they are the two characters who go through change of heart in the course of the play. Sure, Elwood (and Harvey, if only we could see him) are at the center of the play, but Elwood is the same good-hearted man from start to finish, while Veta's disdain for her brother's delusion gradually wears away, and Dr.

Chumley discovers the potential to escape the stress and strain of his harried life. Both Wingert and Hendrickson craft their characters with clear lines at the onset, and we see them re-draw those lines over the course of the play—which all takes place within 24 hours—to make the changes in Veta and Dr. Chumley as natural as jam on toast. At the same time, neither of these stage veterans miss any of the abundant opportunities to provoke laughter.

Sun Mee Chomet plays Myrtle May at too high a level of manic energy and angst. The script makes it evident why her Uncle Elwood is such a bane to her existence, but this Myrtle May seems so uncharitable and self-centered that it is hard to spare any sympathy for her.

Ashley Rose Montondo provides both loveliness and grit to her portrayal of Nurse Kelly, serving the character well. Her sparring partner, Dr. Sanderson, played by Ryan Shams, comes across as overly stiff and devoid of romantic instincts. Tyson Forbes, though, is spot-on as the slightly thuggish orderly, Duane Wilson—loyal to his employer, indelicate with the patients, and blunt as a steam iron.

In roles that amount to extended cameos, three of the Twin Cities' foremost actors do their usual outstanding work: Greta Oglesby as society doyenne Ethel Chauvenet, Peggy O'Connell as Mrs. Chumley, and Ansa Akyea as E.J. Lofgren, a cab driver. In the latter role, albeit only on stage for several minutes, Akyea ably demonstrates Elwood's capacity to encounter someone with heated anger and sway them in the direction of friendship.

The Guthrie has given Harvey a handsome physical production, the elegant library of the Dowd-Simmons home alternating with the reception room of Chumley's rest as the two settings for all the action. The female characters are all costumed elegantly—even without a gram of Ms. Oglesby's formidable acting skill, the gown and hat she wears would completely convince us that she stands at the pinnacle of local society—while the gentlemen are all debonair in their suits. This play does not call for elaborate lighting shifts, though one lighting cue that takes place while Elwood is searching for Harvey is essential in conveying a plot point, and these, along with the sound design, serve the production well.

Elwood introduces Harvey as his pooka, giving the impression at first that a pooka is a kind of rabbit. In fact, though, a pooka is a feature of rural Irish folklore, a kind of ghost or spirit that can harbor either good or bad fortune. They were said to be shape-shifters, able to take the appearance of any number of animals, including a rabbit, or even the form of a human with animal features ... voila, a six foot rabbit.



David Kelly, Sally Wingert, Ryan Shams, Steve Hendrickson, Sun Mee Chomet, and Michael T. Hume
Photo by T. Charles Erickson

If Elwood knows his lupine friend to be a pooka—a phantom, or spirit creature—it does not mean he believes any less in Harvey, nor that he expects others will doubt Harvey's veracity. Knowing this changes Elwood from a man who imagines he sees something real and of this world, to a man who knows what he sees is of the spirit realm, yet believes it just as earnestly. One wonders, is there a difference between Elwood's embrace of Harvey if that embrace is born of faith rather than sheer delusion? If Mary Chase did not intend audiences to look this deeply at the nature of her creation, it is still possible to do so. Besides, it was her idea to call Harvey a "pooka" first, a "rabbit" second.

All told, Harvey is a delightful play, skillfully presented and artfully mounted in this Guthrie production. If it misses the opportunity to scratch the surface a bit, that does not diminish the wonderful fun to be had with Elwood, Veta Louise, Myrtle May, Dr. Chumley and—of course—the world's best known, best loved six foot tall rabbit.