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BWW Review: HARVEY is a Comedy with Imagination and Heart at 1st Stage Theatre

by

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With World War II raging on in Europe, Veta Simmons and her daughter, Myrtle Mae Simmons are fighting a battle of their own against Elwood P. Dowd, Veta's brother, in order to try to keep their social lives intact. However, all of their tactics cannot keep Elwood from inviting his friend, Harvey, to their social events. Harvey is Elwood's best friend and they do everything together. The only problem is that Elwood is the only person who can see Harvey, a pooka in the form of a six foot tall rabbit. One afternoon after a disastrous Wednesday forum, Veta decides

that it is time to commit Elwood to Chumley's Rest, a sanitarium. 1st Stage Theatre's *Harvey*, directed by Michael Chamberlin and written by Mary Chase, is a charming and witty rendition of the classic comedy that simulates your imagination and keeps you rooting for Elwood (and Harvey) until the very end.

The casting choices for *Harvey* are solid. It isn't too often that you see such as cohesive and lovable cast grace a stage. There is a liveliness to every character (even Harvey) that makes them feel real. Jonathan Lee Taylor (Elwood P. Dowd) is brilliant as the affable Elwood. He is the uncle that you wish you had. Taylor's role as Elwood is quite a challenge considering that he talks to Harvey who isn't at all there. He is able to make you feel as if Harvey is always in the room. Tonya Beckman (Veta Louise Simmons) is entertaining to watch every time she is on stage. Beckman's interruption of Veta eludes the charm of Lucille Ball. She is able to amplify Veta's anxieties and worries to make them side splinting funny especially during a scene in which Veta goes to try to commit Elwood to Chumley's Rest and ends up doing the opposite. Kelsey Meiklejohn (Myrtle Mae Simmons) is quite the match to Beckman's Veta and

meshes well with Beckman on stage. Emily Morrison (Mrs. Ethel Chauvenet) only appears in one scene, but her performance of going into hysterics, during a humorous scene in which Aunt Ethel "meets" Harvey for the first time, packs a punch. Elliot Bales (Dr. William Chumley) is a towering and stern presence as the founder of Chumley's Rest. His demeanor during scenes in which he interacts with Carolyn Kashner (Nurse Ruth Kelly), Robert Grimm (Duane Wilson), and Tim Torre (Dr. Lyman Sanderson) are comedic gold. Kasher and Torre have intense chemistry on stage especially during a scene in which Nurse Ruth and Dr. Sanderson are talking about their dates from the previous night. Sue Schaffel (Betty Chumley) is sweet and quirky as Dr. Chumley's wife. Schaffel's remarks about Dr. Chumley's "irritableness" are said in such a manner that induces giggles and appreciative applause. DeJeanette Horne (Judge Omar Gaffney) is delightful and charismatic as the Dowd family's attorney. Horne's first interaction with Bales consists of a (quite uproarious) death stare between doctor and attorney. This initial interaction perfectly sets a comical tension between Dr. Chumley and Judge Omar Gaffney all due to their stereotypical perceptions of each other's professions. William Aitken (E.J. Lofgren) makes a brief appearance as a taxi driver and gives a tear inducing speech about the ramifications of bringing someone who is "crazy" to Chumley's Rest.

The scenic design, by Kay Hughes, is versatile. The center of the stage is a platform that rotates between the reception room at Chumley's Rest and the library of the Dowd family mansion. On both sides of the stage, there are panels that can be moved to be different back drops during the scene changes. On both sides of the rotating set, the back wall of the stage, and on either side of the stage in the front, there is detailed brick work smattered with an array of World War II posters. The costume design, by Kara Waala, is stunning and each of the pieces worn by the actors match their characters' personalities while still being appropriate for the time period. The lighting design, by Brittany Shemuga, uses colors, such as orange and blue, and bright white lights during scenes in which Harvey "appears" creates a surreal feeling and the use of shadow to cast Harvey's image behind a door is a great effect.

1st Stag Theatre's *Harvey* is a comedy that you don't want to miss. It certainly is one of the best plays of the year in Northern Virginia. It runs until December 20th. Tickets can be purchased online.

Photo caption and credit: (left to right) Carolyn Kashner, Robert Grimm, Tim Torre and Jonathan Lee Taylor in "Harvey" at 1st Stage. The show runs through December 20, 2015 in Tysons Corner. Photo by Teresa Castracane.