

'Harvey' at 1st Stage

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Julia L. Exline

1st Stage Theatre presents *Harvey*, Mary Chase's 1945 Pulitzer Prize-winning comedic drama, directed by Michael Chamberlin. When a high-society family makes a desperate attempt to hide the eccentric behavior of one of their own, they find themselves in a runaway whirlwind of chaos. This classic comedy of errors is in capable hands with 1st stage, whose professional theatrical and technical elements work together to put on a fantastic evening of entertainment.



Jonathan Lee Taylor and Elliott Bales. Photo by Teresa Castracane.

Technical Director Jose Abraham oversees an effective team of artists. Scenic Designer Kathryn Kawecki has created a massive revolving set; one side, the intricately detailed library of the Dowd family mansion, the other, a white reception room of a sanitarium named Chumley's Rest. While the sanatorium is appropriately clinical and plain, the posh library has books crammed into every nook and cranny, including a grand fireplace comically stuffed with novels.

The sets are highly impressive, and Sound Designer Edward Moser and Lighting Designer Brittany Shemuga contribute professional cues and effects, the most noticeable being how the sunlight fades into an evening glow as the plot unfolds. Costume Designer Kara Waala brings the 1940's to life with era-appropriate dresses and hairstyles, accessorizing the upper-crust characters with dainty white gloves and luxurious fur shawls.

While hosting a party in her family home, social-climbers Veta (Tonya Beckman) and her daughter Myrtle Mae (Kelsey Meikljohn) find themselves incredibly embarrassed when Veta's brother Elwood (a tour de force performance by Jonathan Lee Taylor) joins in on the festivities. Friendly and charming, Elwood is great company—except for the fact that his company includes his best friend Harvey, a 6-foot tall anamorphic white rabbit whom only Elwood can see, and who he insists on introducing to everyone he meets. Finally pushed past her patience, Veta

decides to commit Elwood to a sanitarium— where things go hilariously, uproariously awry.

Through the course of a day, mix-ups and misunderstandings pile upon themselves, threatening everyone's sanity...except Elwood's, who remains as affable as ever. With the help of some clever special effects, the play leaves a lot of ambiguity and room for discussion— is Harvey, in fact, real? While there is a justifiable argument that Harvey is in fact a Pooka (in Irish Folklore: they are visible only to those who believe in them), most consider him a reoccurring delusion of Elwood's. Underneath the comedic nature of this play, the issue of mental health is explored – is Elwood really crazy, or is crazy relative? And if he *is* crazy, is that in fact such a bad thing? After all, Elwood is without a doubt the happiest character onstage.

The ensemble is filled with powerhouse performances. Tony Beckman is riotous as Veta, with a particularly entertaining scene as she finds herself having a nervous breakdown. William Aitken and Emily Morrison have small, but memorable roles; Aitken as E.J. Lofgren, a taxi driver with wise words for the family, and Morrison as Ethel Chauvenet, a party guest who finds herself baffled at Elwood's behavior.



Tonya Beckman. Photo by Teresa Castracane.

Elliot Bales has the commanding role of Dr. William R. Chumley, the sanitarium founder who finds his business in hot water after his employee Dr. Sanderson (Tim Torre) makes a huge error in judgment.



Jonathan Lee Taylor and Sue Schaffel. Photo by Teresa Castracane.

My favorite performance of the evening was Sue Schaffel's, who plays Betty Chumley, the kind (if somewhat daft) wife of Dr. Chumley. Breathy and birdlike, her sweet and gullible nature is nicely honed by Schaffel.

1st Stage Theatre's production of *Harvey* is exceptionally well-done, with solid direction, wonderful design, and a

talented cast. I highly recommend it for a hare-raisingly fun evening out! Hop on over and buy some tickets to 1st Stage's hilarious *Harvey*.

Running Time: Two and a half hours, including one 15-minute intermission.



Harvey plays through December 20, 2015 at 1st Stage – 1524 Spring Hill Road, in Tysons, VA. For tickets, call (703) 854-1856, or purchase them [online](#).

RATING: ★★★★★

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