

Harvey

By Christine Sarkes, April 18, 2016

Harvey, the Pulitzer Prize-winning play by Mary Chase and film, starring Jimmy Stewart, gets the screwball comedy treatment at the Guthrie Theater through May 15. The play will entertain all audiences with its broad comedic turns, gentle rebuke of social conformity and support of individuality and joyful innocence. Harvey is superbly acted and laugh-out-loud funny. For those who crave a little message with their theater fare, Harvey delivers a few timeless ones: be true to yourself, be kind to others and be open to the possibility of magic.

The story centers on the life of Elwood P. Dowd (David Kelly) and his best friend, an invisible six-foot tall rabbit named Harvey (“because that’s his name”). Harvey is a pooka, or nature spirit, that inexplicably appeared in Elwood’s life to the embarrassment of his sister Veta Simmons (Sally Wingert) and niece, Myrtle Mae Simmons (Sun Mee Chomet). Veta and Myrtle Mae are social climbers determined to find a match for Myrtle Mae by ingratiating themselves into local society. When Elwood’s public eccentricity interferes with their plans, Veta decides to have him committed. When they arrive at the sanitarium, a comedy of errors ensues. The young, ambitious Dr. Sanderson (Ryan Shams) and his lovesick nurse Ruth Kelly (Ashley Rose Montondo) commit Veta instead of Elwood. When he shows up at the sanitarium searching for Veta and Harvey, the mild-mannered Elwood and his rabbit sidekick have a strange influence on the staff, including sanitarium director Dr. Chumley ([Steve Hendrickson](#)), his wife Betty Chumley (Peggy O’Connell), the orderly Duane Wilson (Tyson Forbes) and the judge who arrives to sort it all out (Michael J. Hume). Wingert and Chomet were superb as the put-upon mother/daughter pair, giving their characters unique physical movements and gestures that heightened their



David Kelly and Steve Hendrickson
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comedic punch. Kelly’s Elwood is appealing as a wide-eyed, not-so-innocent gentleman who embraces his eccentricity and lives life fully. Hendrickson is very funny as the pompous Dr. Chumley, who is changed the most by his interactions with Elwood and his pooka.

When reading the always excellent Guthrie play notes, we learned that Harvey competed with Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie* for the Pulitzer in Drama that year. In trying to understand how a comedy about a man with an invisible rabbit friend might win out against a dramatic powerhouse, I realized the play offered WWII audiences a chance to root for a character who fought against conformity and confounded social expectations. More than that, Harvey allows the audience to experience the easy joy of character who loves life, accepts human frailty and gives generously of himself to strangers and family alike.