

Theater review: ‘Harvey’ hasn’t aged a bit, and it’s still a gem

By Dominic P. Papatola, April 18, 2016

There’s a single intermission, instead of two as the play was originally written. Director Libby Appel engages in some non-traditional casting. And the song played during the curtain call comes from the 21st century rather than the 1940s. Other than that, you could be forgiven for thinking that the Guthrie Theater’s production of “Harvey” emerged from a time capsule sealed up at the dawn of the Truman administration.

That’s not at all a bad thing. Mary Chase’s winsome and whimsical comedy about a good-natured Elwood P. Dowd, his 6-foot-tall imaginary rabbit friend and the consternation the relationship causes in Elwood’s family is a sturdy and well-crafted piece of work, one that requires burnishing more than embellishment.

And that’s just what the show gets: Scenic designer William Bloodgood’s naturalistic settings convey both the dark-wood, old-money security of Elwood’s home and the sterile-white threat presented by the sanitarium to which the family wants to commit Elwood. Scott W. Edwards’ soundscape asks us if we’d like to swing on a star and drift along with the tumbling tumbleweeds before easing us back into the present with Never Shout Never’s “Happy” as the company takes their bows.

The story itself unspools with an easy, anachronistic charm; a daftness that grows more and more ridiculous but never feels overblown. It’s the sort of script could be hijacked by any number of cast members looking to chew a little scenery, but Appel and her company cohere nicely, like a tight jazz ensemble in which everyone knows when to solo and when to fade back into the group.

That starts with David Kelly, who dons the role of Elwood like a well-worn suit; hardly flashy but supremely comfortable. His Elwood carries an unimposing, almost conspiratorial certitude that makes it difficult for any but the least humane to deny the existence of his long-eared friend. Kelly (like Appel, a veteran of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival) makes his Guthrie debut bearing an easy, winning grin and a presence that is palpable without being overpowering.

This sense of generosity provides room for local favorites Sally Wingert and [Steve Hendrickson](#) to make their marks. Wingert plays Veta, Elwood’s dotty sister who sees Elwood’s idiosyncrasies as a barrier to pairing off her eligible teen-aged daughter to a man of proper society.



David Kelly and Steve Hendrickson
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Wingert is at the stage in her career where she is getting more and more little-old-lady parts, but she seems to have a 64-pack of character colors with which to sketch and differentiate these roles.

Hendrickson, too, is cast in a role common for him — the stuffy, self-important Gentleman of a Certain Age. But the role of sanitarium chief Dr. Chumley has a few twists and turns. These allow Hendrickson to do an incandescent slow burn in the first half of the play and a fine comic mental unraveling after intermission.

The remaining roles are just as astutely drawn, be they by Tyson Forbes as a thuggishly loyal sanitarium orderly, or by Ansa Akyea, who manages to sketch an entire character in maybe a dozen lines as a cabbie who appears at the end of the show.

That kind of attention to detail and trust in some durable old material demonstrate that, in the correct hands, “Harvey” can feel as crisp as a freshly-picked bunch of carrots.