

An exceptional Jud V. Williford leads first-rate cast in taking ICT audiences *Around the World in 80 Days*

Vicki Paris Goodman

Culture Writer

I never saw the purportedly mad-cap movie *Around the World in 80 Days* that's based on the book by Jules Verne. It featured cameo appearances by practically every Hollywood star of its day. Instead, the play, adapted for the stage by Mark Brown, employs five local actors to deliver the 39 roles! These actors are so talented that the likes of Frank Sinatra and David Niven won't be missed.

The year is 1872, and English gentleman Phileas Fogg has accepted a high-stakes bet that he cannot circle the planet in the then barely possible span of 80 days. The wager of 20,000 English pounds amounts to most of his fortune. A mathematical man of remarkable logic and numerical precision, Fogg is confident of his prospects, even allowing for inclement weather, human error, and a variety of unforeseen events.

Of course, unanticipated calamities occur in spades to challenge Fogg's best laid plans. And these mishaps of varying magnitude provide the fodder for the suspense, laughter, and romance that ultimately make the play such a delight.

That said, the play could not succeed without a first-rate cast capable of the physical and spoken comedy necessary to pull it all off.

While the play incidentally presents something of a clinic in global time zones, the audience is treated to foreign accents that unexpectedly comprise some of the most comical bits.

In International City Theatre's current production, Michael Uribes is endearing as Fogg's courageous and fiercely loyal servant Passepartout. His antics provide some of the funniest moments of all.

Melinda Porto ably delivers several male characters before settling into her primary task portraying the lovely and charming Aouda, the Indian woman who Fogg and Passepartout rescue from a ceremonial pyre in which she is to be sacrificed.

As the British detective who follows Fogg believing he is a fugitive robber, Brian Stanton displays ineptitude and pratfalls that seem to know no bounds.

Mark Gagliardi's gruffness and exaggerated inanity make his portrayals some of the most colorful. I suppose I even smiled at the overdone British stereotyping of Americans as unrefined and clueless. So be it.

But none of it would entirely come together without Jud V. Williford, who is an exceptional Phileas Fogg. His ample stature, quiet confidence, and serenely charismatic presence bely his self-effacing refusal to

believe he could be entitled to the love of the woman he desires. Beyond that, Williford lends Fogg a patience, kindness, and decency seldom seen, even in times gone by. He is, therefore, a character worthy of literary history and remembrance. Pretty unusual for a character in a play that is clearly not a dramatic work.

Most important of all, Williford and Porto establish a yearning chemistry that could heat the room.

Without sacrificing the laughs, the undercurrent of desire that gradually builds between Fogg and Aouda adds an element that gives the play the meaning it needs and deserves.

Being opening night, one or two minor prop and wardrobe "malfunctions" occurred. This cast didn't miss a beat, ad-libbing character-appropriate dialogue to fit the occasion as if it were written into the script.

What I appreciated perhaps most of all was the easy pace of the action, where I had feared a tempo far more frantic.

One minor criticism: In the opening scene, Porto plays Fogg's dismissed prior servant. There is a noticeable disconnect between the initial implication that Fogg is rigid and uncompromising, and his subsequent and consistent depiction as a man of uncommon for-

giveness.

Allison Bibicoff directs this excellent production in which Staci Walters's very effective set amounts to little more than a backdrop representing a giant map of the world, with Fogg's route clearly marked. Backlights show the entourage's current location at any given time, and well camouflaged openable "windows" in the map allow for characters to peek through to deliver comic and explanatory lines of dialogue.

In the end, Fogg barely misses his timely return to London. Or does he? And what of the stalemate that exists between him and Aouda? You'd best see a performance of this entertaining and inspiring production to find out.

Around the World in 80 Days continues at International City Theatre through Feb. 17. Tickets are \$45 for Friday and Saturday evening performances and for Sunday matinees; \$38 for Thursday evening performances. Evening performances are at 8pm; Sunday matinees are at 2pm. ICT is located in the Long Beach Performing Arts Center at 300 East Ocean Blvd. Call (562) 436-4610 for reservations and information. Tickets are also available online at InternationalCityTheatre.com.



Photo by Suzanne Maps

From left, Jud V. Williford is an exceptional Phileas Fogg, and Michael Uribes endearing as his courageous and fiercely loyal servant Passepartout in ICT's production of *Around the World in 80 Days*.