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ICT'S ALTERNATE ROUTE "AROUND THE WORLD" IS A VERY SPECIAL TRIP

By Gregory Moore

Photography: Suzanne Mapes

Mark Brown's theatrical adaptation of Jules Verne's *Around the World in 80 Days* sounds suspiciously gimmicky, what with having only five actors playing nearly 40 roles. But a funny thing happens on the way to global circumnavigation: five actors—at least when it's the right five actors—are just enough to get us where we're going.

Phileas Fogg (Jud V. Williford) believes that the entirety of life is reducible to mathematics,

and therefore that all can be foreseen. So when his acquaintances at the Reform Club scoff at the *Daily Telegraph's* theoretical 80-day itinerary for traveling from London around the world and back to London, Fogg wagers 20,000 pounds on the matter and sets off immediately—much to the chagrin of his new servant, Passepartout (Michael Uribes), who had been delighted to land employment with Fogg precisely because of Fogg's well-deserved reputation for being the most predictable of persons. Predictably, adventure ensues.

But in the 21st century it's unlikely that anyone reads—let alone sees—Verne's 19th-century creation simply to find out whether Fogg succeeds; the pleasure is in getting there. Both Brown and the International City Theatre (ICT) understand this, playing each aspect of the journey for its weight in fun.

One of those aspects is the conceit of a few actors playing a lot of roles. This is nowhere more apparent than with Mark Gagliardi, who opens the play as something of a narrator and goes on to portray I don't know how many characters (lots!), each with such a forcefully distinct energy that he's in a full sweat midway through Act One. Uribes, Brian Stanton, and Melinda Porto are no less solid in their multiplicity of parts, although each has roles that ground them (for Stanton, it's the Clouseauesque Detective Fix; for Porto, Indian rescuee Aouda).

Williford is the only actor confined to a single role—that of Fogg, the most-important character—because Brown knows that putting him in other hats could create confusion that disrupts the play's center of gravity. Williford is perfect as that center, as punctilious in elocution as in manner, unflappable, unemotive. Thus is it all the more affecting when, at just the right moment, he falls into a moment of poetical rapture.

ICT's staging of *80 Days* is cleverly minimalistic, relying primarily on its sole piece of scenery: a rear façade that is part map of the world, part multipurpose concealer of doors, windows, and carts. ICT sets always look good, but I've never seen them employ one with such fun functionality.



Costumery is unusually important in Brown's *80 Days*, because with four actors playing numerous parts apiece, the use of clear, broad strokes to differentiate characters is vitally important to keep the audience's suspension of disbelief flowing. Kim DeShazo, whose stylish costume design I much appreciated in ICT's 2012 season-closer *Ain't Misbehavin'*, again hits the bull's-eye. The central characters get solid looks (Fogg's haberdashery is appropriately precise), while the minor characters range from surprisingly detailed (considering how fluid so many wardrobe changes must be) to employing the caricaturist skill of emphasizing two or three defining traits.

The actors' accents emanate from that same caricaturist touch. While Fogg and Fix put forth little in the way of accent and Aouda's Indian lilt is light, most every other character's is exaggerated, whether (s)he is Cockney, Singaporean, Liverpoolian, Texan, whatever. I'm half-afraid patrons with overactively politically-correct imaginations might misconstrue these accents as racist, when they are simply parallels of those aforementioned broad strokes of costumery.

Director Allison Bibicoff has done such great service to Brown's script that often one can only guess at whether a staging choice is actually in Brown's stage directions or is a Bibicoff's solution. Presumably the use of the rear façade is the latter, but it's a prime example of a choice so effective that it's hard to imagine the play without it. In fact, for this play it's impossible, because ICT's production clearly is a unique work.

For this, again the actors must be praised. The quintet's attitude toward the work reminds of childhood, of exactly how five grade-school friends, in their most refined and precocious imaginings, would have staged *80 Days* in a suburban backyard. They recite their lines and move about the stage with a clownishness that bounces just beneath the surface of the exactitude of their performance. A trio of opening-night gaffes were as funny as anything in the script, and we are very likely to see even more spontaneous amusements as the run progresses and the cast gathers the confidence that can make them willing to throw ever more caution to the wind.

In my experience, ICT's strengths have been musicals. When they've gone for comedic fun, I've generally found them a bit flat. Not here. *Around the World in 80 Days* is an effective adaptation cleverly staged, given a true frolicsomeness by an adventurous cast.

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