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## What a wonderful 'World'

**MSU Summer Circle offers a jewel of a Jules Verne adaptation with the delightful 'Around the World in 80 Days'**

by James Sanford



James Sanford/City Pulse

Friday, June 22 -- Director Michael Anderson's 1956 film of "Around the World in 80 Days" runs more than three hours and has a cast of hundreds (aside from leads David Niven, Shirley MacLaine, Robert Newton and Cantinflas, there are dozens of cameos from people like Frank Sinatra, Buster Keaton, Marlene Dietrich, John Gielgud, Charles Boyer, Cesar Romero and Noel Coward). Director Rob Roznowski's Michigan State University Summer Circle Theatre production of "Around the World in 80 Days" runs less than two hours and has a cast of five, plus a hard-working, top-hatted sound engineer. But if you suspect a scaled-down presentation means the Jules Verne classic gets short-changed, you'd better think twice: Roznowski and his team thoroughly rock this "World," making this fast-paced, high-energy adventure a complete delight.

Racing around the globe requires plenty of nimbleness and flexibility on the part of the quintet of actors. Aside from Wes Haskell as the debonair, unflappable and unstoppable Phileas Fogg, everyone is called upon to play multiple parts, sometimes in the same scene; believe me, you can't understand the concept of multitasking until you see Joshua Whitson portray a helpful clerk giving advice on where to find a boat captain and then rush across the stage -- while slipping effortlessly into a raincoat and a fresh accent -- to assume the role of the salty sailor he just mentioned. And watching the stunningly versatile Edward O'Ryan literally chase himself through rural India? That, ladies and gentlemen, is truly a sight to behold.

Mark Brown's brisk adaptation turns "World" into a sophisticated slapstick comedy that retains the novel's highlights and jettisons some of the memorable episodes from the Oscar-winning film, such as the hot-air balloon trip, the wacky bullfight and the sojourn in the San Francisco saloon. Londoner Fogg, who has made a 20,000 pound bet with his fellow Reform Club members that he can circle the world in 80 days, doesn't have much time to spare, and neither does Brown, who sends Fogg and his faithful servant Passépartout (Michael Ryan Cleland, a born clown) to Suez, India, Japan, the American West (since the story takes place in 1872, we're talking classic cowboys-and-Indians stuff here), New York and back to England.

Along the way, the men rescue an Indian widow, Aouda (Brittany Nicol), from incineration in her husband's funeral pyre. They must also outwit the determined Fix -- "That's Detective Fix!" he frequently reminds everyone -- who is certain Fogg financed his journey by stealing 55,000 pounds from a bank. The frequently flustered Fix provides a sensational showcase for O'Ryan's comic timing; it's amazing how many different spins he can put on a simple "What?!"

Haskell, Cleland, Nicol and O'Ryan play off of each other so splendidly it's as if they've been in a repertory company for years, and Whitson gives them top-notch assistance in a dizzying assortment of supporting roles (he's especially funny as the discombobulated Judge Obediah and as a loud-mouthed, dim-witted Westerner who fights off an Indian attack while hollering, "Take that, ya damn Apaches! Go back to your own country!"). Roznowski choreographs the various vignettes marvelously.

And although Jake Brozovich never says a word, he's always onstage, seated off to the side and conjuring up exceptionally sharp radio-play-style audio effects. There's much more than meets the eye in G. "Max" Maxin IV's seemingly simple set, which turns out to be as full of surprises as the performers. We all know about the elephant in the room, but Maxin puts a jaw-dropping twist on that old idea.

The wonderful "World" marks the last local appearances of Haskell and O'Ryan, two of MSU's most gifted and high-profile actors. Next month, O'Ryan departs for California and Haskell heads to New York. In the spirit of Phileas Fogg, let's send them off with a hearty "bon voyage."

*'Around the World in 80 Days'*

Michigan State University Summer Circle Theatre

8 p.m. Friday, June 22 and Saturday, June 23

Outdoor theater near the Auditorium Building

Free

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