

AROUND THE WORLD IN 80 DAYS

Adapted by Mark Brown

Based on the novel by Jules Verne

Virginia Stage Company

Wells Theatre Feb.23-Mar.14, 2010

For tickets call: (757) 627-1234

Hello, I'm Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large

A game of whist being played by four gentlemen at the Reform Club in London is interrupted as conversation leads to a wager. The mysterious, reserved and very wealthy Phileas Fogg risks his entire fortune in a bet that he can go around the world in eighty days. The time is 1872 and such a feat is in the realm of possibility thanks to the rapidly expanding technological events underway. Transcontinental railways have been built and the Suez Canal is a fait accompli.

With only a carpet bag, Phileas and his newly engaged manservant, who is a former circus performer named Passepartout, begin their journey the evening after the wager has been agreed upon. The club is abuzz with talk of their adventure and news of a huge bank robbery by an elegant gentleman.

Via steamer and railway the intrepid travelers reach Suez, cross India to Hong Kong, then sail to Yokohama and ultimately to San Francisco. They go by rail to New York where they board a ship to take them back to London. In Suez they meet the bumbling Detective Fix who is looking for the bank robber, and considers Phileas a definite person of interest. In India they rescue the beautiful Aouda from being burned in her husband's funeral pyre. They encounter obstacles galore. Is it possible to bring to life a journey around the world with only five actors playing over thirty roles? In this heavy handed presentation by Director Patrick Mullins it's bloody difficult to give an unqualified "yes".

Here's why. Mullins has his actors playing uninteresting cartoon characters in stead of believable people. Often actors, when called upon to go from one role to another rather quickly, resort to caricature. They do "funny" walks, grotesque posturing, weird gestures and phony speaking that seem more like tedious amateur acting than humorous depictions of people. Such is the case here. Nobody laughed very much at their antics in the matinee performance I saw. Nothing much seems to be happening because the actors are too busy trying to be amusing. There is no suspense, urgency or sense of discovery In strange lands.

Phileas the man is defined as "repose in action" by Jules Verne. His servant says "he has seen wax people in Madame Tussaud's as lively as his master." Those are hard traits to act if taken too literally. Michael Sharon, arguably too restrained, does slowly open up a little and brings a likeable kindness and warmth to the man. Scott Drummond succeeds on every level as Passepartout. Maureen Sebastian is a lovely delicate doll as Aouda. In her other roles she reveals a profound need for speech lessons. Kenneth Boys is entertaining in an unobtrusive way as Detective Fix and his protean efforts work well enough. Matthew Schmidt has hits and misses with his.

Dick Block's set has a whimsy that I wish cast had. Jeni Schaefer's costumes have an appropriate richness about them. Lighting by A. Nelson Ruger IV is fluid and does a lot to define place and atmosphere. Zach William's sound does likewise.

This is Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large and I'll see you at the next opening.