

## THEATER REVIEW | HARVEY

# Revival filled with sweet, gentle laughs

By Michael Grossberg

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

*Harvey*, Mary Chase's 1945 Pulitzer Prize-winning comedy about a nice man and his unusual best friend, hasn't received a major area production in almost two decades. Along comes Otterbein Summer Theatre to lavish the old chestnut of American theater with loving care and a lighthearted touch.

Otterbein's well-staged production of the three-act play, which opened Thursday in the Campus Center Theatre, offers a leisurely trip down memory lane, especially for senior citizens who still have fond memories of *Harvey* from the 1950 Jimmy Stewart film or Otterbein's summer revivals in 1970, 1979 and 1988.

► Otterbein Summer Theatre will present *Harvey* at 8 tonight and 2 p.m. Sunday — and through July 8 — in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville. Tickets cost \$20. Call 614-823-1109.

Director Christina Kirk knits the 12-member student cast into a well-tailored cardigan sweater that clothes the audience in warm and gentle humor.

But it's an open question whether younger theatergoers will relate as easily to the fantasy elements of a play that seems primitive in a post-Spielberg era, during which far more elaborate effects bring fantasies to life on film, television and the stage.

Chase's play foreshadowed

and might easily have joined *Mr. Ed*, *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie* as 1960s TV hits. Like those sitcoms, *Harvey* employs fantasy as a comic metaphor to illustrate and celebrate eccentric American individualism and the unconventional pursuit of happiness.

The theme is embodied in the sweetness and unfailing politeness of Elwood P. Dowd, who views Harvey as his best friend, although few others see the giant invisible rabbit.

Zach Kleinsmith is no Jimmy Stewart (who is?), but he captures Elwood's decency, positive energy and simple good cheer.

Through Kleinsmith's eyes and gestures and a bare minimum of effects (most notably, a door that opens and closes on its own), Harvey comes to life.

Also strong is the supporting cast, led by Meg Ward as Elwood's flustered sister, Sara Alvarez as her frustrated daughter and Luke Dixon as a sanitarium doctor whose initial skepticism fades with a fateful bar encounter.

As the sanitarium nurse, Lindsey Powell develops amusing romantic chemistry with most of the men around her, starting with Drew Aber's overconfident but errant doctor.

Elizabeth Daniels adds interesting subtext to Betty Chumley, a doctor's too-deferential wife.

The mid-20th-century setting is handsomely reinforced by Corinne Porter's versatile scenic design and Marcia Hain's mostly dowdy (or Dowdy) costumes.

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# Otterbein invites audiences to meet 'Harvey'

By DENNIS THOMPSON

*Suburban News Theater Critic*

Otterbein Summer Theatre breaks out an American classic with *Harvey*, Mary Chase's delightful 1944 comedy that tells the story of Elwood P. Dowd and his friend Harvey, the invisible white rabbit.

When I was in high school, *Harvey* was our senior class play. A friend of mine played Dowd, and for years the portrait of Harvey and him hung in his parents' house.

The play seemed dated then, and that was more than 30 years ago.

If you're too picky, and I must be since I'm mentioning it, there are antiquated aspects of the play.

We balk at the psychiatric conclusions and methods. We cringe at the old notions of the way men and women think of each other and interact.

And we note with a touch of sadness that Dowd's amiable affinity for everyone might likely be viewed as sexual harassment today.

What is timeless, and why this story is still charming, is the affable character of Dowd, the clever way that Chase makes him seem to be the only non-crazy person as

the world flutters around him.

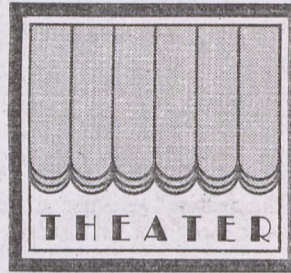
If anything, age has brought a more wistful feel to the whole scenario. We would love to just forget everything else and go with a couple of friends down to Charlie's.

Zach Kleinsmith is such a likable, disarming actor that he seems a natural for the part of Dowd. I imagine one reason this play was chosen for the summer season is that he was still around to play the lead in it.

He doesn't disappoint. His Dowd is charming, likable, casual, the eye of the storm around him. He is a delight to watch.

Meg Ward is also strong as Dowd's sister, Veta Louise. She balances the frenetic woman who is mindful of her place in society with the caring sister. As such, she has some wonderful comic and heartfelt moments.

Luke Dixon is a solid



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presence as Dr. Chumley. Strong also are David Bahgat as the exasperated Judge Gaffney and Lindsey Powell as the warm Nurse Kelly.

Chris Carter plays the orderly, Wilson, as an animated cartoon, lumbering around more broadly than any other character.

More bothersome is Sara Alvarez' Myrtle Mae, Dowd's niece. It's a question of interpretation, but Alvarez does not play Myr-

tle as someone who loves her uncle, choosing instead to play her as someone who is embarrassed by him. She is hateful, braying and mean, a thoroughly unpleasant character.

There are specifics in regard to Christina Kirk's direction with which I have problems.

There is a mixture of acting styles, sometimes within the same character in different scenes, sometimes with different characters in the same scene. At times there is an odd mixture of cartoon and realism. The timing seems off at other times; and at nearly three hours, it has moments that seem sluggish.

But overall, this is a warm, engaging, enjoyable and well-played comedy.

*Otterbein Summer Theatre's Harvey continues at 7:30 p.m. Thursday and 8 p.m. Friday, Saturday and July 6-8 at the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville. Tickets are \$20. For more information call 614-823-1109.*



## Enjoyable, even with its flaws

Along with the invisible rabbit, you sometimes suspect Otterbein's production of **Harvey** has an invisible director.

How else can you explain the ape-like movements Chris Carter effects as Wilson, the sanitarium attendant, or the strange voice David Bahgat spits out as Judge Omar Gaffney? Neither is the least bit believable or appropriate for Mary Chase's gentle 1944 comedy.

Director Christina Kirk also lets several actors work a bit too hard to establish comic personas, though most eventually settle more comfortably into the familiar tale.

Thankfully, the piece is saved by Zach Kleinsmith's assured portrayal of Elwood P. Dowd, the man whose best friend is a rabbit visible only to him. Kleinsmith's Elwood is so easygoing and unflappable that viewers can't help rooting for him.

Not that you don't feel for the people who share his home, sister Veta (Meg Ward) and her daughter, Myrtle Mae (Sara Alvarez). Both are frustrated that Elwood's imaginary friend makes it impossible to invite anyone over to the house. It would be only a matter of time before he tried to introduce the visitors to Harvey.

Veta's solution is to have Elwood committed to a sanitarium on the outskirts of town. This backfires when the young and inexperienced Dr. Sanderson misunderstands the situation.

Drew Aber, as Sanderson, and Lindsey Powell, as nurse Ruth Kelly, struggle to define their difficult relationship, a mixture of dislike and sexual attraction, but it eventually comes across.

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**RICHARD ADES**



A bit more successful is Luke Dixon as Dr. Chumley, the pompous head of the sanitarium. Better yet is Elizabeth Daniels as Mrs. Chumley, his easily flattered wife. Her scene with Elwood is a treasure.

Corinne Porter's set designs, particularly of Elwood and Veta's home, are attractive in a 1940s kind of way.

Though this isn't a perfect production, Kleinsmith's performance and Chase's witty depiction of harmless eccentricity make it an enjoyable one.

### INFO:

Actors' Theatre will present *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)* through July 9 at the amphitheater in Schiller Park, 1069 Jaeger St. in German Village. Showtimes are 8 p.m. Thursdays-Sundays. Running time: 1 hour, 40 minutes (including intermission). Free. Bring a blanket or lawn chair.

### INFO:

Otterbein Summer Theatre will present *Harvey* through July 8 in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St. in Westerville. Showtimes are 7:30 tonight and 8 p.m. Friday, Saturday and next Thursday through July 8. Running time: 2 hours, 45 minutes (including two intermissions). Tickets are \$20. 823-1109.



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Theatre

STAGE NOTES

# 389 Invisible rabbit returns to Otterbein stage

Otterbein Summer Theatre will launch its 40th-anniversary season with an old favorite: *Harvey*.

Mary Chase's gentle comedy, opening tonight on the Westerville campus, revolves around Elwood P. Dowd and Harvey, a large invisible rabbit and Elwood's best friend.

"What's magical about the play and Elwood is how he transforms everyone he's around without trying to," director Christina Kirk said.

"Elwood just takes everyone at face value, and he accepts people as they are."

Otterbein previously staged the old-fashioned three-act comedy in the summers of 1970, 1979 and 1988 — making it the most popular summer-theater play.

The 1945 Pulitzer Prize winner has endured, Kirk said, because it says something important about the American spirit.

"I'd like to believe that Elwood has achieved the American dream that we're looking for. The rest of the world is on hyperdrive and striving and not really sure what they're striving for, but Elwood is one of the few people who can relax, kick back and have a drink with Harvey."

"Otterbein audiences always have been delighted by *Harvey*. But this is a good time to bring it back because America is as uptight as ever."



MICHAEL  
GROSSBERG



CHRIS RUSSELL | DISPATCH

Veta (Meg Ward) and Elwood (Zach Kleinsmith) in *Harvey*

Zach Kleinsmith, a recent Otterbein College graduate, plays Elwood.

"Elwood is very graceful, charming, polite and proper," Kleinsmith said. "Everyone in the play is trying to get to that place where Elwood is."

"*Harvey* is a play about a philosophy of life and grace, of reacting in the moment to whatever comes your way."

Kirk praised the actor for the "lightness and grace" of his approach to the role.

Kleinsmith, 22, plays Elwood at 47. Even more challenging than adjusting his body posture and movements to reflect how an older man might behave, though, is playing opposite an invisible friend, he said.

During rehearsals, some taller crew members and the assistant director helped by standing next to Kleinsmith where Harvey would be.

"It gave me an idea of what it would be like to have a presence there, so I could figure out how to act around an invisible being. . . . Harvey and Elwood are the closest of friends and tell each other everything. It's like having your best friend with you wherever you go."

Is Elwood deranged?

"I don't think he is crazy," Kirk said. "I just think he's oh-so-smart and has chosen to be oh-so-pleasant."

"Elwood has made a choice to be happy. He's decided that the world can be about interacting with people and doesn't have to be about all this striving. We could all do more of that."

"We all want to believe that we can spend a few moments just being delighted."

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## All about Shakespeare

In honor of its 25th season, Actors' Theatre will do all of Shakespeare's plays.

But the plays will be parodied; condensed and in some cases butchered in *The Complete Works of Shakespeare (Abridged)*, opening tonight in Schiller Park.

"This is a marvelous entree to the works of Shakespeare, and that's why we wanted to include it as part of our 25th season," director John S. Kuhn said.

"There will be enough Shakespearean text to keep our regular theatergoers from being disappointed, but there's enough comedy that everyone will have a good time, whatever their previous experience of Shakespeare."

Alex Beekman, Ian Short and Chris Kuhn (the director's son) will play all the quick-changing roles in the Reduced Shakespeare Company's two-act condensation.

"We've got three very funny guys in the cast," John Kuhn said.

Short and Beekman previously appeared with Actors' in *Shakespeare on Love*, a romantic anthology, and Short acted in *Much Ado About Love*.

Kuhn, 18, has "great comic timing," his father said, but the actor still had to go through the audition process.

The show will be presented at 8 to 10 p.m. through Sunday night, and through July 9, in the Schiller Park amphitheater in German Village.

Admission is free, but donations are sought. For more information, call 614-444-6888.

Michael Grossberg is Dispatch theater critic.

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