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'Harvey'

By Sophie Braccini



Believing is seeing. From left: Veta Louise Simmons (Laurie Strawn), Elwood Dowd (Steve Rhyne) and Dr. Chumley (John Blytt) as they meet a surprising friend in "Harvey." Photo Stu Selland

Elwood institutionalized. But of course nothing will go according to plan, goodness will triumph, and Elwood and Harvey will be set free.

Town Hall actors under Hovey's direction fit their characters like hand in glove. Steve Rhyne who plays Elwood has an authentic sweetness and caring shown in his demeanor, his face, even the angle of his eyebrows and his gaze that says, "I am here, I am present, I am opened to you and I really see you." Elwood always has a wonderful time, wherever he is, whomever he is with. "Playing Elwood has started rubbing off into my everyday life," says Rhyne with a smile. "When Elwood asks someone, 'How are you?' he really means it, and I find myself having this kind of attitude at work with people."

The biggest challenge for director Hovey was the over 6 foot tall - and invisible - Harvey. "We have added just a little touch of magic to the performance, but no one will really 'see' Harvey," says Hovey, who looks like the sweet and joyous spirit of the play got to her as well. To make Harvey real for the actors, Hovey impersonated the rabbit at the beginning of rehearsals. "We studied his placement, his interaction, I said the words only Elwood hears, so the actors could really play around him in a credible way."

"By the time we were in the sixth week of rehearsal I started to really 'see' Harvey," confirms Rhyne. "I see his bulk, where his eyes are when he stands and when he is sitting. I see his ears, and even if he is said to be white, I see some grey on this belly." And it works really well on stage. The presence of the pooka, a creature from Celtic mythology, is almost palpable and as other characters in the play start seeing him, audience members expect to do so themselves.

According to Hovey the message of the play is summarized by what Elwood says: "My mother told me that in this world, you must be oh so smart, or oh so pleasant. Well, for years I was smart. I recommend pleasant." Another great moment is when Elwood talks to a psychiatrist about coming to grips with reality: "Well, I've wrestled with reality for 35 years, doctor, and I'm happy to state I

Town Hall Theatre Company's choice of Mary Chase's "Harvey" for this holiday season is as sweet and family-oriented a production as one could want.

A huge Broadway hit, "Harvey" won the Pulitzer Prize in Drama in 1945 and starred James Stewart as Elwood P. Dowd in the famous 1950 comedy of the same name. The Town Hall Theatre's charming version directed by Susan Hovey will take audiences who are familiar with the story right back to their youth, and it is a great way for parents to share a dose of genuine goodness with their children. The show opens on Dec. 5.

Elwood P. Dowd is a harmless, sweet good-natured man in his early 40s with one caveat: his best friend is a 6-foot-tall Pooka, resembling a giant white rabbit that only Dowd can see. This peculiarity normally would not be a problem, but his sister, Veta Louise Simmons (Laurie Strawn), and niece who are living with him are social climbers, and are constantly embarrassed as Elwood introduces Harvey to their select guests. Feeling that her brother's delusion will condemn them to social isolation, Veta Louise decides to get

finally won out over it."

The play talks about the power of imagination and how genuine gentleness can transform lives. The performance is a perfect holiday treat, as sweet and comforting as a cup of rich hot cocoa with as many marshmallows as you can imagine.

"Harvey" runs Dec. 5-19, with previews on Dec. 3 and 4, at Town Hall Theatre, 3535 School Street in Lafayette. Theatre Club nights on Dec. 11 and 18 will feature free wine and a talkback session with the director and cast immediately following the performance. For tickets call (925) 283-1557 or visit www.TownHallTheatre.com.

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