

'Harvey'

A holiday dose of pure goodness at Town Hall Theatre

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

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 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 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.

Have you ever thought... "I'm Not Ready Yet!"

By Linda Fodrini-Johnson, MA, MFT, CMC

What is it that makes us fiercely independent individuals say we are not ready for something? Remember when we were young and playing with friends or on the playground we heard the saying, "Get ready, get set, go?"

Once we pass age 65 or 70, we may find that managing life requires more dependence than we want to admit; our mindset is "not ready" for that. Being ready does not necessarily mean "go" – it means getting your ducks in a row. It is the "get set" part of the equation – not necessarily the need to take immediate action, but to make plans for those "what ifs."

In reality, we can't be ready for everything or all of life's challenges; if we did, our sense of adventure and exploration might be stifled. However, there are some individuals, me included, who procrastinate about

signing up for services, or finalizing legal documents or even contemplating moving because we are "not ready yet!"

I have heard over the years many adult children of aging parents say that their elderly parents (in their 80s or 90s) are not "ready" for a caregiver or even moving to a supportive senior housing community, yet the parent is calling more often with vague needs for family support or help in understanding an important document. When these calls happen more frequently, it is usually a sign that it is time to "get set" – maybe not "go" – and to start to put together a plan for eventual support, ever so gradually.

In Lamorinda, we have a wonderful grassroots program called the "Lamorinda Village" which is an inexpensive way to get support when you need just a little bit of help. The Lamorinda Village offers a way to stay engaged, which is extremely important to one's quality of life and health status and allows a place to engage in volunteerism that also extends life and has shown to reduce pain.

While the monthly fees are very affordable, many people say they are "not ready yet." My answer is this: All of us over the age of 65 should participate in the Lamorinda Village. Together, we need to build the community we want in the future. It is a small monthly expense for the "peace of mind" we each need for that time of "need." This is especially true for all of us who want to age our way, and in our own homes.

For more information go to www.LamorindaVillage.org. There are Villages all over the country, so if you have family in other areas, go to www.vtvnetwork.org and search for the location nearest them.

Being "ready" is a progressive process. We usually move between

being open to change to just a little further into willingness, when we see the possibilities of what could happen. Being prepared can free us from some anxiety or worry.

Remember we are odd mortal creatures and usually resist when others make decisions for us, even when they are good decisions and in our best interest. Making changes can be scary, but preparing for change can be a way to stay in control and have life our way.

If you want to make a suggestion for someone else, be sure to use "I messages" – saying what you are concerned about, not what they should do. Let the other respond, validate their feelings and ask if they would like some options to think about.

Preparedness is a virtue – build a support system to have life as you wish. Get ready, get set – and go.



Linda Fodrini-Johnson is the Founder of Eldercare Services, a Licensed Marriage, Family and Child Counselor, and a Certified Care Manager. Eldercare Services, a full-service care management and home care company accredited by the Joint Commission serving the Bay Area since 1989. For information, call (925) 937-2018 or visit www.EldercareAnswers.com.

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