

# Entertaining escape from reality, with the help of a giant invisible rabbit

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By Jane Horwitz November 18, 2015

Elwood P. Dowd, the benevolent tippler in “Harvey,” has to light up the stage for the play to work. Other aspects of a production can falter, but Elwood must hit a bull’s-eye, or this dated farce will creak like the Tin Man in need of oil.

Luckily for 1st Stage, actor Jonathan Lee Taylor’s aim is true. His lovely Elwood makes the production — uneven as it is, with performances ranging from amateurish to professional — a qualified success.

Mary Chase’s play won the 1945 Pulitzer Prize for drama, beating out Tennessee Williams’s “The Glass Menagerie,” believe it or not. Say what you will, both plays have endured in the American canon: “Harvey” had a Broadway revival starring Jim Parsons of TV’s “The Big Bang Theory” in 2012. Cherry Jones starred in a 2013 revival of “Menagerie.”

Here is a refresher for “Harvey” newbies: The play is set just after World War II in the comfy home of Elwood, his sister Veta Louise Simmons (Tonya Beckman) and her grown-up daughter Myrtle Mae (Kelsey Meiklejohn). Veta and Myrtle Mae have a problem in Elwood, one that prevents them from safely inviting the local gentry over for tea and awful musicales.

Elwood doesn’t have to work, so he meets up day and night with an ever-widening circle of friends to drink at bars and fire stations around town. More to the point, as regards Veta and Myrtle Mae, he is never without his best pal, Harvey, an invisible 6-foot rabbit. Elwood often holds the door for Harvey and introduces him to all.

Harvey, we’re told later, is a “pooka” — a mischievous animal spirit from Irish folklore, but real to Elwood and perhaps more real than that, as Chase’s script waggishly implies. In any case, Harvey is the reason that Veta has decided she must have her brother committed to Chumley’s Rest, a sanitarium for the bemused.

When Veta brings Elwood there, Dr. Chumley’s second-in-command, Dr. Sanderson (Tim Torre), is so busy flirting with and insulting Nurse Kelly (Carolyn Kashner) — “beautiful and dumb, too” — that he checks poor Veta in as the patient and lets Elwood wander off. We hear, but thankfully do not witness, how a creep of an orderly, Wilson (Robert Grimm), manhandles Veta. In Act 2, the pompous Dr. Chumley (Elliott Bales), hoping to avoid a lawsuit, goes in search of Elwood, while Veta

returns home a wreck, demanding justice.

Taylor does a fine job of gauging just how drunk Elwood should be, scene by scene. He is well supported by Beckman's anxious and rather glamorous Veta, Bales's easily flustered Dr. Chumley, Sue Schaffel's dithery Mrs. Chumley and William Aitken's cab driver, giving a lovely speech about the way Chumley's Rest takes oddballs and deadens them into normality. The show, directed by Michael Chamberlin, falters at times because the full cast doesn't exhibit equal polish.

Scenic designer Kay Hughes has decorated the pre-show set, an odd phalanx of tall, pseudo-red-brick flats, with cool World War II-era posters. When the stage's turntable shifts to reveal Elwood's parlor, it proves to be a drab affair. Chumley's Rest, by contrast, has a blindingly white palette, including the French Provincial desks and chairs. Both sets look a little flimsy.

The costumes by Kara Waala, especially the women's dresses and accessories, are first rate, and sound designer Edward Moser sets the pre-show tone with such hit oldies as "A-Tisket, A-Tasket" and "Don't Fence Me In."

The good news is that director Chamberlin, and especially Taylor as Elwood, mine the timeless sweetness that has kept "Harvey" alive, and they don't let it cloy.

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You can't help but love a man who tells a psychiatrist, "Doctor, I wrestled with reality for 40 years, and I am happy to state that I finally won out over it."

*Horwitz is a freelance writer.*

**Harvey** By Mary Chase. Directed by Michael Chamberlin. Lighting design, Brittany Shemuga. With DeJeanette Horne and Emily Morrison. About 2 hours, 20 minutes, including an intermission. Through Dec. 20 at 1st Stage, 1524 Spring Hill Rd., Tysons Corner, Va. 22102. \$30, with discounts for seniors, students, military. Call 703-854-1856 or visit [www.1ststagetysons.org](http://www.1ststagetysons.org).