

Cape Fear Regional Theatre's new play, 'Around the World in 80 Days,' covers a lot of ground

Rodger Mullen Staff writer Oct 31, 2012

Cape Fear Regional Theatre's new play covers a lot of ground - the entire Earth, to be precise.

Fortunately, it does so in such a sprightly, good-humored manner that the trip never gets tedious.

For the second show of CFRT's 2012-13 season, the theater is presenting "Around the World in 80 Days," a comedy based on the Jules Verne novel that is directed by Nicolas Minas. Performances continue through Nov. 11.

The play, set in 1872, centers on Phileas Fogg (Ken Griggs), a proper Englishman who bets his fortune he can circle the globe in just 80 days.

Fogg has just read a newspaper article that speculates that such a trip might be possible, given the advent of trains and steamboats. He places the bet with fellow members of the oh-so-stuffy Reform Club.

Accompanied by his French assistant/valet Passepartout (J. Preddie Predmore), Fogg begins the journey, confident of success. But unforeseen obstacles await him.

In India, the travelers encounter a young woman, Aouda (Wallis Quaintance) about to be burned alive on a funeral pyre with her dead husband. They rescue Aouda, and she joins them on their journey.

Fogg also is being pursued by a Scotland Yard detective named Fix (Torsten Hillhouse), who is mistakenly convinced that Fogg is a fugitive bank robber. Hillhouse also takes on other roles in the play.

Rounding out the cast of five is Tom Littman. Littman plays no fewer than 18 characters, including the narrator.

At Sunday's matinee performance, the pace was set from the outset - fast and furious. That pace didn't lag the entire length of the play, despite a couple of dialogue slip-ups from which the cast quickly recovered.

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The laughs came nonstop, many of them derived from Griggs' spot-on portrayal of the fastidious Fogg, described by another character as "exactitude personified." He has the trip planned practically down to the minute.

Much of the comedic heavy lifting was done by Predmore, who excelled as Fogg's harried but wily assistant. Other than Littman's multicharacter sprint, Predmore's role was probably the most physically demanding.

Quaintance performed well as the beautiful Indian woman who manages to soften Fogg's sharp edges, as did Hillhouse as the initially suspicious police detective who gradually comes around to Fogg's side.

But Littman, who was in constant motion throughout the play, may have been the standout, despite the fact that some of his characters were on stage for just seconds at a time.

The scenery in "Around the World in 80 Days," designed by Kimberly Powers, deserves recognition. It's dominated by a huge, old-fashioned map of the world containing panels that slide open to reveal different characters or scenes. The design cleverly creates the impression of a trip around the world accomplished on a theater stage.

"Around the World in 80 Days" is as light-hearted as "Jesus Christ Superstar," the first play of the season, was serious. It's definitely a trip worth taking.