



Submitted September 9, 2010

Proposé le 9 septembre 2010

Published January 13, 2011

Publié le 13 janvier 2011

Around the World in 80 Days — Adaptation by Mark Brown

Roger Leyonmark

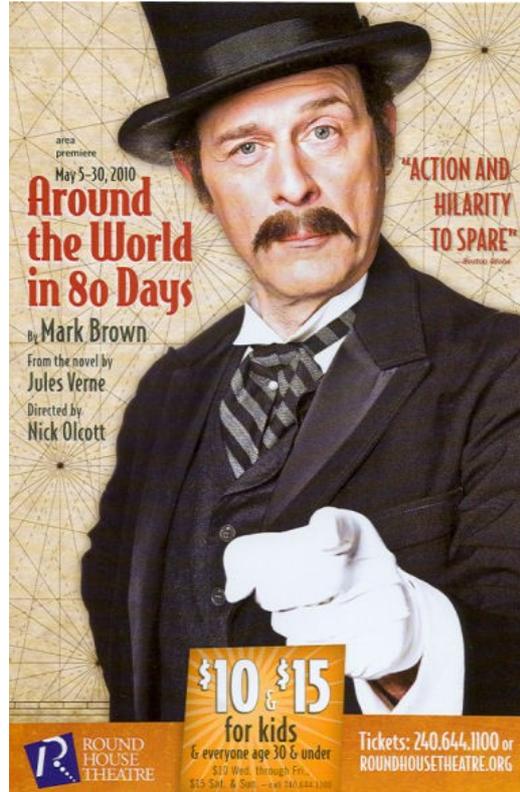
Mark Brown. *Around the World in 80 Days.* Comedy/Adventure adapted from the novel by Jules Verne. Woodstock, Illinois, Dramatic Publishing. 2007.

For those attending the 2010 North American Jules Verne Society's meeting in Columbia, Maryland, the highlight of the weekend was a stage performance of *Around the World in 80 Days*. This production, written by playwright Mark Brown in 2001, was presented at the Roundhouse Theatre in Bethesda, Maryland as part of its 2009/2010 season. Though little more than a few years old, Brown's script has already been presented in numerous venues across the country, since its premiere at the Utah Shakespearean Festival. In fact, it has been seen, literally, around the world in South Africa, England, Canada, as well as the United States.

This may be the first time that the same Jules Verne play has ever been viewed in so many cities, and practically all within a few short years of each other. But there is no traveling road company, carting along its own cast, sets, and costumes across America. Armed only with Mark Brown's hilarious adaptation, stage companies from Laguna Beach to Indianapolis to Cape Cod to Atlanta have mined theatrical gold in Jules Verne's 1872 story. Or perhaps fool's gold, given the farcical Monty Pythonesque comic approach with which Brown re-interprets the adventures of Phileas Fogg.

Few of the NAJVS members other than Brian Taves, who had reviewed a 2008 performance in New York by the Irish Repertory Theatre, [1] had any idea of what was in store before the opening act of the afternoon performance. Having been asked to write this review, I innocently settled into my seat at the Roundhouse, pen and notebook dutifully in hand as all reviewers surely must do. Within seconds of curtain up, though, the play's frenetic pacing and absurd comedic style relegated my reporter's props to the floor beneath the seat.

What the audience immediately notices upon entering the theater is an intriguing yet minimalist set from designer Mischa Kachman (graduate of the State Academy of Theatrical Arts in St. Petersburg, Russia). A huge wheel dominates the stage, like some nineteenth century industrial artifact: a monstrous steam engine flywheel, perhaps, or one of the side paddles stripped from the Great Eastern. A curved staircase, ship's rail, mast, rounded deckhouse lined with portholes and cluttered with gears of all sizes, and a gigantic pointer affixed to the wheel's axle, fill out the rest of the set. Oh, and one mustn't forget a portrait of the monarch for whom the century was named, Queen Victoria, set into a gilded frame high above everything else on stage.



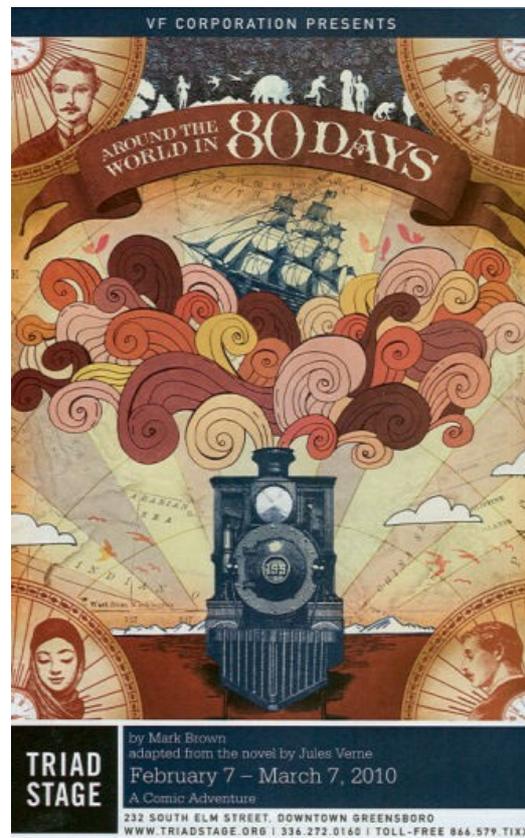
Poster of the play in Bethesda, Maryland

That pointer is like the hand of an enormous Big Ben permanently poised at 2:30, hastening our intrepid travelers ever onward against their common enemy, time. One more droll detail: as noted by Nelson Pressley, [2] the stage floor is a revolving belt, suggesting nothing quite so much as an airport baggage carousel. An anachronism, yes, but a clever visual gag for our globe trotters.

What you will not see is a balloon. Writer Mark Brown goes to great lengths in every interview [3] to dispel that myth. A lighter-than-air jaunt across Europe was the invention of Michael Todd, producer of the famous 1956 film adaptation starring David Niven and Cantinflas. A fiction of a fiction that seems to have assumed a life of its own over the last half century. While it hardly seems necessary to mention this in the cyber pages of *Verniana*, there just may be an occasional Verne aficionado to whom this is news.

Undoubtedly one of the reasons for the proliferation of this play is the astounding economy of cast. Is it possible that such a global adventure epic, replete with 39 characters, could be reduced to a mere cast of 5? Well, Brown thought so: in fact, he set that parameter right from the start. His experience as an actor apparently provided him the expertise and confidence to know just how many demands he could make upon such a small troupe.

And these actors have to be nimble as well as gifted with comic timing, for personality and costume changes come with riotous, breath-taking rapidity. Hats, beards, moustaches, waistcoats and turbans, genders and accents blithely ricochet around the stage as each character does his turn, then tears off to assume another role, sometimes only for a matter of seconds.



Poster of the play in Greensboro, North Carolina

Clearly the author intended the action to be a kind of vaudeville afflicted with attention deficit disorder. The frantic pacing is apparently as much fun for those on stage as for those rocking in their seats in the audience. In that sense, the fourth wall of theater is demolished to everyone's anarchic delight.

As noted with the economy of cast, there is a matching restraint in the use of props, settings, and special effects. The audience, of necessity, must exercise its own imagination while following the globe-girdlers. That it appears to do so enthusiastically is a tribute to the individual and collective talents of the cast and production staff (honorable mention must be given to the lighting effects designed by Colin Bills).

Does the script call for gale force winds to imperil Princess Aouda aboard the *Tankadère*? Then she is deftly hoisted sideways by her cohorts until she resembles Mary Poppins in a whirlwind. What about an elephant to complete that journey across the Indian subcontinent? No problem. The actors bounce and jostle on a seat atop the enormous wheel. In the same manner, our travelers are particularly adept at mimicking the jolts and bumps of the Union Pacific passenger car, in reality just a few chairs set back to back. If it must snow, a handful of the white stuff tossed into the air suffices. The ticking of a clock to represent the agonizing hours spent awaiting Fogg's return with Passepartout from the Sioux? Surely a recorded sound effect would do, but no... Inspector Fix produces a block and stick from his coat: Tock! Tock! Tock!

Holding it all precariously together is the starchy fabric of Victorian British propriety, which even in 1872 Verne surely intended as parody. The epidemic silliness of the proceedings easily could have degenerated into a tiresome, undisciplined mess. Director Nick Olcott's great achievement, I think, is to maintain some sense of equilibrium between those opposing forces of decorum and anarchy.

But there had to be a great storyline to support so much farce. Without that, the play's two and one-half hour running time would soon become insufferable. This Verne tale, probably his most popular work in the English-speaking world, exactly suits the task. Despite all the pratfalls, sight gags, and nudge-nudge wink-winks, playwright Brown has distilled a compelling drama, and his five actors flesh out their multiple roles so engagingly that the audience truly cares what fate awaits the protagonists. That's quite an accomplishment to those of us who know the story practically by heart.

The elegant Mitchell Hébert plays gentleman Phileas Fogg, the very caricature of British aplomb and reserve. Mr. Hébert even resembles the original French illustrations of Fogg by artist Alphonse-Marie Adolphe de Neuville. This is a man of cold exactitude, his daily routine fixed and never varying. Though the most robotic of men, fate will soon step in to alter Phileas Fogg's cloistered life, and unlock his frigid heart. Fogg's ludicrous decorum will eventually crack apart (but never crumble) to reveal a man of great daring and compassion.

As the play opens, Frenchman Jean Passepartout is surrounded by former manservants of Fogg, each complaining of being sacked for the most trivial of offenses. This jack of all trades is interpreted with wonderful Gallic effusiveness by Sasha Olnick (sporting a deliciously ersatz French accent that might have rained insults, or even cows, down from the ramparts upon Eric Idle's Arthurian knight). Passepartout happily anticipates the quiet, peaceful life he has just assumed as valet to his yet unseen master. The unfortunate man cannot know, of course, that at that very moment Phileas Fogg is engaged in a fateful conversation with fellow members of London's Reform Club.

Over a game of whist, these important men (introduced to the audience as a clump of puffed-up, huffing Colonel Blimps) debate the feasibility of circumnavigating the globe in 80 days. The ever confident Fogg asserts it to be eminently possible. To back up his words, he wagers half his fortune (20,000 pounds sterling) that he can indeed complete the tour in the allotted time.

Thus the stage is set for Jean Passepartout's great disillusionment when he meets his master for the first time that evening. And the stage is now set for their grand adventure. No time is wasted with our plucky travelers as they set out from London's Charing Cross station at eight forty-five p.m., Wednesday, October second. As his fellow club members wish him Godspeed, Phileas Fogg reminds them that they may expect him in the drawing room of the Reform Club on Saturday, the twenty-first of December at precisely a quarter before nine p.m.

Throughout their journeys, a billboard hanging over the set informs us of each new destination, and the actors take turns popping out from the wings with placards, announcing in stentorian tones the exact passage of time between each point on the itinerary.

There is a secondary plot line as we all know, the pursuit of Fogg by Scotland Yard's detective Fix. The Bank of England has been robbed of fifty-five thousand pounds sterling, just days prior to Fogg's wager. Unfortunately for him, eyewitnesses describe the bandit as a gentleman, exactly matching our intrepid voyager. Inspector Fix, the archetypal stolid

(and none too bright) police detective of nineteenth century fiction, has but one obsession, his *idée fixe*, as reviewer Taves puts it. [4] That is, he will track our hero around the world if necessary, until he nabs his man. As delectably portrayed by Ethan Bowen, Fix is all foolish and dim-witted bluster. He somehow maintains, against all evidence to the contrary, a sort of Dudley Do-Right bravado and confidence in himself. The poor fellow (think John Cleese meets Inspector Lestrade meets Peter Sellers) manages to shoot himself in the foot at every turn, quite literally in the scene aboard a Union Pacific train as our party battles the Sioux. Bowen's portrayal of the inept, insecure detective is convulsively silly. And his double-take reactions help tear down that theatrical fourth wall, such as when he self-righteously interrupts the flow of action to quibble about the narrator's none-too-complimentary commentary.

Tuyet Thi Pham, in the role of the Indian Princess Aouda, is as charming and regal a Victorian lady as Jules Verne might have wished. Grateful she is to Fogg for saving her from immolation by suttee (actually, she's saved by Passepartout, but of course he's only a servant). Nonetheless, there is only so much noblesse oblige she can take from the impassive British gentleman. Aouda's growing love in no way silences her from demanding some real human interaction with her benefactor.

It is worth noting that the story's love interest is only listed as Actor 4 in the Roundhouse playbill. As such, she is expected to flesh out several other walk-on roles just like everyone else (with the exception of Phileas Fogg). Her various moustaches, derbies, and masculine togs obviously don't conceal her gender, but that merely adds to the merriment.

It is also to the production's credit that they chose an actor of non-European ethnicity to portray the princess, unlike the timid choice of Shirley MacLaine for the 1956 film. We are much more casual about inter-racial romance in the twenty-first century than in Verne's time. But it is well to be reminded of the societal barriers these nineteenth century lovers must overcome to find happiness. Jules Verne has always been cast as a prophet of the future, so perhaps this portrait of gender and racial equality could also be added to his list of prophecies.

As the self-parodying narrator of this play might intone: "Last, but not least, we come to Actor 1, the fabulous James Konicek!" This plucky fellow assays sixteen - count them! - sixteen roles throughout the production, as many roles as actors 2, 3, and 4 combined! Whether or not that is a record, Mr. Konicek is astonishing in his comedic versatility. Without a lead role to call his own, this dervish tackles (let me think now...) Judge Obadiah, Sir Francis Cromarty, Colonel Proctor, and Captain John Bundy of the *Tankadère*, etc, etc.

This quick-change artist indulges in some insidiously, shamelessly, politically incorrect national stereotypes, that drew many of the biggest guffaws of the afternoon. And yet, when necessary, he tones it all down, such as his portrayal of the gentlemanly Sir Francis.

The mishaps, misadventures, and mistaken identities proceed just as we Vernians would have them, until the split second denouement back in London at the stroke of eight forty-five. Here I might quibble a bit about the anti-climactic end scene. The explanation of Fogg's gain of 24 hours while traveling eastward could have been staged to greater dramatic effect. Still, our hero's proclamation of love for the Indian princess, which the audience has impatiently awaited, draws well deserved and heartfelt aaahs.

This play must surely be compared to *The 39 Steps*, adapted by Patrick Barlow from the Hitchcock movie (inspired by the John Buchan novel) filmed in England during the mid-30's. I saw the Kavinoky Theatre production in Buffalo, New York last year, and cannot

help but marvel at the cross-pollination of whimsy, playful imagination, and manic humor that inform each production. By the way, here's something for the conspiracy-minded: how come the title *39 Steps* just happens to have the same number as the cast of roles in Mark Brown's script? Coincidence? Oh please...

Some reviewers such as Jayne Blanchard [5] seemed to have had reservations about the wisdom of a two and one-half hour running time for a family friendly show. I saw no evidence of any pint-sized fidgeting during the performance I attended, but then again, I was so caught up in the fun that I would not have noticed a balloon crash through the ceiling. Though, despite Mark Brown's insistence, I might have secretly hoped for it.

NOTES

1. Brian Taves: "80 Days of Slapstick". *Extraordinary Voyages – The Newsletter of the North American Jules Verne Society, Inc.*, vol. 15, no 1, September 2008, p.6-7.
2. Nelson Pressley: "'Around the World', a goofy spin: Round House's production turns Jules Verne' tale into a more fun-filled farce". *The Washington Post*, May 13, 2010, page C1.
3. Jacqueline Lawton: "An interview with 80 Days playwright Mark Brown": "Part One – The Writer", "Part Two – The Play and Beyond" - <http://www.roundhousetheatre.org/category/interview/>.
4. Brian Taves: "80 Days of Slapstick". *Extraordinary Voyages – The Newsletter of the North American Jules Verne Society, Inc.*, vol. 15, no 1, September 2008, p.6-7. Brian Taves: "A perfected 80 days". *Extraordinary Voyages – The Newsletter of the North American Jules Verne Society, Inc.*, vol. 16, no 4, June 2010, p. 6.
5. Jayne Blanchard's review was published under the title "Around the World in 80 Days" May 13, 2010 on the DC – Theatre Scene – Washington's Liveliest Theatre Web Site: <http://dctheatrescene.com/2010/05/13/around-the-world-in-80-days-2/>.

Roger W. Leyonmark (leyonmarks2@verizon.net) holds a BFA from Syracuse University (1974). For thirty years he was an international illustrator, while also creating a body of personal work, primarily three-dimensional assemblage, for which he won awards from the New York Society of Illustrators in 1999. Leyonmark's fine-line pen and ink technique was drawn very consciously from his lifelong passion for Jules Verne, and the engravings accompanying the original Hetzel editions. A member of the North American Jules Verne Society for ten years, Leyonmark participated in bringing *Voyage à travers l'impossible (Journey through the Impossible)* to an American publisher (Prometheus), and also created the artwork for its 2003 publication. He is currently writing his first novel, *The Beacon of Syrtis Major*.