

MCT's entertaining 'Harvey' nothing like the classic movie

By KATIE HUGHES MCKEE

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When I attended Saturday evening's performance of "Harvey," I was reminded that 31 years ago I auditioned for MCT's "Pajama Game." As I looked at the posters lining the walls, I realized that "Pajama Game" was the very first production of this company. I recall a quintessential MCT experience: a certain director's small children running around, screaming, as I delivered my monologue, everyone smoking cigarettes while I did my vocal audition. I was called back, but I said, "Um, no thanks."

MCT has grown up since then, but still has the charming, funky ambience of a small-town community theater. The current offering, "Harvey," is a fresh, feisty look at a classic, professionally performed with first-class production values.

It has been way longer than 30 years since I have seen a production of Mary Chase's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, or even seen the classic film with Jimmy Stewart. I rented it for a buck at my local video store, and the differences were quite apparent. Scott Kravitz has assembled a superb cast which gives an assertive performance. The film is a drawing room comedy with some screwball thrown in. Kravitz's cast takes screwball over the top and back again.

Myrtle Mae Simmons, the daughter who is embarrassed by her uncle Elwood, is portrayed as a sweet ingénue in the film. Daria Troxell's Myrtle Mae is anything but. Her mother, Veta, who was played by Josephine Hull, in an Oscar-winning performance in the film and who played the role for six months in the West End with Stewart, is patrician, and genteelly mortified. Hannah Eckstein is a full-on snob who gets hysterical, trembles and jiggles with emotion, and, yes, steals the show. There is a lot of, shall we say, sexual nuance to this character that you aren't going to find in other productions.

The grande dame of MCT, Rita Wadsworth, has a choice cameo as Aunt Edna, as does Alan Gibbs as the cabbie. Danielle Crook is a sweet and smart Nurse Kelly, and Grant Patrizio delivers a delightfully smug and irritating foil as Dr. Sanderson. Wilson, the orderly, played in the film by the venerable Jesse White, is a young, handsome sleazebag Charles Woods with whom Myrtle Mae is idiot enough to fall in love. Peter Gelblum, an attorney by day, gets some choice lines about lawyers as Judge Gaffney. Jackson Wolffe is the pompous Dr. Chumley who is taken down several notches by a close encounter with a certain very large white mammal, and MarNae Taylor is his sweet, repressed wife --with great hair! -- who is charmed, as are, eventually, all the other characters, by Elwood P. Dowd.

It takes moxie to attempt the role of Elwood, as it will eternally be linked to James Stewart, much as the role of Harold Hill will always be Robert Preston's. A fresh face from over the hill, W. Scot Whisler, completely inhabits the role with a sweetness, sincerity and ingenuousness that will have you in love with him as you leave Park Hall. { Through may 27 Fridays and Saturdays 8 p.m., Sundays at 2 p.m. Park Hall, 9400 Mill St., Ben Lomond. \$15 to \$18. www.mctshows.org }