

Precious Jules

San Jose Rep brings Verne's 'Around the World in 80 Days' to life with five multipurpose actors

By Jessica Fromm

WHEN YOU bring a complex adventure novel like Jules Verne's classic *Around the World in 80 Days* to the stage, you always run the risk of making the audience feel like they're on a laborious journey that lasts the full 80 days. Fortunately, San Jose Repertory Theatre's production of *Around the World in 80 Days* comes out fast paced and stays buoyant. Playwright Mark Brown and director Michael Butler reinterpret the famous tale of rapid global circumnavigation into an original, rollicking voyage full of breezy flair and humor. Though the play lasts more than two hours, there's never a boring moment as the story lightheartedly chugs along.

Phileas Fogg (Matthew Floyd Miller) is a wealthy 19th-century British gentleman who is so anal retentive that it's a wonder he can sit down without sucking up the furniture. After making a bet with a trio of fellow aristocrats that he can circle the planet in a mere 80 days, Fogg sets out with his newly hired and heavily accented French valet, Passepartout (a fun Gendell Hernández). Using every mode of transportation available, the two encounter numerous obstacles while traversing oceans and continents. They bump into an eclectic array of characters at every stop, like the scheming Detective Fix (Howard Swain) and Aouda (Anna Bullard), a Parsi princess and token damsel in distress. Though there is some politically incorrect ethnic humor, the tone remains light and tongue-in-cheek.

Impressively, every character in this lively romp is portrayed by one of five performers. The most entertaining of the bunch is actor Mark Farrell, who by donning a bewildering array of accents, demeanors and costumes impersonates upward of 15 characters. Showing admirable energy and comic timing, Farrell is entirely engaging, whether shimmying hilariously around stage with a boat strapped to his head or interpreting an Indian Wars colonel via William Shatner-style delivery.

One of the most extraordinary aspects of the production is how brilliantly the stage is utilized by scenic designer Kelly Tighe. The production is styled in the opulent aesthetic of steampunk, a growing retro-futuristic movement that combines Victorian finery with modern technology. The set has the distinct feel of being located inside a giant ticking watch, complete with a huge manually revolving central stage that is sporadically set into motion by stagehands for fast, dramatic effect. The only thing that this production lacks is that it moves at such breathless speed that the characters never get filled out. We don't get to stop and explore Fogg and Passepartout's friendship, or even why Fogg is so emotionally constipated in the first place. This concern aside, San Jose Rep's production of *Around the World in 80 Days* is a genuinely fun, ingeniously produced and witty show that can be enjoyed by all ages.



Photograph by Pat Kirk

GLOBETROTTERS: Anna Bullard (from left), Mark Farrell, Howard Swain and (front) Matthew Floyd Miller keep on moving around the world for San Jose Rep.

AROUND THE WORLD IN 80 DAYS, a San Jose Repertory Theatre production, plays Tuesday at 7:30pm, Wednesday–Friday at 8pm, Saturday at 3 and 8pm and Sunday at 2pm, through Dec. 21 at 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose. Tickets are \$32–\$61. (408.367.7255)