Around the World in 80 Days
Reviewed By: Andy Propst · Jul 21, 2008 · New York

Much like Phileas Fogg (Daniel Stewart), the hero of Jules Verne's Around the World in 80 Days, playwright Mark Brown and director Michael Evan Haney seem to tackle the impossible by bringing this massive novel to the stage using just five actors. And in their Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park production, now imported to the Irish Repertory, not only do they succeed in their mission -- they bring the work to the stage gleefully and thrillingly.

Scenic designer Joseph P. Tilford provides a marvelously simple, yet clever set for Fogg's globe-trotting adventure. He frames the action with elements from neo-classical architecture, which ground the piece in the late-Victorian milieu of the hero, and provides the performers with several tables, chairs, and trunks. As it turns out, these items are all that the actors need to convince us that we're watching Fogg, along with his manservant Passepartout (Evan Zes), trekking through the wilds of India astride an elephant.

When the pair, joined by Aouda (Lauren Elise McCourt), the Indian maiden they rescued from being sacrificed, and Detective Fix (John Keating), who's pursuing Fogg because he believes the intrepid traveler is responsible for a major bank robbery in London, arrive in America, we watch with bated breath as they hurtle through the plains on a train being attacked by members of the Comanche tribe.

It can be exciting stuff; and it can also be dizzyingly silly. Sorting a thick French accent that brings to mind Peter Sellers' Inspector Clouseau, Zes repeatedly refers to his heirloom pocket watch as his "time pisseessss." A gifted physical comedian with a face and body seemingly made of rubber, Zes also inspires laughs and giggles as he cavorts, like a modern-day Charlie Chaplin, through these adventures. Equally amusing is Keating's turn as the bumbling, arrogant, and ultimately stupid Fix, who generally gets foiled at every turn, by either his own idiocy or British bureaucracy, which can never seem to get the warrant for Fogg's arrest into his hands in a timely fashion.

Balancing the production -- yet also adding to its comedy -- are Stewart's restrained and dignified turn as Fogg and McCord's coolly exotic turn as Aouda. Stewart finds the dry humor and crisp punctiliousness of Fogg (made famous by David Niven in the film) and balances it with subtle warmth. McCord (who also gets to cut-up early on in several male roles) begins playing simply a damsel-in-distress, but as the play progresses and Aouda's affection for Fogg deepens, so does her performance.
Alongside these four performers is the tremendously gifted Jay Russell, who has what may be the show's most demanding role. He plays some 16 different characters, each with a deliciously detailed comic accent and caricatured physicality. Particularly choice is his turn as the Buffalo Bill-like Colonel Proctor, whom the travelers meet while en route to New York. Russell's Proctor blusters with a deep Southern drawl-slash-growl that is only made funnier by his inspired use of the fringe on his buckskin coat (just one of the many choice costumes from designer David K. Mickelsen).

Haney's production barrels along like a comic steam engine careening down a particularly precarious twist-filled track. In the end, this small-scale 80 Days is simply big-scale fun.