

## VEER Magazine:

### Whimsical Debut: Virginia Stage Co. showcases exceptional adaptation of classic *Around the World in 80 Days*

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By Jerome Langston

The Virginia premiere of *Around the World in 80 Days*, the Jules Verne literary classic adapted for the stage by Mark Brown, assuredly advances the Virginia Stage Company's 31<sup>st</sup> season. It is the company's fourth production of the season, following the solemn, razzle-dazzle of the musical, *Billy Bishop Goes to War*.

Directed by VSC favorite Ed Morgan, *Bishop* was a crowd-pleaser that garnered positive reviews from local critics, including VEER's own Montague Gammon. *Around the World in 80 Days* falls even more in line with the tradition of presenting quality popular fare in theatre, and has managed to emerge as a critical darling ever since its premiere back in 2001 at the Utah Shakespearean Festival.

Following that auspicious debut, award-winning playwright and actor Mark Brown's adaption has been mounted globally; including both an Off-Broadway run and a successful run in England. Yet this is the first time that his adaption is being professionally produced in the Commonwealth. Brown acknowledged that in our brief interview via the most impersonal, yet often necessary of communication mediums, email.

"I'm excited the show is having its Virginia debut. I was starting to think Virginia was mad at me and I was on some tyrant list," he comically remarked. "I'm always thrilled to have a theatre produce one of my shows. That a theatre will commit its resources on something I wrote is extremely humbling and rewarding. And the Virginia Stage Company is a wonderful theatre. It's always been known for producing high quality shows and it will be exciting to see what they do with *80 Days*."

Brown decided upon adapting the Jules Verne nineteenth century novel about a decade ago, while having a simple conversation with friends about books that would translate into good theatre. "The entire conversation lasted about thirty seconds," he shared.

"When I first wrote the script, people told me it was too big for the stage, that there was no way to stage an epic story of this proportion. But creativity and imagination are funny things. They allow us to bring anything to the stage. I think, in part, it's the enormity of the story that makes it a perfect fit for the stage. It forces a director, a set designer, etc to be creative and imaginative," Brown explained. "But also the story is very intimate. At the heart of this epic journey are the relationships of the characters..."

*Around the World in 80 Days* was written by the famous French writer, Jules Verne, and originally published in 1873. Phileas Fogg is the main character, a Londoner who in order to win a pricey wager set by friends at a gentleman's club, must circumnavigate the entire world in 80 days. Fogg is initially accompanied by just his French valet Passepartout. However, that soon changes upon a chance meeting with a female, Aouda, while on their journey. The duo is also being followed by a Scotland Yard detective, in a case of mistaken identity, all of which naturally amounts to a great deal of hilarity and high jinks.

In Brown's stage adaptation, five actors are tasked with portraying 39 characters and inhabiting countless foreign locales. It would appear quite a task for even the most seasoned of actors.

"That's part of the fun of the show, watching the actors deal with this obstacle of all these places they have to get and all these people they have to be," confidently asserts Patrick Mullins, director of VSC's production of *80 Days* and the company's associate artistic director.

Once such actor, Matthew Schmidt, who portrays many of the 39 characters, acknowledged during a break in rehearsal, the inherent visual challenge of the play. "I think we're using the imagination of the audience quite a bit," he noted.

"Realism is great and the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was wonderful, but I'd rather work in a world where if I wanted to go see the movie, I'd go see the movie..." remarks Mulligan, further articulating the virtue of live theatre over film.

Michael Sharon portrays Phileas Fogg. "He's actually talked about more in the script than he actually appears in the script," the actor explains. "He's kind of a man of mystery."

Sharon is only three days into rehearsal for the play, so he admits to still learning his character. In the story, Fogg is a man of taste and order, not the type of dude who would typically set off on such an adventure. Sharon believes Fogg has grown weary of the monotony of his life, which is why he welcomes the challenge set forth by the wager. The director also appeared to share this view, when he opined about the story's thematic core.

"This is the exploration of a guy who has a lot to teach us, who is very wise and knowledgeable. Yet in his journey around the world, he learns the one thing you can't really learn about in a book...love."