



KAZ NOVAK, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Scott Broe, left, has the lead role of tippling Elwood P. Dowd, Maria Kalvaitis is a society matron and Tom Rice plays a physician in Harvey.

Harvey's still a funny fantasy

Harvey

Who: Aldershot Players
Where: West Plains United Church,
 549 Plains Rd. W., Burlington
When: Oct. 19-21, 27-28
Tickets: Dinner and show, \$27
Phone: 637-7629

By GARY SMITH

Special to The Hamilton Spectator

"Pooka — From old Celtic mythology. A fairy spirit in animal form, always very large. The pooka appears here and there, now and then to this one and that one at his own caprice. ... Very fond of rumpots, crackpots."

That's Harvey, the six-foot invisible rabbit who follows poor, pixilated Elwood P. Dowd.

Like his inebriated buddy, he's a gentle tippler, a sweet-natured soul, fond of pretty girls and the aroma of good cigars.

His awkward presence in the otherwise well-ordered Dowd household causes nothing but embarrassment for Vita Louise, Elwood's social climbing sister.

How do you explain to the "girls" at the Wednesday Afternoon Forum that a pooka is on the premises?

How do you account for Elwood's animated conversations with a giant rabbit no one else can see?

More importantly, what do you do when you begin to see Harvey yourself?

Vita Louise and her sexually repressed daughter, Myrtle Mae, have the answer.

They do just what you'd expect any pooka-fearing, brother-loving family member to do.

They ship troubled Elwood off to the safety of Chumley's Rest, an asylum for people who see things on the fantastic side.

In a nutshell, that's the plot of Mary Coyle Chase's wonderful old chestnut Harvey, a

classic comedy that's been captivating audiences since 1944. Chase, a failed playwright, reputedly concocted the comedy on a whim.

History has it that she wrote her play to tickle the fancy of a distraught neighbour, whose son was shot down over the South Pacific during the Second World War.

The comedy won a Pulitzer in 1945.

James Stewart starred in the popular film version, opposite the wonderful Josephine Hull.

Later, he repeated his Elwood role on Broadway, with the redoubtable Helen Hayes as poor, befuddled Vita Louise. It was wonderful vintage fun. Well, now the gang at Aldershot Players are having a go at the big bunny show.

A hard-working cast finds much of the sentimental warmth that masquerades as humour in this charming, nostalgic play.

Scott Broe is a quietly understated Elwood, connecting nicely with the man's gentle, unassuming nature.

He doesn't always manage the twinkle that would make this Elwood infuriatingly lovable.

And he doesn't always punch his laugh lines with enough energy or style.

But amazingly, he does make us believe in the truth about Harvey.

So sure is his belief in the big bunny, we almost believe we see him, too.

Bev Mattson and Karen Henderson convincingly portray the greedy, self-centredness of Myrtle Mae and Vita Louise, but are a tad too shrill too much of the time.

Tom Rice and Doug Gowland, as the physicians Sanderson and Chumley respectively, are appropriately befuddled by Elwood and his furry pal.

And Nicki Rodger, a sweet treat as lovesick asylum nurse Ruth Kelly, bustles about ap-

pealingly.

Ralph Woodcock and Susanne Tristani have effective moments as Judge Gaffney and Betty Chumley.

And Sam Sidawi and Kim Koren have fun with the roles of man-handling rest home attendant Duane Wilson and insightful cab driver E. J. Lofgren.

The most fully realized performance of the evening, however, comes from the enchanting Maria Kalvaitis.

An actress of easy elegance, Kalvaitis is so effervescent in her small turn as society matron Ethel Chauvenet, you long for her to return in the second act.

Alas, she doesn't.

Rosalynde Woodcock's direction doesn't whip the play into sufficient perpetual motion. Too-slow pacing invites us to pierce holes in the comic ozone layer that ought to protect this play from "intellectual warming."

Harvey is the sort of romp, after all, that you musn't have too much time to think about.

Ralph Woodcock's clever design allows for speedy set changes, moving us swiftly from Elwood's comfortable home to the sterility of Chumley's Rest.

At times, the sets' trappings, like the inner workings of this production, stray too close to cartoon in nature.

No matter. In the end, like Elwood, we get the big picture.

And like that lovable nerd, with the highball in his hand, we find ourselves looking back as we walk through the doorway.

Harvey might just be hopping along behind.

Gary Smith has been reviewing dance and theatre for The Hamilton Spectator for more than 20 years. The award-winning critic also directs shows in the Hamilton area.