



**EYE ON THEATRE**

**Barbecued Bard**

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hindrance. The beautiful Isabella, she of “those cheek roses,” is portrayed by the pitch black actress Danai Gurira. Not only deficient histrionically, Gurira is also, unlike so many black women and several fetching actresses of color, incontrovertibly unprepossessing, and of a voice that is neither appealing nor in shrieking (as it often is) distinguishable from that of a Harlem streetwalker. Unfortunately, too, the nun’s attire she mostly wears emphasizes in its whiteness the negritude of her countenance, which in the play’s locale, Vienna, famous for its blondes, seems particularly misplaced.

In a tiny step toward credibility, Andre Holland is cast as her brother, Claudio, as which he is less preposterous than as Bertram, chiefly because of the role’s brevity and piteousness. Annie Parisse, as Mariana who replaces Isabella in bed with Angelo, could not be more different from Danai Gurira, thus further negating a shred of probability.

Reg Rogers’s Lucio is as much a travesty as his Parolles, but as a more pronounced clown, Pompey, Carson Elrod is wonderfully



effete. A major trouble, though, is the Duke Vincentio of Lorenzo Pisoni. The Duke, I believe, is an allegorical representation of the Almighty, Shakespeare’s attempt to justify God’s capricious ways to man. Hence the Duke is usually played as a poised, mature dignitary, however authoritarian and even sadistic, eventually just in meting out appropriate rewards and punishments. So it is wrong to have him enacted by Lorenzo Pisoni as a brash young man, more impetuous than canny in his playing with the lives of his fellow humans.

Typical of Esbjornson’s directorial

absurdities (worse of all a mock penis wielded as a “picklock”) is the production’s totally non-Shakespearean, foolishly invented beginning. Here we have a few creepy, horned demons, black from top to toe and seemingly bent on mischief, finally summoning up through the floor a large bed occupied by the young Duke in

dishabille, who slowly gets dressed while those devils still keep prancing around.

Besides the quirky direction, there are the spuriously grandiose music inflicted by John Gromada, more sound man than composer, and the rather uninspired costumes by Elizabeth Hope Clancy, who, besides other sins, saddles Annie Parisse’s Mariana with an unbecoming hoop skirt in a misconceived bid for some sort of historic authenticity ignored everywhere else, except for an equally quasi-Elizabethan wig palmed off on the hapless actress thus

singled out from among the rest.

There are again decent supporting performances, especially by John Cullum as Escalus and Tonya Pinkins as Mistress Overdone, although Michael Hayden, in the other leading role of Angelo, the Duke’s unworthy deputy, is only acceptable. Though he rightly underplays Angelo’s villainy, he pretty much underplays the entire striking character into virtual nonexistence.

The arguable best thing about both productions is Peter Kaczorowski’s lighting, which captures all sorts of desiderated moods. But how much light can the best designer shed on a play without the needed ministrations of director and leading actors?

John Simon has written for over 50 years on theatre, film, literature, music and fine arts for the *Hudson Review*, *New Leader*, *New Criterion*, *National Review*, *New York Magazine*, *Opera News*, *Weekly Standard*, *Broadway.com* and *Bloomberg News*. Mr. Simon holds a **PhD from Harvard University** in Comparative Literature and has taught at MIT, Harvard University, Bard College and **Marymount Manhattan College**.

To learn more, visit the **John Simon-Uncensored.com** website.

**COMMUNITY THEATRE**

**Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival’s Around the World in 90 Minutes *Hilarious and Raucous***



**By ABBY LUBY**

The rip-roaring, side-splitting stage version of “*Around the World in 80 Days*” performed by the Hudson Valley Shakespeare

Festival is a must see. In this 90-minute, round-the-world journey, five actors play 39 characters, all displaying an astonishing range of talent.

Writer Mark Brown adapted the Jules Verne novel using witty dialogue, slapstick action and high speed character transformations who morph into another characterization so quickly, you could miss it in a blink of an eye. And if you’re looking for the balloon – well, guess what? This play is sans balloon because, believe it or not, there is no balloon in the novel. Somehow, a balloon ended up in the 1956 movie with David Niven and Shirley MacLaine and has occupied America’s perception of the story ever since.

But don’t worry about the missing balloon. There’s plenty of action – lurching train rides, bumpy elephant jaunts,



(L-R): Richard Ercole, Wesley Mann, Vaishnavi Sharma

white-knuckle sea tycoons and icy snow sailing. Simulating the travel scenes is a choreography that is pure genius. Actors shimmy and shake so convincingly that you feel like you’re riding the rails and braving the storms along with them. When the train crashes after speeding over a broken bridge, actors arch and bend in dramatic slow motion, landing in a perfect heap, returning in a beat and ready to forge ahead.

Fun and wildly imaginative scene changes include the transformation of a

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## COMMUNITY THEATRE

## Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival's Around the World in 90 Minutes

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construction wheelbarrow to an elephant, a sloop, and a wind boat for the snow. Chairs are whisked on and off the stage, a blackboard is the only non-moving part of the show displaying the 80-day trip in pink chalk - the route a necklace around a map of the world. Behind the blackboard is the makeshift, immediate access dressing room, where the unseen, quick costume changes are accompanied by the forward moving narration in front of the map.

Director Chris Edwards says there were many fun challenges to producing the Mark Brown adaptation of Verne's famous novel, especially keeping the quick costume changes out of the audience's view. Ultimately, transitions were seamless and an occasional wig hanging slightly off the hairline was very much in character with the play.

"For me, this play is Monte Python meets 'Sense and Sensibility,'" says Edwards, referring to the 1811 Victorian novel by Jane Austen. "Around the World has a wild and woolly feeling to it."

That Jason O'Connell adeptly plays 16 different roles is undoubtedly a tour de force of acting. O'Connell has the audience in the palm of his hand, dashing in and out, adroitly changing characters as he changes costumes. Most hilarious is his role as the



(l-R): Standing Jason O'Connell, Richard Ercole, Ryan Quinn (on ladder) - kneeling, Wesley Mann, Vaishnavi Sharma

Chinese Broker where every muscle in his body exudes an aging, hunched over Chinese man, who confronts a straight faced Phileas Fogg in a rant that weaves ribbons of hysteria and has the audience in stitches.

The protagonist and wagering Englishman, Phileas Fogg, is astutely played by Richard Ercole who is more or less the straight man, perpetually watching the clock, coming up with assorted trip strategies when trains are missed and boats are delayed. His is an emotionally guarded character, one in control, especially when it comes to our heroine, Aouda, played by the eloquent Vaishnavi Sharma, the love

interest. It is Aouda who finally yanks Fogg out of his very staid, English character in a delicate pantomime of a near kiss that ultimately leads to Fogg's flood of emotion as he finally declares his love for Aouda.

Playing Fogg's man servant Passepartout, is Ryan Quinn, whose French accent is punctuated by a perpetual physical gallop as he consistently refers to his familial watch piece as the perfect "time piss."

Passepartout experiences the various exotic cultures, as he takes in what's around him, contrasting Fogg's narrow fixation on the 'ticking clock.'

Wesley Mann is detective Fix, who pursues Phileas Fogg around the globe, bent on proving that Fogg is a criminal. Topped by his brown, bowler hat, Mann's bumbling detective is Jacques Clouseau on steroids, especially with his wonderfully agile, slap stick calisthenics.

Susanna Stahlmann plays Foley, the gatekeeper of the play, a floozy dressed in a tight Victorian bodice replete with tall

white boots and a white feather cresting her head. Foley is the glue that keeps the play together; broadcasting her vocal sound effects into a mic, her whistles, tongue knocks and lip pops all signal the action to freeze so she, or other characters can fill in the narration. Although Foley has few lines, she is the omnipresent side kick, essential for the show to progress.

The addition of non-Shakespeare plays to HVSF's productions started a few years ago and has become very popular, performed and conceived with the same irreverence to Shakespeare intended by that the festival's founding artistic director, Terrence O'Brien. "Around the World in 80 Days" will delight children of all ages. This is the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival's 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Season and the other shows include The Comedy of Errors and a first time production of Hamlet.

Shows are at the grounds of historic Boscobel in Garrison, New York and run through Labor Day.

[www.hvshakespeare.org](http://www.hvshakespeare.org) HVSF office, (845) 265-7858.

*Abby Luby is a freelance writer in Westchester and the greater New York City area. Her new novel about nuclear power, "Nuclear Romance" is expected out in eBook format by the end of the summer, 2011.*

## GovernmentSection

### White Plains Mayor Cuts Positions While Increasing His Staff

By NANCY KING

The Westchester Guardian has learned that Mayor Tom Roach laid off eight city employees on Friday June 24<sup>th</sup>. Those employees who will see their jobs vanish on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011, were let go in an effort to keep White Plain's austerity budget from going off the tracks. Those positions being cut are comprised of two from the department of Public Works (DPW), one from Recreation and Parks, one from the Budget Office, one from IT, one from the Youth Bureau, one from the Building Department, and one from Mayor Roach's office. Six of those employees were union members. According to Chief of Staff John Callahan, eliminating those "defunded" positions would save the city \$625,000.00. It is also widely believed more cuts are to

be made in the coming weeks.

However dire the economic future for White Plains seems to be, it can't be too bleak. On the same day that these layoffs were announced, Mayor Tom Roach announced that he would be adding two people to his personal administrative staff. Kim Di Tomasso, Roach's former campaign manager has been named to a part time Director of Special Projects. Her salary will be 50K without benefits. The other new hire is Karen Pasquale. Her title is Economic Director/Press Relations. Is it bad timing or something else that has the residents of the City of White Plains shaking their heads over this one?

Ms. Pasquale was an assistant to former County Executive Andy Spano.

Obviously since January 2010, there has been no job for her on the 9<sup>th</sup> floor. There was a brief stint for her at the New York Power Authority but like all patronage jobs, they come to an end sooner or later. Ms. Pasquale is also politically quite well connected in White Plains. Her husband, Robert Hoch, is a member of the White Plains Democratic Committee and chair of the White Plains Historical Society. As a matter of fact, the first thing I plan on asking her when she arrives at City Hall is if the gun from the USS Maine is still in a storage shed in the city dump. You would think her husband, as chair of the historical society would like to see that gun back on a pedestal and in a park somewhere in White Plains. Maybe Ms.

Pasquale will work on this when she arrives at City Hall. With a resume that reaches from the County Office Building to the New York Power Authority, it seems that Mayor Roach feels he got a bargain hiring someone who will not only be our guru of economics and press relations but will also be equally versed in government relations, policy planning and city operations.

Perhaps even more interesting is Mayor Roach's choice of Kim Di Tomasso. Since 2002, Ms. Di Tomasso has owned and operated political consulting / event planning agency Ditto Consulting in Manhattan. Her clients include Derek Jeter, Andrea Stewart -Cousins, Nita Lowey, Chuck Lesnick, and Mike Spano. While Ms. Di Tomasso may be planning charity events for Jeter, political campaign management and fundraising are her forte. In 2008 she was receiving \$6,000 a month in consulting services from the Stewart

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