

THEATRE

Surrealist wit keeps Harvey fresh

REVIEW

What: Harvey

When: To Oct. 19

Where: Langham Court Theatre

Rating: 3 1/2 stars (out of five)

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Times Colonist

Stage comedies can lose their glimmer over the years. It's because so many are tied to a cultural zeitgeist that tarnishes with time.

Mary Chase's *Harvey* is a 1944 comedy. Happily, the show, revived last year on Broadway, retains sufficient sparkle for today's audiences. Chase's script — about a curiously childlike man who believes his best friend is a giant invisible rabbit — glows with a gently surrealist wit. Whether it be Chase, Beckett or Monty Python, this absurdist sensibility never goes out of style.

Langham Court Theatre, under Heather Jarvie's solid direction, has staged a rather charming remount of *Harvey*. Although other actors have their moments, the key to its success is Michael Romano, who — in his best Langham Court showing to date — portrays Elwood with just the right amount of distracted affability.

Elwood, the play's unlikely hero, recalls the likable eccentrics inhab-

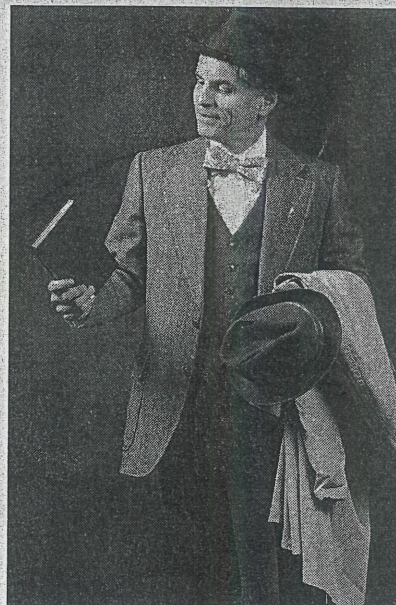
iting Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*. He seems absolutely extraneous to society. Elwood doesn't work; he spends his days boozing in bars and making friends with everyone he encounters. He's not exactly simple-minded, but he is simple and naive — a sort of "wise fool" akin to Forrest Gump.

What makes Elwood remarkable is his insistence on the existence of Harvey, a six-foot rabbit no one else (well, almost no one else) can see. The imaginary friendship likely would cause few problems if it weren't for Elwood's insistence Harvey be introduced to people, have his portrait painted and be outfitted with a fedora with holes for his rabbit ears.

Finally, his sister Veta (nicely played with plummy exasperation by Gloria Snider) gets fed up. She decides Elwood must be committed to an psychiatric institution. However, the tables are turned at the hospital with comic results.

Chase's main message is an old saw: In our effort to conform at all costs, beetle-browed citizens miss out on life's beauty and wonder. However, the homily is presented with such cleverness and originality, the audience doesn't really mind that the moral is a touch saccharine.

For Wednesday's preview show, Romano — bow-tied and tweed-



LANGHAM COURT THEATRE
Michael Romano stars as Elwood P. Dowd in Langham Court Theatre's *Harvey*.

jacketed — offered a superior performance that displayed an acute understanding of what his character is all about. His Elwood is wide-eyed, always calm and sweetly polite. Romano moved with a slight looseness that suggests oddness. To his credit, he avoided the role's greatest potential pitfall: to ham it up — something that would ruin the

integrity of the character.

Jason Stevens was also notable, playing a pompous, red-faced judge with a Churchillian ferocity that (while stagy at times) worked well. The 12-person cast includes Michelle Mitchell as Veta's daughter and Drew Wavelyn as Dr. Chumley.

An oversight occurred in a scene in which Elwood and Chumley appear after having spent an evening drinking in a bar. One would assume a tipsiness might creep into their speech and movement — especially Chumley, whom we're led to believe was hitting the bottle hard. Yet there was no sign of this on stage.

As well, there are some sequences that plod when they should prance — something especially crucial in comedy.

Designer Toshik Bukowiecki has created two sets — one of the entrance in Elwood's home, another of the hospital. They look good (especially the faux marble); however, the task of moving large chunks of scenery made for excruciatingly slow set changes. This may improve as the run progresses — certainly, the backstage crew needs to step up its game.

Overall, *Harvey* is an enjoyable season opener that bodes well for Langham Court's 85th year. achamberlain@timescolonist.com