



Tracee Hoban (left), Bob Buechler and Jennifer Mandeville-Schulz in *Charley's Aunt*

MATT EMBICH

Cross-Dressing Victorian Men

Cottage Theatre gets zany with *Charley's Aunt*

Ah, Victorian Farce! Lovesick playboys, nonplussed butlers, formidable matrons, God Save the Queen — it's all there, exactly as you'd expect it, in Cottage Theatre's current production of *Charley's Aunt*.

Brandon Thomas' witty script follows the antics of two Oxford students who talk a friend into dressing up as a wealthy, widowed aunt to act as chaperon when they have their girls over to lunch. Zany fun follows as potential suitors pop up for the imposter auntie. As unbelievable as it is predictable, the pleasure and art in a play like this lies in the exquisite execution of details.

The audience members sitting around me enjoyed this show so much. They loved the lush costumes and had good things to say about every actor on stage. Kory Weimer (Jack Chesney) and Simon Arnold (Charley Wykeham) are very good, and play off one another beautifully. Bob Buechler's cross-dressing Lord Fancourt is energetically executed, and I don't know when I've seen an actor so obviously having such a good time on stage. Karen Snyder brings a refreshing frankness to the production as Donna Lucia D'Alvadorez.

Charley's Aunt is good fun, but for this production to really fly it would have to be perfectly sharp and crisp. Rather, it sailed like a paper airplane made by many different hands, some more adept than

others. The first act was the least promising, with a little mush mouth and one or two accents that seemed to hail closer to Louisburg than London. Performances tightened up as the show rolled along, and by the third act I'd forgotten the slow start. The set and costumes were overall so well done that I found myself being irrationally annoyed by flaws that stuck out amidst the splendor: Andre champagne, a bowler hat worn indoors, ponytails on men.

With Ibsen popping up recently on Eugene stages, audiences are given an unusual chance to examine late 19th-Century theater. *Charley's Aunt* opened to critical acclaim in 1892 and ran for 1,466 performances, one year after Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* was summarily panned. *Charley's Aunt* is as good an example of Victorian farce as *Hedda Gabler* is of late 19th-Century realism. Both plays are written by men about what it's like to be a woman. The two plays couldn't be more different, with the exception of a heightened theatricality and the offer of a glimpse into another world. Whether you're looking for an evening of laughs or seeking to brush up on your theater history, *Charley's Aunt* is worth the trek. **EW**

Charley's Aunt runs weekends at Cottage Theatre through Feb. 20; Friday and Saturday shows start promptly at 8 pm, Sunday matinees begin at 2:30 pm; \$16, \$14 sen. & stu., tickets at www.cottagetheatre.org or 541-942-8001.

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