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RABBIT STEW

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Harvey

by Mary Chase

Directed by Athena Hunting

The Algonquin Theater Ensemble

The West Valley Art Museum, Surprise

(602) 547-8920

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\$18.00 - \$20.00

No matter how you examine it, **Mary Chase's *Harvey*** is a chestnut. It's there in the pantheon that includes other such greats as *Arsenic and Old Lace*, *You Can't Take it With You*, and *Mister Roberts*. These scripts are wonderful in the right hands, but they don't always wind up in the right hands. Generally, good hands can be found in the west valley with **Algonquin Theater Company**. This troupe, known for risk-taking and boundary stretching, is offering the theatrical equivalent of comfort food, but even meatloaf in the right hands can be a delicacy. However, this time around, the mix is a little lacking. **Athena Hunting's** generally connected ensemble does have a few weaknesses, the pacing is a bit odd at times, and by second weekend, there were still a few line difficulties. It's very good, but it's not quite to the impressive level that this company has set as its standard.

But there's **Ron Hunting**. His Elwood P. Dowd is an easygoing, slightly spaced out sweetheart that is completely his own creation. His downplaying, vacant look,

and slight stammer don't recall anyone else's Dowd. It isn't overwhelming, it's just right. This show has been built around him (as it should be), it's just that some of it isn't quite as right.

Sharon Collar is enjoyable as Dowd's sister Veta, although there are several quirks to her presentation. She has a wonderful cut-glass upper crust accent that inexplicably slips from time to time into an Irish brogue. She also seems hesitant with her lines, which causes the others to be a little hesitant when she's onstage. **Julie Lee** offers her best performance ever as the daffy niece Myrtle Mae. Screwball comedy becomes this lanky scenery-chewer. **Franc Gaxiola's** Dr. Sanderson is an unfussy, no-nonsense creation, the straight man in the asylum. However, there is little spark between him and his love interest Nurse Kelly (**Stephanie Christman**), who does a better job flirting with Hunting. **Terry Hamilton** gets a few good laughs with Dr. Chumley, but his presentation seemed flat compared to the choices he might have made. **Gary Vos'** Judge Gaffney is full of bravado, but he seemed to be the most hesitant about line fudges. **Richard Bain's** Duane Wilson is a broad creation, but he wisely chooses not to go too far with this group, and that makes it work.

Athena Hunting's staging rises and falls between farcical and straight comedy, and that's good most of the time, but there are a few brief moments of inactivity onstage that cause things to drag a bit.

Ron Hunting's set is absolutely ingenious, and it's a little playlet in itself to watch the transformation. **Stuart Bailey's** lighting works in the small space, and **Mona Nigohossian-Hynes'** costumes either hit the mark perfectly, as in Gaffney's outfit, or miss oddly, like Dowd's vest.

This production of *Harvey* is charming and even has a few nice surprises. Sometimes a home cooked meal, even with a few lumps in the gravy, hits the spot.

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