

# Commonweal Theatre Company Study Guide

## HARVEY

by Mary Chase

Student Matinees underwritten by



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Directed by Alan Bailey

Stage Manager & Props Designer.....Troy Iverson  
Set Designer.....Tom Berger  
Costume Designer.....Angela Finnes  
Lighting Designer.....Jason Underferth  
Sound Designer.....Andy Waltzer  
Assistant Stage Manager & Props Designer.....Jenna Bolland  
ASL Interpreter (June 29 performance).....Gail Devereaux

### Cast

Myrtle Mae Simmons (a young girl on the brink of coming out into society) ..... Stela Burdt  
Veta Louise Simmons (her mother) ..... Adrienne Sweeney  
Elwood P. Dowd (Veta's brother) ..... Eric Bunge  
Mrs. Ethel Chauvenet (an old family friend) ..... Nancy Carruthers Huisenga  
Ruth Kelly, R.N. (a nurse at the Chumley's Rest sanitarium) ..... Jill Underwood  
Duane Wilson (an orderly at Chumley's Rest) ..... Mike Davidovich  
Lyman Sanderson, M.D. (a young psychiatrist at Chumley's Rest) ..... Scott Dixon  
William R. Chumley, M.D. (prominent psychiatrist and founder of Chumley's Rest) . Hal Cropp  
Betty Chumley (Dr. Chumley's wife) ..... Barbara Benson Keith  
Judge Omar Gaffney (the Dowd family's attorney) ..... David Hennessey  
E.J. Lofgren (a taxi driver) ..... Troy Iverson

### Setting

1946. The library of the old Dowd family mansion and the reception room of Chumley's Rest.

### Notes from the director

Mary Chase was born in 1907 in Denver, Colorado to parents who immigrated to the United States from Ireland. In 1942, she began writing *Harvey*, a play about a friendly inebriate named Elwood P. Dowd and his invisible companion. The inspiration

for the play came from a dream she had in which a psychiatrist was being chased by a giant white rabbit. It reminded her of stories her Irish uncles had told about pookas, mischievous goblins in Irish folklore who appear only to those who believe in them.

The pooka is well-known as one of the most powerful of Irish fairy folk. It is an adroit shape-shifter, and it may appear as a horse, rabbit, goat, goblin, or dog. Though the pooka enjoys confusing and sometimes terrifying humans, it is considered benevolent. It has the power of human speech, and it has been known to give advice and lead people away from danger. The names of both Puck from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Winnie-the-Pooh are said to have derivations in common with the word "pooka."

Mary Chases's play *Harvey* enjoyed a phenomenally successful Broadway run, playing for nearly five years after its 1944 opening. It won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and the 1950 film version starring James Stewart has achieved iconic status.

The dreamer that lies in each of us should never lose sight of the following ...

    this play that has become a classic ...

    this play that has endured for generations ...

    this play that is about one of the most famous dreamers in literature was created because an artist listened to her dream. ~ Alan

*Bailey*

## The story

It is a spring afternoon at the Dowd family home, and a tea for the high-society ladies of the Wednesday Forum is in full swing. The hostess, **Veta Louise Simmons**, is hoping that the event will allow her daughter, **Myrtle Mae**, now in her twenties and still unmarried, to mingle with the mothers and grandmothers of some of the town's remaining eligible bachelors. To Veta's horror, her brother, **Elwood P. Dowd**, arrives home unexpectedly with his closest friend, Harvey, a six foot one-and-a-half inch tall white rabbit—a friend nobody else can see. Veta and Myrtle Mae are mortified as Elwood who, ever pleasant and polite, begins introducing his companion to the ladies of the Wednesday Forum, including **Mrs. Ethel Chauvenet**. The embarrassing family secret is now exposed, and all that Veta and Myrtle Mae can do is watch helplessly as their guests flee the house.

In spite of the fact that they are living in Elwood's house and being supported by his money, Veta and Myrtle Mae vow that this is the last time they will be humiliated by his eccentric behavior. They determine that the only solution is to commit Elwood to Chumley's Rest, a sanitarium (i.e. mental hospital). Later that afternoon, they arrive by cab with Elwood at the sanitarium. Elwood is hustled away by **Wilson**, the sanitarium orderly. In the office, Veta meets with **Nurse Kelly** and **Dr. Sanderson** and attempts to explain the situation of her brother and his invisible rabbit companion.

Veta's agitated state of mind, however, leads Dr. Sanderson to the conclusion that a terrible mistake has been made and that it is she, not her brother, who is the one in need of treatment—so he releases Elwood and sends Veta off to the hydro-therapy tub.

In an ensuing conversation between Dr. Sanderson and his superior, **Dr. Chumley**, it gradually becomes clear that yet another mistake has been made. It is

indeed Elwood, not Veta, who was to have been committed. Veta, having suffered many indignities, is thus released, and the hunt for Elwood is on.

In the ensuing confusion, the doctors, Veta, and Elwood all try to figure out who is really crazy: nobody, everyone, Elwood, Veta, or the doctors themselves? What, as **E.J. Lofgren** the cab driver says, is "a perfectly normal human being?" Of course, it all gets sorted out in the end, but there are many surprises (as well as comic doses of wisdom) along the way, as everyone questions just what exactly is real.

## About the play

Along with the mythical pooka, a timely event motivated Mary Chase to write *Harvey*. The second inspiration came when one day she took notice of her widowed neighbor who had lost her only son in World War II just two months earlier. In reflection Chase asked herself: "Would I ever possibly write anything that might make this woman laugh again?" (*Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 228. *Twentieth-Century American Dramatists*, p. 44). Hoping to bring laughter and respite to war-torn America, she set to work.

The play took Chase two years to write, during which time she also wrote a weekly radio program for the Teamster's Union. She would write in the evenings after her children were in bed and her husband had gone to work. *Harvey* was rewritten over fifty times and was finally submitted to New York producer Brock Pemberton who accepted it immediately. It opened to rave reviews on Broadway in 1944 and ran for four and a half years at the 48th Street Theatre. It played for a total of 1,755 performances, making it one of the longest running shows in Broadway history. Critic Louis Nichols was pleasantly surprised by *Harvey*, calling it "one of the delights of the season" (*New York Times*, 11 Nov. 1944).

There is little doubt that Elwood's unflappable demeanor, his impeccable manners and the happy world he creates around him resonated with audiences in 1944. Remember that the causalities of World War II were staggering – most estimates suggest that 60 million people died including six million Jews in concentration camps and 20 million soldiers. Many reviewers attributed *Harvey's* success to "its escapist theme [that] appealed to audiences trying to take leave of the harsh realities of the world" (*Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 228. *Twentieth-Century American Dramatists*, p. 45).

## About our production

The director chose to set this play in 1946, two years after it was written, to underscore the uncertainty the world was facing at the end of the war. What would become of America now that it wasn't unified in fighting for a righteous cause?

This setting affects the characters' psychologies more than the scenery and costumes, both of which have a characteristic 1940s appearance. Only Veta seems to be "stuck" in an earlier era, in which one's place in society and marrying early and well (in the case of her daughter) were of primary concern.

The biggest challenge in producing *Harvey* is creating two completely different locations (the mansion and the sanitarium). The style of the play dictates that the settings be portrayed naturalistically (real walls, doors, furniture, etc.). At the same

time, the director wanted the scene shifts to happen as quickly and smoothly as possible. The set designer's solution was to create a "reversible" set – a mansion wall is flipped and we are instantly looking at the sanitarium doctors' offices.

Also, the director didn't want the play to come to a screeching halt as actors moved set pieces around, so he incorporated the scene shifts into the story. The first shift demonstrates the uneasy love story between Nurse Kelly and Dr. Sanderson, while the second shift showcases the blossoming relationship between Wilson and Myrtle Mae.

## **Elwood's wisdom**

**"When I enjoy people I like to stay right with them."**

Elwood says this to Nurse Kelly and Dr. Sanderson as he asks them to join him downtown for a drink. Is Elwood discouraged at all by the fact that Kelly and Sanderson have to work until 10 p.m.?

**"As you grow older and pretty women pass you by, you will think with deep gratitude of these generous girls of your youth."**

What is at the heart of Elwood's gentle warning to Dr. Sanderson?

**"Doctor, I wrestled with reality for forty years, and I am happy to state that I finally won out over it."**

What does Elwood mean by this statement he makes to Sanderson?

**"We go down to Charlie's [bar] quite often – Harvey and I – and the proprietor is a fine man with an interesting approach to life."**

Elwood says this to Wilson, Kelly and Sanderson. Minutes later, Kelly has a phone conversation with this proprietor who appears to say some very colorful things. Compare the way Elwood describes people (in this case, the bartender) to how others might describe them. What does this say about Elwood?

**"The evening wore on! That's a nice expression. With your permission I'll say it again. The evening wore on."**

Elwood says this in the middle of a story he is telling. Elwood seems to operate on a different wavelength than the people around him. How does this quote illustrate that?

**"An element of conflict in any discussion is a good thing. It means that everybody is taking part and nobody is left out. I like that."**

Elwood has invited everybody in the sanitarium out to a bar while they express a desire for him to stay and be treated. Elwood is never disagreeable, always willing to see the positive side of any situation. When people express differing opinions, what constitutes the boundary between an argument and a healthy debate?

**"I always have a wonderful time just where I am, whomever I'm with."**

Elwood says this to Dr. Chumley as Chumley describes a place he'd rather be. Do you find this an admirable philosophy? What would the world be like if everybody felt this way?

**"My mother used to say to me, 'In this world, Elwood...you must be oh, so smart or oh, so pleasant.' For years I was smart. I recommend pleasant."**

If you had to choose, which would you rather be?

**"One can't have too many friends."**

Elwood says this to Veta as he invites the taxi driver over for dinner. Do agree or disagree with this statement? Why?

### **Things to look for / Topics for discussion**

- 1) If Myrtle wants to meet eligible men, why does Veta throw her a party where only middle aged women are invited?
- 2) What is the principal reason Mrs. Chauvenet comes to Veta's party, even though it is in honor of Myrtle?
- 3) Veta believes Elwood's visions of Harvey are not her brother's fault. Why?
- 4) When did Veta first notice Elwood had a big rabbit friend?
- 5) Veta tells Sanderson that Elwood's behavior is "a slap in the face to everything we've stood for in this community." It's clear she isn't only referring him talking to an invisible friend. What else does she object to?
- 6) How can Veta profit financially by having Elwood committed?
- 7) Almost every reference to transportation in this play involves a taxi cab. Why do you suppose these people use cabs so much?
- 8) Why is Nurse Kelly so taken with Elwood? What does Doctor Sanderson think of this?
- 9) Elwood unwittingly tells Betty Chumley why it is that some people see Harvey and others don't. What is the reason he gives?
- 10) Besides being invisible to most people, what special powers does Harvey seem to have?
- 11) Toward the end of the play, Dr. Chumley says he's been swatting at flies while miracles lean on lampposts at the corner. What does he mean?
- 12) What is Dr. Chumley's formula 977 supposed to do?
- 13) According to what Veta says she has learned in her study of art, what does a painting reveal that a photograph cannot show?
- 14) Why won't the cab driver wait for his payment, even though he knows it would only be a few minutes?

- 15) By the end of the play, how many people, do you think, have seen Harvey? How many people who haven't seen him believe that he may, in fact, exist?
- 16) In approaching this script, we decided to look at Harvey as a metaphor for the unknown. With this in mind, how do you think each character in the play handles the prospect of dealing with the unknown?
- 17) If you were living with Elwood and his behavior was becoming disruptive to your routines, what would you do? Suppose there was a treatment for him that would prevent him from seeing Harvey and wouldn't hurt him in any way. Would you ask that he undergo treatment? Why or why not?
- 18) Did you have imaginary friends as a child? Do you know people who seem to talk to themselves? How many examples can you think of from your life of behavior that is similar to Elwood's, even if it isn't as extreme?
- 19) When do you think society should tolerate eccentric behavior? At what point do you think society has a right to intervene and curb such behavior?