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Fulton's '80 Days' is a musical journey

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Theater **Review**

To circle the globe without fear of two-hour layovers or cramped middle seats, travel to **Fulton** Opera House and join Phileas Fogg and his entourage as they venture "Around the World in **80** Days."

This new musical by Julianne Homokay and Ron Barnett revisits Jules Verne's 1873 novel with a tip of the hat (in the finale) to the 1956 Oscar-winning film.

Travel is never easy, and neither is premiering a new musical. The 24 musical numbers feel like a few too many, and a couple of musical interlude dances seem to hark back to the days when musicals like "Oklahoma" featured ballet sequences.

An energetic cast of 20 includes a knockout performance by Kevin **Kraft** as Fogg's manservant, Passepartout, and a scene-stealing turn by Steven C. Rich as a gospel-singing preacher. Rich does justice to the show's best number, "Ride That Train." Other numbers, such as "Logical Solution" and the romantic ballad "Teach My Heart," provide a fine marriage of tuneful music (by Barnett) and memorable lyrics (by Homokay).

But too many songs seem solely designed to provide local color without reference to moving the story forward. In fact, there's a surprising glut of numbers in which Philly Fogg (played with understated strength by Paul Jackel) is nowhere in sight. Isn't the story supposed to be based on his bet, his fortune and his travel-induced change-of-heart from a coldly punctilious gentleman to a heroic man-in-love?

Fogg is chased around the world by Scotland Yard Inspector Fix, played by Randall Frizado, who gets the gold medal for his comic accents. Local favorite Steve Spiese gets the silver for his long list of ensemble character accents.

Female leads Jessica Edwards as Passepartout's flamboyant French flame and Anita Vasan as Fogg's rescued Indian maiden sing beautifully and look great, but don't come to life like Fogg, Fix or Jean P.

The staging (set design by Robert Klingelhofer) moves seamlessly through 17 scenes, but feels static, consisting of maps, postcard views and paintings of ships and trains. There's a nice snowfall effect when Fogg and crew take an iceboat across the plains and a terrific elephant cutout that makes for one of the production's funniest sequences.

Humor is a big plus in this sentimental story. A running gag with a station attendant (Greg Flattery) in a small booth telling the travelers why they can't buy tickets for the next leg of their journey is the best bit in the show.

Director Robin McKercher keeps this three-hour show cheerfully chugging up the steep incline of new-playdom, while an 11-piece orchestra under Barnett's direction gives the show its backbone.

In the end, although this new musical can be both fun and funny, "**80 Days**" needs to tighten its seatbelt or it may leave audiences asking, "Are we there yet?"

"Around the World in **80 Days**" runs through April 1 at **Fulton** Opera House, 12 N. Prince St. Tickets cost \$17 to \$42. For more information, call 397-7425.

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