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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 31

PHILEAS, GRAB YOUR NUNCHUCKS

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AROUND THE WORLD IN 80 DAYS

★

Directed by Frank Coraci
Written by Michael Weiss, David Benullo, and David Goldstein
With Jackie Chan, Steve Coogan, Cecile de France, and Jim Broadbent.

By J.R. Jones

Along with H.G. Wells, French novelist Jules Verne is considered the father of science fiction. His stories predicted such technological marvels as the helicopter, the satellite, the Aqua-Lung, the armored tank, and Project Apollo. His most popular book, *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873), was atypically realistic: its English hero, the imperturbable Phileas Fogg, and his French servant, Passepartout, circle the globe by train, steamship, elephant, and sail-driven sled, using routes already established by contemporary adventurers. Yet today it seems like the most prophetic thing Verne ever wrote: at the beginning of the journey Fogg is the ultimate Victorian gentleman, stubbornly ignoring the exotic scenery outside his train to focus on a perpetual game of whist, but by the end of the book his adventures have forced him to open himself up to the rest of the world.

This sly comic conceit is what keeps *Around the World in Eighty Days* fresh 130 years later, but Disney's new, idiot-friendly version is less concerned with global morality than with global markets. The story has been twisted into a numbingly standardized Jackie Chan vehicle, each stop on the journey setting the stage for a slapstick martial-arts battle. Because this is his show, the dynamic between the two characters has been reversed: Passepartout (Chan) is actually a Chinese agent trying to return a priceless statue to his native village, and Fogg, played by British TV comedian Steve Coogan, is his goofy sidekick, like Owen Wilson in the *Shanghai Noon* movies. This crass rewrite has the effect of reversing the book's message too: in a movie industry that's increasingly driven by overseas revenue, Disney's *Around the World in 80 Days* is mostly concerned with the rest of the world opening its wallet.

Verne was an avid student of geography who toured Europe, northern Africa, and the United States during his lifetime. He claimed that *Around the World in Eighty Days* was inspired by a promotional pamphlet by the British explorer and travel agent Sir Thomas Cook, but Verne biographer Peter Costello has documented other probable sources. In March 1870 a French newspaper published a global itinerary identical to the one in the novel. That same year Boston railroad magnate George Francis Train circled the globe westward, from New York to San Francisco, Japan, Hong Kong, Saigon, Singapore, Marseilles, Liverpool, and back to New York; except for an extended layover in France, his jaunt was completed in 80 days. Costello also turned up an 1872 collection of newspaper columns chronicling a similar journey, titled *Round the World* and written by one William Perry Fogg, a Cleveland businessman.

Another Verne scholar, Brian Taves, suggests that Phileas Fogg was inspired by the author's father, a Catholic attorney who had discouraged his son from embarking on a literary career and who died shortly before Verne began *Around the World in Eighty Days*. Whatever the source, Fogg is a memorable character, one who begins as an object of satire but eventually seems to win Verne's respect and affection. Like Sherlock Holmes, Fogg is precise and unemotional, looking down his nose at people who can't accommodate the measured rhythm of his life: "He was so exact that he was never in a hurry, was always ready, and was economical alike of his steps and his motions. He never took one step too many, and always went to his destination by the shortest cut; he made no superfluous gestures, and was never seen to be moved or agitated. He was the most deliberate person in the world, yet always reached his destination at the exact moment." It's the perfect comic setup for an adventure that will involve countless delays, missed connections, and other unforeseen problems, each of which Fogg negotiates without batting an eyelid.

There's a fair amount of cultural stereotype here, which Verne heightens by giving Fogg a passionate French servant. In contrast to Fogg, who lives quietly on Savile Row and repairs daily to his posh gentlemen's club, Passepartout has been knocking about all his life, working as a street singer, a circus acrobat, a gymnastics teacher, and a fireman before emigrating to England to become a valet. He hires on with Fogg, relishing the thought of a more sedentary life—a plan disrupted on his first day when Fogg bets his friends at the club that he can circle the globe in 80 days and comes home ordering Passepartout to pack immediately. Like Doctor Watson in the Holmes stories, Passepartout becomes the reader's eyes and ears in Verne's third-person narrative, which turns out to be a necessity, since Fogg is "one of those Englishmen who are wont to see foreign countries through the eyes of their domestics."

Fogg's obliviousness to the rest of the world is a running joke throughout the early chapters: not only does he intend to complete his journey on time, he hopes to do so without mentally leaving the club. "Seldom having the curiosity even to go upon the deck, he passed through the memorable scenes of the Red Sea with cold indifference; did not care to recognize the historic towns and villages which, along its borders, raised their picturesque outlines against the sky; and betrayed no fear of the dangers of the Arabic Gulf. . . . How did this eccentric personage pass his time on the 'Mongolia'? He made his four hearty meals every day, regardless of the most persistent rolling and pitching on the part of the steamer, and he played whist indefatigably." Years before William Lederer and Eugene Burdick satirized the West's cultural myopia in *The Ugly American*, Fogg may have shamed some Western readers into setting down their cards long enough to look out the window.

Of course, this being a French comedy, Fogg is redeemed by love. Traveling across central India by elephant, he and Passepartout encounter a Brahman funeral procession and learn that the young widow is to be torched in suttee. They mount a daring rescue in which Passepartout disguises himself as the corpse and rises up just as the fires are being lit, stunning the Hindu worshippers long enough for the pair to make off with the woman. Disrupting a religious ritual may seem a striking act of Western arrogance, but a life is spared—and Fogg now has something to think about besides whist. He resolves to bring the brown-skinned beauty, Aouda, back to England where she'll be safe from retribution, and she becomes a partner in his adventure. The trio arrives back in London five minutes too late, appearing to lose Fogg his wager and break him financially, but the young woman offers herself to him in spite of this, leaving him "astonished" and "penetrated."

Verne ends the story with a brilliant comic turnaround: When Passepartout is dispatched to find a minister, he discovers that it's Sunday, not Monday as they had thought. In contrast to the nonfiction accounts of westward journeys that were floating around at the time, Verne had Fogg travel east (London to Suez, Bombay, Calcutta, Hong Kong, Yokohama, San Francisco, New York, and back to London), crossing 24 time zones along the way and leaping ahead one hour with each. Because of this, he's returned to England a day earlier than anticipated and wins his wager. It's the only element of the story that smacks of science fiction, and in fact Verne got the idea from another master of the fantastic—Edgar Allan Poe, whose story "Three Sundays in a Week" exploits the same phenomenon.

Around the World in Eighty Days outsold all of Verne's other books, but what really made his fortune was the stage play that followed. Produced by the French theatrical lion Adolphe Philippe d'Ennery, it premiered in November 1874 at the 2,000-seat Porte Saint-Martin Theatre, and its emphasis on spectacle established a commercial formula that has dogged the book ever since. As Verne biographer Kenneth Allott explains, d'Ennery adapted the novel "by the simple process of dropping most of the wit and information, stressing the dramatic tension of the plot, and employing as much scenery as was humanly possible." There was a mock train engine that was overrun by marauding Indians in the Wild West sequence, and live snakes for a Malayan sequence that was added to the story. But the real star of the show was a live elephant leased from the London Zoo. "The trumpeter of my fame," Verne called it. "The first half of the evening the audience are longing for the elephant to appear, and the rest of the evening they are regretting that they won't see it again!"

This carnival atmosphere was typical of 19th-century theater, and it made *Around the World in Eighty Days* an eminently exportable stage property: after causing a sensation in Paris, where it ran for over a year, it was mounted in London, Brussels, Vienna, and New York. The story's international audience was hardly lost on Hollywood showman Michael Todd, who chose *Around the World in Eighty Days* as the follow-up to his first wide-screen hit, *Oklahoma!* (1955). The development of wide-screen processes was part of the movie industry's panicked reaction to the growing popularity of television, and Todd intended to pack his new 65-millimeter frame with as many stars and postcard vistas as he could get his hands on. The great S.J. Perelman, one of three writers on the picture, ruefully described Todd to his friend T.S. Eliot as a "combination of Quasimodo and P.T. Barnum," but Todd was savvy enough to realize that a movie as expensive as his would have to draw well overseas, and he was gunning for an audience of at least a hundred million.

The casting played an important part in this scheme. Todd found the perfect Phileas Fogg in English actor David Niven, but to broaden the film's appeal, Passepartout became a Spaniard—the Mexican comedian Cantinflas, who had a huge Latin American following. Among the star-studded cast were numerous Europe-to-Hollywood transplants (Charles Boyer, Marlene Dietrich, Peter Lorre, Noel Coward, Victor McLaglen, Cedric Hardwicke, Trevor Howard), British character actors (Robert Newton, Robert Morley, John Gielgud, Reginald Denny, Finlay Currie, Hermione Gingold, Beatrice Lillie), and celebrities from France (Fernandel, Martine Carol) and Spain (musician Jose Greco, bullfighter Luis Miguel Dominguin). Shot on location in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, the film cost $6 million—an outrageous budget at the time—but upon its release it screened around the world for two years, grossing $65 million. Nearly two-thirds of that came from overseas rentals.

Unfortunately Todd's business model is standard operating procedure in Hollywood today. As David Kipen points out in his recent *Atlantic* piece, "Offshoring the Audience," the multi-

national corporations that own the seven major studios have largely abandoned American-themed films to independent producers, focusing instead on mammoth blockbusters that can score nine-figure box-office and video revenues around the world. During Hollywood's golden age, Kipen writes, the "world market was still just a nice bonus, a modest hedge against a fickle industry's occasional reverses. Now, in contrast, the hedge has outgrown the castle. International film box-office revenues regularly surpass domestic ones.... In less than thirty years, roughly since the premiere of *Star Wars*, domestic grosses—once the industry's bread and butter—have become a virtual loss leader."

This economic formula explains why action star Jackie Chan has become such a hot property in Hollywood at age 50, after a quarter-century career in Hong Kong. *Shanghai Noon* (2000) cost almost $80 million to produce and market; in the U.S. it grossed about $57 million, which would have been a disaster if not for the $42 million it collected overseas. *Shanghai Knights* (2003) was the same story: $75 million in costs, $60 million in domestic grosses, $29 million in overseas grosses. *The Tuxedo* (2002), which cost $85 million, actually made more money overseas ($54 million) than it did here ($50 million). All three movies fit Kipen's description of a typical Hollywood export in the new millennium: "overbearing, carelessly told, and gang-written into incomprehensibility."

Those words aptly sum up the new *Around the World*. The Michael Todd version, for all its lumbering excess, had the virtue of sticking closely to Verne's narrative; its only significant inventions were the memorable hot-air balloon journey (grafted onto the story from Verne's first novel, *Five Weeks in a Balloon*) and a brief layover in Spain so that Cantinflas could indulge in his specialty, a comic bullfight. As often happens in the movie business, this new version seems to be based not on the Verne novel but on the earlier hit, with Passepartout's nationality tweaked yet again and a string of cameo appearances that range from the mildly amusing (Kathy Bates, Sammo Hung, Luke and Owen Wilson) to the dismal (Rob Schneider, Arnold Schwarzenegger).

This time around Phileas Fogg is no idle gentleman but an avid inventor whose cockamamy devices (a jet pack, a propeller-driven automobile) have made him the laughingstock of the Royal Academy of Science. Passepartout enters his service after stealing from the Bank of England a jade statue of the Buddha that he hopes to return to his native village in the Himalayas. As played by the witty Coogan, Fogg is a cowardly bumbler along the lines of Bob Hope, and Passepartout has to engineer his wager with the president of the Royal Academy (Jim Broadbent) as a means of escaping London with the artwork. Along their journey Fogg and Passepartout pick up a spirited Parisian woman (Cecile de France), who becomes Fogg's unlikely love interest, and somehow Passepartout persuades his master that they'll make better time if they cross the highest mountain range in the world.

This detour seems even more bizarre given the fact that Chan's native Hong Kong was one of Fogg's original destinations. But fans of Jules Verne would be justified in wondering if any of the writers on this project even bothered to crack the book. Just about every significant sequence has been dropped—Passepartout's rescue of Aouda atop the funeral pyre, Fogg's duel with a vicious blowhard aboard a Union Pacific Railroad car, the train's foolhardy crossing of a dilapidated bridge over a deep ravine—so that Chan will have time to fight off ninjas at every turn.

Because this is a Disney movie, the producers can't resist trotting out a techno version of "It's a Small World" over the end credits. In fact, the world is smaller these days—and aims are narrower as well. ■