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Arthur B. Evans  
*DePauw University*

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# Science Fiction Studies

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## Verne on Stage.

**Jules Verne.** *Journey Through the Impossible.* Trans. Edward Baxter. Ed. Jean-Michel Margot. Artwork Roger Leyonmark. Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2003. 181pp. \$21.00 hc.

I have been remiss in not mentioning earlier this excellent little book, the first English translation of an 1882 play by Jules Verne that shows him at his most whimsically science-fictional. It features on-stage journeys to the center of the Earth, beneath the seas to Atlantis, and through outer space to the planet Altor. The cast of characters in *Journey* recycles a host of recognizable Vernian heroes such as Professor Lidenbrock, Captain Nemo, Impey Barbicane and J.T. Maston, and Doctor Ox, among others. The main protagonist of the play is the son of Captain Hatteras who is seeking to “surpass what has been done by the heroes whose names are written in these books, to go beyond the frontiers they could not cross” (42)—i.e., to go beyond the extraordinary to the impossible. Concisely translated from the French by veteran Verne translator Edward Baxter, this delightful play is triply rare: very few of Verne’s theater works are available in English; *Journey* is the only one to incorporate bits and pieces from his most celebrated early sf novels; and the original French script of *Journey* had been lost for nearly a century when, in 1978, a hand-written copy was finally discovered in the French government archives.

Although he quickly became famous for the scientific novels of his *Voyages Extraordinaires*, theater was Verne’s true passion. He began his writing career as a playwright in the 1850s and several of his plays were performed at the Théâtre Historique, the Théâtre Lyrique, and the Bouffes-Parisiennes long before his historic 1862 encounter with publisher Pierre-Jules Hetzel. And, not surprisingly, once he had become an internationally best-selling author, Verne again returned to the theater, teaming up with Adolphe d’Ennery to adapt a few of his novels to the stage. As explained in the

introduction by Jean-Michel Margot, president of the North American Jules Verne Society (the organization sponsoring the publication of this book):

The success [of these plays] was striking.... *Around the World in Eighty Days*—a lavish production with Indians, Hindus, elephants, serpents, trains, and shipwrecks—ran for 415 successive performances from November 7, 1874 to December 20, 1875. Encouraged by this success, Verne reissued *Children of Captain Grant* in 1878 and *Michel Strogoff* in 1880. (14)

Verne penned *Journey Through the Impossible* next; it opened at the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin on November 25, 1882 and then ran for 97 performances. Incidentally, contrary to what one might suppose, Verne became wealthy not from the royalties he earned from his published novels, but rather from his share of the gate of these very popular plays adapted from his novels—much like authors today who get rich by negotiating lucrative deals for the television and cinema rights to their books.

In addition to Margot's expert introduction, Leyonmark's fine illustrations (which recall in style the nineteenth-century woodcuts of Verne's original editions), and twenty pages of notes on the text, this book also includes two press reviews of *Journey Through the Impossible*, one written by a Parisian reviewer that was published in French on November 25, 1882, and the other (anonymous) that appeared in English in *The New York Times* on December 19, 1882. The first characterized the play as "very lavish ... very beautiful and very elegant" but then went on—rather perplexingly—to complain that "it lacks imagination, novelty, and ingenuity" (148). The second reviewer described the play as "a salmagundi, pretty nearly headless and tailless, yet which must be acknowledged to be a triumph of stage carpentry, scene-painting, and costumery" (136). Both reviewers predicted that *Journey* would probably be very successful at the box office because of its visual appeal—in similar fashion to movie reviewers today who explain the success of many contemporary sf films as being mostly due to their eye-popping special effects.

**The North American Jules Verne Society, in sponsoring the development and publication of this book, explained that its principal purpose was to make a substantial contribution to Verne scholarship. It has certainly done so. Highly recommended.—ABE**