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'Elephant Man' shows the beauty, avoids the freak show

By **STACY NICK**
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I admit it; I questioned Bas Bleu director Cathy Reinking's decision not to show a deformed John Merrick in her rendition of "The Elephant Man."

One of the most well-known storylines, "The Elephant Man" tells the story of Merrick's rise from obscurity and ridicule to fame and respect. Merrick's severe deformity, believed to have been caused by Proteus Syndrome or "Elephant Man's Disease," which causes cauliflower-like, unchecked growth of bones and skin, made him legendary, but the play focuses on his kind nature and rise beyond his appearance. It seemed a stretch to push the audience to imagine the disfigurement.

Won't make that mistake again.

Reinking's decision was right on the money. Stage makeup would only have drawn attention away from the depth of this play and the beauty in Merrick.

I also wondered if having cellist Sarah Studebaker playing on stage wouldn't disrupt the flow. Wrong again.

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Bradley Wakoff/The Coloradoan

Robert Reid stars as Dr. Treves, with cellist Sarah

The music added an additional texture to the play that would have been sorely missed. More than just background music, it played into the performance like another character.

But there was one thing (or more to the point about a dozen) things missing - actors.

The cast only had seven actors portraying 19 characters. The only person not doing double (or in some cases triple or quadruple) duty was Stetson Weddle, as Merrick.

Often productions use supporting actors in multiple roles but this was just too much. The actors all did fine jobs keeping track of their roles but for the audience it was a distraction. Instead of concentrating on the performance, you're thinking "I like Kurt Brighton better as the freak show ringleader than the bishop."

In his first Bas Bleu performance, Weddle played Merrick with a simplicity and beauty few could match, creating a character you immediately connect with and feel for. In the final scene, as Merrick prepares to die, Weddle incorporates nuances so subtle yet immediately understood that you don't even notice that for about five minutes there is no dialogue whatsoever.

As Merrick's savior, Dr. Frederick Treves, actor Robert M. Reid was a bit of a roller coaster ride on opening night. His performance hit several highs including a scene where he tries to shield Merrick from knowing that the end is near, but went flat in spots where the dialogue dragged.

Wendi Ishii, Bas Bleu artistic director and co-founder, helped kick things up a notch. As actress Mrs. Kendall, Ishii provides timing that is both comic and crippling. At one point as Kendall is faced with exposing the most intimate part of herself Ishii keeps her back to the audience, using only her voice and her stature she is able to express a mixture of fear, shame and devotion.

The supporting cast, although stretched thin as earlier noted, does a fantastic job.

Brighton and Greg Clark obviously had fun with their sideshow barker roles and Tamara Todres transitioned easily between her roles as a freak show act, a nurse and a princess.

"The Elephant Man" is a poignant play that, while hitting a few lulls, is beautifully done with surprising insight. Reinking takes a well-known story and shows it in a way that addresses Merrick's exploitation without exploiting him further.

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Studebaker in the background in Bas Bleu Theatre's "The Elephant Man."

'The Elephant Man'

When: through July 23; 7:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays with 2:30 p.m. matinees July 3, 10 and 17 and 7:30 p.m. shows July 7, 14 and 21

Where: Bas Bleu Theatre, 401 Pine St.

Cost: \$17 for adults; \$12 for seniors 65 and older and \$10 for students; Thursday and Sunday matinees are two for one (Parents note: There is brief, partial nudity)

Information and tickets: www.basbleu.org or 498-8949