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Thursday, June 23, 2005

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## Noble man, deformed culture

"Elephant" reveals its beauty in solid performances

By Bob Bows  
Special to The Denver Post

While animals may abandon their disabled, human beings would like to believe that we have evolved beyond this behavior, and certainly the little protections afforded by our anti-discrimination laws are a step in the right direction.

But as the story of Joseph Merrick tells us, there is much more we can do to foster the spiritual and artistic nature of all humans, including those in whom nature has altered the standard set of genes.

Borrowing from the Academy Award-winning movie, Bas Bleu Theatre's current production of "The Elephant Man," directed by Cathy Reinking, opens with a cinematic snapshot of Victorian England and its rigid beliefs - including its religious pretensions and caste system - while introducing the principle characters of this troubling biographical tale.

Merrick, who suffers from bone and tissue



Kurt Brighton, left, as Joseph Merrick's carry handler, and Robert M. Reid as Merrick's mentor star in The Elephant Man. (Bas Bleu Theatre)

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abnormalities, is forced into a workhouse as a child. Later comes a stint in a freak show until, in a final act of abuse, he is abandoned in Brussels, Belgium. Fortuitously, Merrick is sent to the Royal London Hospital, where he finds a home under the patronage of Dr. Frederick Treves, who once examined him.

Unlike the film, the stage version of this story does not attempt to re-create Merrick's physical condition other than by the posture and voice of his portrayer. The rest of the start- ling details are introduced through set posters and educational lobby displays.

In a detailed and sensitive performance, Stetson Weddle deftly conveys the indications of Merrick's condition with his hobbled gait, twisted posture and gentle voice. As Merrick's cause is taken up by royals and noted artists, Weddle's Merrick grows from tentative and cowering into a delicate blend of insight and gentleness.

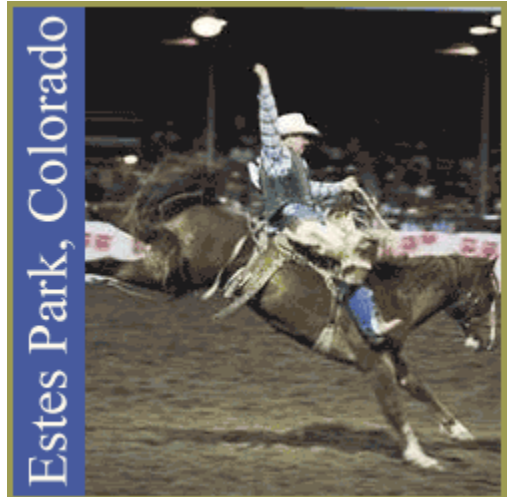
Merrick's relationship with Treves undergoes a vast transformation as well. At first, Treves is an idiosyncratic combination of cold scientific curiosity, self-righteous moralism and patient tutelage - a man who in his written account inexplicably changes Merrick's name from Joseph to John.

Unlike Merrick, who thrives under mentorship, Treves fails to heed the wise words of his superior, Carr Gomm, the hospital's governor. Thus later we witness the precocious student, Merrick, giving moral instruction to Treves, who is unable to see his own cultural prejudices.

Robert

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M. Reid introduces us to Treves as a vibrant, optimistic professional, warmed by the prospect of a distinguished medical career. But rather than let successful research guide his direction, Reid's Treves disintegrates as material concerns eat away at his well-being. It is an impressive dramatic arc.

In many ways, the story is framed by Gomm, who secures funding from Queen Victoria and the public to support Merrick's care, and who writes the final encapsulation of events for the London Times. Here, L. Michael Scovel's Gomm is worldly and authoritative, though more understated than need be, given that his monologues essentially open and close the play.

Kurt Brighton delivers a wonderfully coarse and scheming Ross, Merrick's carny handler, while Wendy Ishii's Mrs. Kendall delicately explores

Merrick's artistic nature. Sarah Studebaker's soulful and original cello accompaniment creates a thoughtful and moody atmosphere.

Reinking's naturalistic settings and direction allow Weddle to emulate Merrick's soft-spoken style, but the gap between the theater's cozy seating and its large, and at times remote, stage, unnecessarily distances the audience from what could be a much more intimate experience.

*Bob Bows reviews theater for KUVU/89.3 FM, at ColoradoDrama.com and for Variety. He can be reached at [BBows@ColoradoDrama.com](mailto:BBows@ColoradoDrama.com).*

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## "The Elephant Man"

DRAMA|Bas Bleu Theatre Company, 401 Pine St., Fort Collins|Directed by Cathy Reinking|Starring Robert M. Reid, Stetson Weddle, L. Michael Scovel, Wendy Ishii and Kurt Brighton|THROUGH JULY 23|Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays at 7:30 p.m.; Sundays at 2:30 pm,|2 hours, 5 minutes|\$17, with discounts for seniors and students|970-498-8949

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