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No Freak Show

Bas Bleu's thoughtful *Elephant Man* explores the spirit of outcasts.

By Juliet Wittman

The Elephant Man is based on the life of Joseph Merrick, who was born in Victorian London and suffered from a hideously deforming disease that resulted in overgrowths of bone and hanging excrescences of putrid flesh. He smelled of decay. His head was so large that he couldn't sleep lying down. He had a severe limp, and one of his arms was a uselessly hanging flipper. Abandoned by his father and stepmother, Merrick became the primary attraction in a freak show, from which he was rescued by doctor Frederick Treves. Treves had Merrick ensconced in London Hospital for tests. There, his intelligence and poetic imagination were discovered, and he became something of a celebrity, receiving visits from the famed and wealthy.

The story of the Elephant Man, as he was called in the freak show, is more familiar to us now than it was when Bernard Pomerance wrote this play in the 1970s. The lead character's deformity surprises us less, and there's little suspense in the storyline. But in a series of brief scenes, Pomerance uses Merrick's plight -- his loneliness, his bewildered questions -- to highlight some of the hypocrisies of Victorian society. By extension, he also skewers elements of contemporary society.

The play suggests that, in some sense, all of us are freaks. On one level, Frederick Treves is the sort of Victorian gentleman we find so often in the work of Charles Dickens: the kindly figure who provides a destitute orphan with food, clean bedding and a chance in life, and whose generosity mitigates the cruelty of the social system. But Treves is not *Oliver Twist's* Mr. Brownlow. His motives are more self-interested and more complex. Initially, at least, he's not so different from the villainous Ross, who exploited Merrick in the freak show. Treves wants to use the Elephant Man for research and to make his reputation as a doctor. He destroys Merrick's chance of any kind of relationship with a woman. But eventually he does become a genuine friend and protector. Meanwhile, the head of London Hospital is delighted with the financial support Merrick's case attracts to the institution. And as for the rich and well-placed, they use Merrick as the rich and well-placed tend to use people: to titillate their jaded senses and show they're au courant.

Miners Alley presented *The Elephant Man* two years ago, with a strong focus on stylization and ensemble. Colorful carnival types swirled around the central figure of Merrick, and the focus was more on Victorian society -- its mores and dynamics -- than on Merrick's thoughts and feelings. That production brought home the fact that Treves's early blindness and arrogance stemmed from his position as an Englishman in an English century, and underlined the parallels with our own time and place. Merrick was a freak in nineteenth century England, but so were people of different nationalities, the very poor and the subjugated colonials. For every Merrick rescued from mockery and starvation, there were thousands of people left to miserable fates.

The Bas Bleu production is lower key, and in some ways more sophisticated than the one at Miners Alley. Cathy Reinking's direction is intelligent; the performances are good. Rather than street sounds and cries, a moaning cello (beautifully played by Sarah Studebaker) underlines the action. The director's focus is less on the historical milieu than on the inner lives of Merrick and Treves. There are advantages to this approach, but also losses.

William A. Cotton



Stetson Weddle in *The Elephant Man*.

Details

Who / What:

The Elephant Man

Details:

Presented by Bas Bleu through July 23, 970-498-8949, www.basbleu.org

Where:

401 Pine Street, Fort Collins

For every production of *Elephant Man*, the director and lead actor have to decide how to portray Merrick's deformity. Generally, directors avoid padding and thick make-up, and actors communicate Merrick's physical problems through voice and movement. Stetson Weddle's approach is minimal. His limp is slight, he speaks in a low monotone, stuttering periodically. Only his eyes express the protagonist's emotions. I imagine this approach works beautifully for those seated in the front row of the theater, but it's sometimes too subtle for the rest of the audience, causing Merrick to seem expressionless, and vitiating the effect of his piercing and innocent questions.

Some of the dialogue concerns the clash between science and faith. Merrick, whose piety is generous, natural and unself-conscious, is building a model cathedral as a tribute to Mrs. Kendall, an actress who sometimes visits him. In this production, the model is a shining form behind glass, growing scene by scene. It would have been touching to see it actually taking shape under Merrick's hands.

Robert M. Reid does well as Treves, particularly in the dream scene in which the roles reverse, and Merrick dissects Treves's physiognomy in biting detail. Kurt Brighton provides good service in a number of roles, and Greg Clark is a convincing British working stiff. Tamara Todres has a fine clear voice, and the cleanest English accent of the evening.

Wendy Ishii shows us Mrs. Kendall's transformation as the character overcomes both her own artificiality and her original revulsion toward Merrick. Both she and Weddle are terrific in the scene in which he tells her he has never seen a woman's body and she bares her breasts for him. Ishii has her back to the audience at this moment, but the current of feeling between the two of them -- expressed in his eyes and her perfect stillness -- is electrifying.

The pace is sometimes slow, and the cello music, which works brilliantly in some places, feels intrusive in others. But overall, this is a thoughtful and sometimes moving production.