

theater

Blind Sigh

Bas Bleu's Elephant Man sheds light on the classic play.

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*It was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind*

—from American poet John Godfrey Saxe's "The Blindmen and the Elephant"

The blundering blindmen of Saxe's famous poem came upon an elephant and each "saw" only the portion of the elephant upon which he lit. One grasped the tusk and believed the beast to be shaped like a spear. Another found the squirming trunk and pronounced it quite like a snake. The others envisioned a rope, a wall, a fan and a tree.

Saxe's moral was that each man saw only what he grasped, remaining in ignorance of the elephant's totality.

The characters that populate Bas Bleu Theatre's production of *The Elephant Man* also see only their own interpretations of a man trapped inside a hideous and bestial body.

As is now commonly known, a hereditary disease caused John Merrick's bones to grow lumpy and massive and his skin to sag in cauliflower-textured bags. Yet trapped within his body was an intelligent and sensitive mind.

Like David Lynch's film of the same name, Bernard Pomerance's Tony Award-winning play is based on Merrick's life. However, it differs in that Pomerance primarily explores the impact this gentle man had on the

Victorian middle class and aristocracy.

The gentlefolk meet Merrick after his physician, Sir Frederick Treves, has rescued him from a life of filth and ridicule on London's streets and given him a home at the London Hospital.

Merrick's story provides the momentum for the play, but the moral and dramatic impetus comes from the impact he has on the main characters. Like the blind men of Saxe's poem,

Similarly, Weddle evokes the inherent humanity of Merrick through selected spotlighting of his slender left arm, the one untouched limb on his deformed body.

Weddle's Merrick is fragile, unique and lonely, as subdued emotionally as he is physically. Weddle's moments of greatest intensity are reflected on his friends' faces. With the intelligence of an adult but the innocence of a child, he asks difficult and painful questions.

"If your mercy is so cruel, what do you have for justice?"

The two people most affected are the sensitive yet stuffy Dr. Treves (Robert Reid) and the socially well-connected actress Mrs. Kendall (the ubiquitous Wendy Ishii).

Reid, who was breastingaking in OpenStage's *The Drawer Boy*, takes on a role equal both in size and importance to Weddle's. His Treves is all charity and benevolence at the start, but tortured with reality crumbling at play's end.

Unfortunately, his character is asked to stand in for an entire middle class and its rigid moral system. Reid mostly manages to make Treves' crisis of faith an individual experience.

In particular, there is a moment when Merrick asks why Mrs. Kendall can no longer visit him. Treves stands

in agonized silence until Merrick leaves the room. In that tortured moment, we see the price the good doctor knows he is paying for obeying the onerous rules of Victorian society.

The generous Mrs. Kendall is the only character who does not seek to use Merrick as a mirror. Rather, as his staunchest friend, she sees his desire to find a reflection of himself in her. When Merrick finally finds the courage to confide his deepest sadness—he has never lain with a woman—she is not appalled at the thought.

In a tender scene, Ishii's Mrs. Kendall allows herself to be as unprotected as Merrick has been for much of his life. For him, she opens her blouse (with her back to the audience) and lets down her hair. Rather than letting the moment become about nudity, or even physical beauty, Ishii emanates full trust, friendship and love.

This action sets off a firestorm, however, when the moralistic Treves stumbles upon the two. Much is the hurly-burly that ensues. Unfortunately, this includes a long, hair-pulling and rambling monologue that stops the action and adds little to the plot.

The play involves dream sequences with pinheads, a bloodthirsty mob that can only be implied, many lengthy speeches and stories and two nervous breakdowns. Seasoned director Cathy Reinking juggles these picture-puzzle elements, maintains a cohesive whole and tenderly fulfills the playwright's vision.

The spare set is dominated by three blood-red carnival banners, displaying the Elephant Man's twisted figure. At the rear, a model of St. Philip's Church, which Merrick builds throughout, is reflected in grand silhouette. The model steadily enlarges, mirroring both Merrick's personal growth and the deeply religious man's growth to the heavenly world beyond.

What makes *The Elephant Man* most effective is that, by making his play serve as a mirror, Pomerance makes no judgments. The answers lie solely in our mind's eye.

Pomerance lets us grasp the elephant's ear and find a fan, or his leg and believe it to be a tree. He allows each of us to see what we want to see.

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Bas Bleu Theatre's production of *The Elephant Man* continues through July 23. Curtain is 7:30 p.m. for Thursday, Friday and Saturday performances. Sunday matinees are at 2:30 p.m. Ticket prices are \$17 for adults, \$12 for seniors and \$10 for students. Two-for-one tickets are offered for Thursday and Sunday nights. Info at 970/498-8949 or basbleu.org.



Bas Bleu Theater presents *The Elephant Man*.

each looks on Merrick and sees a mirrored facet of his or her own personality.

As is traditional, Stetson Weddle plays Merrick without prosthesis or distorting make-up. This allows the audience to focus on his character's personality, instead of the gross deformities. Weddle judiciously selects slight physical references to the disease: a game leg, a club arm, a heavy head. His simple vocal device—a nearly constant, undertoned moan—creates the "creature" without the diversion of prosthetics.