



More Man Than Elephant

John Merrick, the famously deformed Elephant Man, was the original American celebrity. The man himself was not an American, but the nature of his fame certainly was. He was a larger-than-life spectacle both loved and hated because of his looks. Admirers worshipped him while haters insisted that he was grotesque and irrelevant. In those ways he was the Tom Cruise of Victorian England. The life of John Merrick is sensationally chronicled in Bernard Pomerance's 1977 play *The Elephant Man*. Bas Bleu Theatre Company is currently producing this modern classic under the direction of Cathy Reinking.

Anyone who was interested in pop culture in the '80s knows the story of the Elephant Man. Whether from Pomerance's play, David Lynch's biographical movie, or the rumor that Michael Jackson freakishly sought to buy Merrick's remains, everyone had heard of him. As a child I was fascinated by the fact that John Merrick was forcibly expelled from his mother's womb when she was stepped on by a rampaging elephant, which I learned from a friend. I believed this for years until I discovered that the true story is only slightly less interesting. For the uninitiated, here is the jist: The deformed and disabled Merrick was paraded around as freak and displayed for money

by sleazy hustler, Ross. As soon as he was deemed unprofitable and cast away, Merrick was taken in, cleaned, and studied by Dr. Frederick Treves. When Merrick revealed his sensitive nature and above-average intelligence, he was inducted into the ranks of England's high society. As this true story unfolds, the audience is faced with large questions about the importance of physical appearances and how to measure an individual's worth.

Mounds of makeup would have to cover an actor's entire head and most of his body in order for him to truly appear like John Merrick. Instead, performances of this character are done without makeup; Merrick's disabilities are implied by slight physical contortions and vocal effects like labored breathing and speech impediments. I have always felt that this role is incredibly challenging because the actor must convey complex emotions while convincing the audience of his extreme physical challenges. Here, Stetson Weddle admirably handles the task. Weddle's Merrick is smart, perceptive, honest and completely disfigured. His labored breathing doesn't allow him to talk quickly or extensively but subtle physical cues reveal the depth of his words and his emotions. The large paintings of Merrick that comprise the backdrop to this production help the audi-

ence to see Weddle as the Elephant Man but he deserves most of the credit because ultimately the point is to depict Merrick as more man than elephant.

As Ross, Kurt Brighton oozes the right combination of sleaze and charm complete with a gaudy plaid suit and a tip of his hat to the ladies. Brighton's Ross is the quintessential huckster born to generate hype and money. He loudly advertises the Elephant Man and nearly convinces the audience to throw money onstage if this will hasten the process of revealing Merrick's face. Later, sick and destitute, Ross pathetically asks Merrick for money suggesting that he deserves it for delivering him to London's elite. As usual Brighton raises the play's energy level when he is present and endows an unlikeable character with humanity and surprising grace.



Robert M. Reid is all business in his treatment of his character, Frederick Treves. The doctor is serious and driven, ably working to help Merrick. While he can find no helpful diagnosis or cure for Merrick's symptoms, he makes sure that the man is financially secure and as comfortable as possible. Reid accurately portrays his character and gives the impression that, if he were a poor man, he might hawk the Elephant Man for money and, like

Ross, convince himself that it's for Merrick's own good. For Merrick's social development he arranges meetings between Merrick and the famous actress Mrs. Kendall (Wendy Ishii) which proves to be very stimulating for his patient. Ishii is engaging as the actress who is able to give Merrick sincere respect and dignity. Ishii's natural charm is key to the one unselfish role in the play.

Director Cathy Reinking did an honor to this classic script by focusing on pulling great performances from the actors while keeping the play stylistically minimal. Live cellist Sarah Studebaker is featured throughout the show, giving it generous doses of melancholy atmosphere. The Elephant Man truly deserves his celebrity. If he were alive today, I would be a diehard fan, that is, unless he embraced Scientology. **AW**

The Elephant Man

Bas Bleu

401 Pine St., Ft. Collins

Through July 23

Fridays & Saturdays 7:30 p.m.

Thursdays 7:30 p.m.

Sundays 2:30 p.m.

\$17, \$12 Seniors, \$10 Students

498-8949