

Berkshire Theatre Group, Stockbridge, MA
The Elephant Man by Bernard Pomerance. Directed by Eric Hill.
Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

“Help! Me!!”

A creature that, more or less stands upright like a man, speaks two words in an emphatic tone and changes history in the 1880s: thus begins the story of John Merrick, the Elephant Man, a sideshow freak in London, refused an exhibition permit in Brussels, and abandoned by his greedy keeper. The words are spoken to a famous medical researcher and surgeon attached to the London Hospital, Frederick Treves. The two become allies in a world disposed to beauty and normalcy, a world that has little interest in anything progressive. What happens to both of them is the story of this play, now on stage at the Berkshire Theatre Group’s Unicorn Theatre in very old-fashioned Stockbridge, Massachusetts, an appropriate setting for a story of revolution in the human soul.



Michael Wartella (second from left) and The Cast of The Elephant Man;
Photo: Tucker Bair

The hideous man’s appearance is made clear, not through makeup or costume, by genuine talent and acting ability. In 1979 it was Philip Anglim; in 1980 it was John Hurt; in 2012 the venerable Williamstown Theatre Festival had Bradley Cooper in the title role. Now, in Stockbridge we have the up-and-coming local actor Michael Wartella in the difficult role, one that almost

requires a standby chiropractor in the wings. Wartella delivers a performance that shines as bright as the new electric streetlights must have when they were first installed in London. He is completely believable as he hauls his awkward, crippled body around the stage, hurling his words at an uncomprehending world. He shows us the steady growth of the man as friendly, accommodating colleagues assist him in his education of what a man really is in life. Wartella lets us know John Merrick for all the richness in his mind and in his heart. “My head is so big,” he says, “because it is filled with dreams.” The actor subtly and blatantly gives us this historic man in all his misery and glory as he reads, questions, worships, designs churches and examines the differences between men and women. It is an award-deserving performance.

He is balanced on stage by Harry Smith who plays the surgeon who befriends the sideshow freak and creates from him a man to be reckoned with in his own way. Treves does not want to duplicate himself, but only to free the human being trapped inside the elephant man. Smith is a subtle actor who allows the character he plays to emerge gracefully. His choices are delicate and his character's growth through his morality is shocking at times. Smith handles it all with an actor's inner qualities and his performance is so believable that we actually forget that we are watching a play and not a real person with a real dilemma.

As the actress Mrs. Kendal, Treves' choice of a companion for Merrick, Laura Shatkus brings humanity to perfect life. Her performance is the antithesis of subtle; her blatant growing respect for the elephant man is beautiful to behold. Her absolute opposite is Merrick's first



E. Gray Simons III; Photo: Tucker Bair

“handler” Ross, played by E. Gray Simons III. He pulls out the stops, as it were, and in his final scene with Merrick he exposes himself for the manipulative and greedy, selfish side of humanity that he is. Putting Ross and Kendal in the same play gives us perfect picture of how the human race is constituted and it give Pomerance a chance, from that 1970s past, to comment on our own political times.

The rest of the cast also deliver fine performances. Robert G. McKay as the hospital administrator whose sympathies for Merrick lie more in the financial rewards the elephant man

brings to his institution is excellent. Hanna Koczela as both the revolted Miss Sandwich and the magnanimous Princess Alexandra gives both roles their needed reality. Dan Woods plays Bishop Walsham How with so much sincerity that one could almost consider converting to the Church of England.

As important and relevant is the acting ability of this fine company, the work of the designers and technicians makes the play live on the stage. Movement director Isadora Wolfe has obviously worked with Wartella to develop the utter reality of his physical performance and the result was flawless in design and execution. Amy Avila's costume design, while both elegant and perfect brought a sense of current relevance into the play through two suits that seemed to be current attire while all the rest of the costumes were ideally period. Matthew E. Adelson's lighting design was among the finest work he has brought to



Mike Wartella, Laura Shatkus, Harry Smith;
Photo: Tucker Bair

this stage and Randall Parsons' set design was both fluid and correct for this play. The projections designed by Brad Peterson were both helpful in understanding Merrick and a bit difficult to read on occasion. Scott Killian's music worked very well in this production.

Holding it all together, and guiding this ship of fools, is the director's job and it has been handled brilliantly by Eric Hill. He seems to have taken this quirky play seriously and delivered it to The Larry Vaber Stage at the Unicorn Theatre with all of its emotional bells and whistles not just intact but on complete display. I think it must be considered his finest work to date.

This is a very special play, a bit odd and a bit unsatisfying at the end, but one that entertains and instructs, thrills and horrifies in its brevity. As the unofficial season opener for the Berkshires Summer in the Arts it is one that should not be missed. It is that good.

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The Elephant Man plays at the Unicorn Theatre, 6 East Street, Stockbridge, MA, through June 15. For information and tickets go to BerkshireTheatreGroup.org or call 413-997-4444.

