

The ProAm production of **The Elephant Man** at the PAC this season is a remounting of the 20th anniversary production I had the pleasure to direct in New York. What follows is a review of that earlier production.

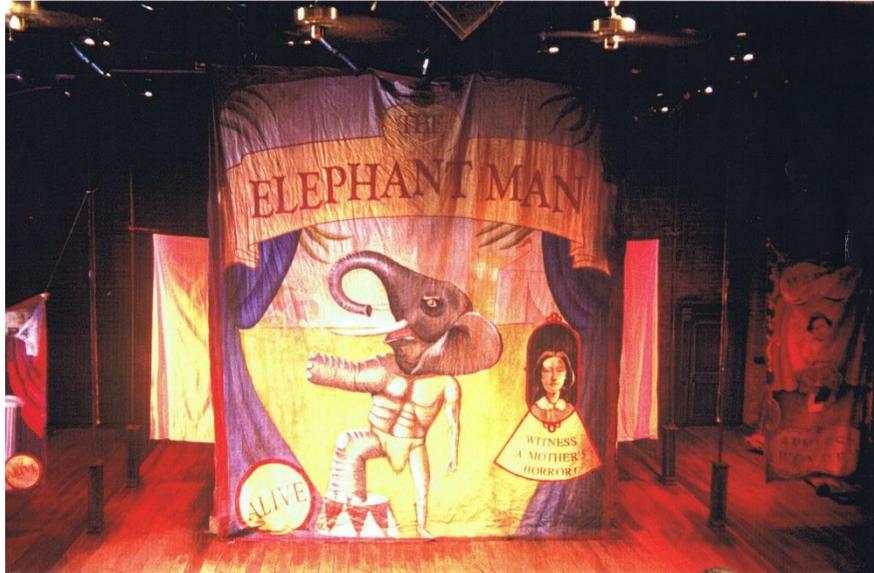


photo from the 20th anniversary production of *The Elephant Man*

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by Lee Winston

Review *The Elephant Man* at Theatre @ St. Clement's

The Elephant Man, Bernard Pomerance's story of John Merrick a man of great physical ugliness who fascinated and obsessed Victoria's London in the 1880's, has returned to the New York stage for the first time since its Broadway opening twenty years ago – and welcome back.

The Elephant Man, at Theatre @ St. Clement's for a limited run, has been given an ambitious and beautiful production smoothly directed by Bart Lovins and produced by Theatre @ St. Clement's and Kevin Jay Productions.

Mr. Lovins is a very young man from Louisville, Kentucky, whose work is well worth watching. That "smoothly" above is hard won, because Mr. Pomerance's play is written as a series of blackout sketches, and that is not what Mr. Lovins chose to stage. He has invented out-of-time sequences and street life occurrences that make a seamless unfolding of illusion and dramatic substance that seem to come "through a glass darkly" joining our time to that one. The effect makes obvious their social context and intensifies any feelings these characters evoke; it oddly makes them more *ours*. The shadow of Darwin had shaken their society, and it is still not quiet in ours – witness the Kansas creationism flap.

The weight of the play rests on its Merrick and its Dr. Treves, played here by two very able young men – Steve Gibbons and Steven Williams respectively – and strongly abetted by three others. First is Melissa Gray as the actress Mrs. Kendall, who reads to Merrick, becomes his friend and who has noticed that deformed as much of his body is he is sexually normal. Second is Davis Hall who plays the dour and dry Carr Gomm, head of the hospital, who supports Treves' work, sees its exploitative potential for the benefit of the hospital and yet also sees to the needs of Merrick and Treves. He cold-bloodily dismisses a gawking porter for disobedience, adroitly gets rid of a highborn con man, smugly writes self-serving letters to the Times and warns an ebullient Treves that the job will have "consolations", a word Treves does not at first comprehend. Mr. Hall's portrayal is impressively understated, quiet and absolutely authoritative. Third of these deft abettors is Richard Pruitt as Bishop Walshan Howe, an assertive, blustery and self-important clergyman who is fascinated by Merrick, sees his faith, and takes charge of Merrick's spiritual instruction.



Melissa Gray, Steve Gibbons and Stephen Williams from the 20th Anniversary production of *The Elephant Man*

It is the playwright's delight to show us that all the people whose lives Merrick touches see Merrick as "like me", especially these three. The message seems a pathetic need to share in another's celebrity, but it comes from a profound humanity that emanates from Merrick. The play might even be subtitled "...or How an Unfortunate Caused His Keepers to See God".

Undaunted by the responsibilities of their roles, Gibbons and Williams are heartbreaking, each rising to the big moments with aplomb. In a late scene in Act II, when Merrick is building a model of St. Phillip's Church, he asks Treves about rules "for your own good" and says, "You don't believe, do you?" Treves stammers on about why he sent Mrs. Kendal away; he happened into the room, you see when Mrs. Kendal was showing her bared breasts to Merrick. Treves has thought only improper things, but Kendal had only risen to Merrick's request to see, for the first time in his life, young, healthy woman's body, one not fat, withered or distorted. Then Merrick throws Mr. Williams' Treves into complete confusion when he calls the doctor "merciful. I myself am proof of it." This leads to Treves' "mad scene", including a mirror of his lecture to medical students by a suave, normal, well dressed and wry Merrick with a clothed but emotionally naked Treves on display. This sequence alone, and the actors' superb work in it, is sufficient reason to see the production, on display at St. Clement's until September 25th. And that is a bare beginning.

Pride of place must go to Steve Gibbons, the slender, blonde, six-foot-plus actor who plays John Merrick. He conveys the need, the humanity and terror of Merrick before he comes to the hospital, endures nakedness during the medical lecture and the confusion during the bath in his room which seems to be about everyone in the world except him, the quiet center of the storm.

During Mr. Lovins' prologue and various crowd scenes Mr. Gibbons plays several other people, and during his death scene he dances a brief waltz with Mrs. Kendal. Gibbons, of course, is not deformed, but has the stances and moves to make one believe completely that his character is.

Three sequences may haunt you: Ross, played by Ty Stover, the manager who abandoned Merrick in Belgium but now is in need himself. He wants to go back into business, wants a percentage, talks of whores and business partners, but Merrick sends him away saying "I'm sorry. That's just the way things are. Be content." Second item is the Nurse Sandwich scene. Sandwich, played by Barbara Crafton, applies for the job of the nurse who will feed Merrick. Dr. Treves insists that he will hold the lunch tray. The severe and bitter woman Ms. Crafton plays is full of confidence until she sees Merrick. Though Treves has warned her that he is "beyond ugly", she seems to fall apart and beats a hasty retreat. Merrick wryly thanks Treves for "saving the lunch this time." The third haunting moment with Mr. Gibbons occurs when Dr. Treves decides to introduce the actress Ms. Kendal to Merrick. She is impressed and suggests that all London would be proud to know Merrick, and that friends would make his life more normal. The doctor agrees, and they leave, but the last moment is Merrick's. His mixed feelings of once more being on display tear a sob from Mr. Gibbons that will rip your heart out.



Stephen Williams and Steve Gibbons from the 20th Anniversary production of *The Elephant Man*



Steve Gibbons and Melissa Gray (foreground), Heather McKenney (background)
from the 20th anniversary production of *The Elephant Man*

There is new incidental music for this production by Darryl Curry, which suffuses and underscores the story throughout, in total harmony with Mr. Lovins' directorial view. The score has a small song for the Pinheads in the brutal Belgium scene that becomes a lullaby of the angels as Merrick dies. These transformations and underlinings accompany the show at key points, subtly as in a movie and superbly. Mr. Curry is an Oberlin graduate and a composer/playwright too. Future presenters of *The Elephant Man* and Samuel French, take note of this worthy other option to the original solo cello. The sound design, by Matt Berman, delivered the score clearly, presently and without distortions; only the invisible presence of the music made anyone aware of it.

David Barber's set design provides spacious "street" above and below a central raised platform where all the scenes occur: the London hospital room adjoining Dr. Treves's office that becomes Merrick's home. Mr. Barber's design is tall and moody, beautifully extending the St. Clement's brickwork and rafters into the settings. Lighting by Josh Bradford is dreamy and darkly atmospheric up high and cruelly bright up close, enhancing Pomerance's dark tale. That it all works so well probably implicates its technical director, Duane Domutz. The costume design, by Sandra King, keeps the dark colors and heavy fabrics of the late Victorian era, but does not favor the corseted look one might expect. It is an acceptable alteration; we do not need actors in pain because another era's expectations made stupid use of the human body.

As parting shots, there are attractive bits throughout by the supporting company: The miserable "sacked" porter, Will, and the "moral swamp" Lord John, who has lied to the hospital and misspent the funds, played by Daniel Haughey; Snork, the orderly who brings Merrick his dinner, played by Kevin Roberge; the elusive mother of Merrick, whom he loves and who gave him up to the workhouse, whom we see fairly often in passing, and the flighty duchess, both played by Heather McKenney; the vicious manager of the pinheads played by William Koch; the Pinheads, who giggle, sing, cower, and double as Siamese twins, played by Jennifer Phelps and Marisa Bela, and the sarcastic, laughing countess played by Ms. Bela; the young Merrick, face swathed in gray cloth, played by young Teddy Alvaro. His ensemble appearances as various young men bring youth and welcome variety to the world of the play, though he has no lines.

See this show. It deserves a long life.