

# Multiple themes examined in 'The Elephant Man'

By Robert Villanueva

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Beneath carnival banners that proclaimed “Martha / Armless Wonder,” “Tiny Mathilda / Alive,” and “The Elephant Man / Live / Witness A Mother’s Horror,” scenes from John Merrick’s life began to unfold.

Mature audiences will have the opportunity to get a glimpse into that extraordinary life when Hardin County Schools Performing Arts Center presents the ProAm production “The Elephant Man” beginning Friday.

The offering is a remounting of the 20th anniversary production directed in New York by PAC director Bart Lovins.

The original play was written by Bernard Pomerance and based on the life of Joseph Merrick, who grew up in Victorian England, though the name John Merrick is used. Merrick developed deformities as he grew up and was given the title moniker.

In the title role, Ryan Burch portrays Merrick with the aim to explore what it means to be a man. Despite his physical deformities, Merrick is like anyone else and throughout the play asserts himself more and more.

“He has an eye for beauty,” Burch said.

The role calls for Burch to perform with posture and pose that reflect Merrick’s deformities. That aspect of his performance was not too problematic, other than his jaw getting fatigued.

“The biggest challenge, really, is making sure I’m alive in every moment,” Burch said.

The moments Burch likes the most are the quiet ones, such as when Merrick gets to bathe.

“Sometimes it’s easy to become encumbered by words,” he said.

The play is, in Burch’s opinion, actually Dr. Treves’ story, Burch said. The doctor takes in Merrick from the sideshow, but his relationship creates another form of putting Merrick on display to society and the medical community.

As the play progresses two of the carnival banners used in the opening scenes remain hanging over the actors representing the fact.

Jared Eaton, who portrays Treves, said he believes the play to be “equally” Treves’ story. During the course of the play, audiences see the rise of Merrick while Treves begins to unravel.

Layered with multiple themes, the play delves into morality, humanity and a number of subjects.

“Treves is an interesting study in the duality of science and faith,” Eaton said.

The duality is important since Treves is faced with the question of balancing the two, Eaton said.

A high school biology teacher and former pastor of “a number of years,” Eaton said he found his background helpful in portraying a doctor who is having a crisis of faith.

“So that balance is not that tough,” he said.

Playing Mrs. Kendal, an actress who agrees to provide social interaction with Merrick, Amelia Word said she connects with her character. She described Mrs. Kendal as someone who shares the “purest form of love” with Merrick.

“She’s the first woman he ever touches,” Word said.

Mrs. Kendal sees the appreciation Merrick has of beauty.

For mature audiences only, the play includes a scene in which Mrs. Kendal exposes her breasts to Merrick.

“That’s another way I can relate to her,” Word said. “I have a very non-conformist view when it comes to the human body.”

Burch said the play does not “shy away from sexuality” and “unflinchingly asks questions of responsibility” as well as what it means to be a man. Evolution versus creation and British imperialism are among the themes.

This production of the play combines elements of the original play and the movie with other touches added by Lovins.

“The Elephant Man” spans the title character’s entire life.

“It’s not about how he died,” Lovins said. “It’s about how he lived.”

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#### **IF YOU GO**

Performances of the PAC ProAm production of “The Elephant Man” are 7 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 2 p.m. Saturday and 3 p.m. Sunday at Hardin County Schools Performing Arts Center at John Hardin High School, 384 W.A. Jenkins Road, Elizabethtown. The play is intended for mature audiences. For more information or tickets, call 270-769-8837 or visit [www.thepac.net](http://www.thepac.net).



Treves helps John Merrick with his bath in a scene from the Hardin County Schools Performing Arts Center's production of "The Elephant Man" which is being presented this weekend. Jared Eaton plays the part of Frederick Treves, the doctor who studies and helps Merrick, aka the Elephant Man, as portrayed by Ryan Burch.



John Merrick, the Elephant Man, is questioned by a pair of curious carnival pinheads. Merrick is played by Ryan Burch and the Pinheads are played by Moira Taylor, left, and Mackenzie Blair.



John Merrick talks about his life as Mrs. Kendal listens in a scene from "The Elephant Man." Amelia Word plays the part of Kendal and Merrick is portrayed by Ryan Burch.



Carr Gomm reads a statement about John Merrick, the Elephant Man, as he bathes. Mickey Anderson plays Gomm in "The Elephant Man."



Patients of Treves react to him leaving the room during a scene from "The Elephant Man."