

## **THE ELEPHANT MAN**

**By Bernard Pomeranc**

Hello, I'm Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large.

I saw the original Broadway production of THE ELEPHANT MAN in 1979 and much of what I remember about that version came back to me in Christopher Hanna's well done recreation. It's rich in theatrical flare and yet at the same time there is simplicity. One feels that both Hanna and the original director were influenced by the German playwright and director, Bertholt Brecht. Probably the writer as well. Brecht, you will recall, talked about alienation and not letting emotion or empathy get in the way of the facts of the story.

Bernard Pomerance's play based on the life of a horribly disfigured creature, riddled by cauliflower like tumors of bone, ends up being not about pity for the poor wretched creature but our changing perceptions of him. As you probably know, the drama is based on the true story of John Merrick, portrayed with ever evolving clarity by Jed Orlemann. Merrick could barely walk or speak. Abandoned by his family, he made his living in freak shows at carnivals, until cheated of his livelihood and once again abandoned to the streets of Victorian London. Dr Frederick Treves, done with Henry Higgins dash and emotional conflict by Jeremiah Wiggins discovers him. He is taken to a London Hospital where he is given baths to eliminate the foul odors his body emits plus a life time home.

He becomes the darling of upper crust London. He is once again exploited and put on display. People give him gifts of adoration. An actress, Mrs. Kendal, is especially kind. The beautiful Brandy Zarle makes Mrs. Kendal a woman of great sensitivity who more than medical science or doctoring sees beyond Merricks deformities. Not only does she help him read and to understand himself to gain dignity, she helps him discover his manhood.. Her progress at this point is interrupted by Victorian hypocrisy. Merrick says that his head is so enormous because it is filled with dreams that cannot get out.

Through the course of the action of the action. he has been building a model of a church with his one good hand... He completes the church shortly before his death. And, for a brief moment we see him well and whole, with a faint smile on the face of a perfectly formed young man. It's a magnificent moment. The dreams have finally gotten out, thanks to acceptance by Mrs. Kendal and others.

Hanna has assembled a uniformly accomplished cast including Munson Hicks as the hospital administrator who has a well stated bottom line approach to Merrick; Mark Mineart is a sleazeball barker with dimension; plus, three comely lasses as the Pin Heads. The they are Lindsey Casey, Ashley Hammond and Rebecca. They are unintelligible but one assumes that was intended since they are mental patients.

As is often the case when performers attempt accents they are hard to understand. Unfortunately that is true here.

Bill Clark's set is overall right off a gaudy midway, even though the entrances and exits seem limited and we can't see the projections of the elephant man as much as we'd like to. A. Nelson Ruger IV lights it appropriately. Jeni Schaefer's costumes are fine but some of them need a good steam iron. Zachary Williamson's sound design contributed a great deal to the overall dramatic intensity. THE ELEPHANT MAN is not a great play but a very satisfying, entertaining theatrical experience. There is more substance here than we get in most plays these days and you have something to think and talk about when you get home.

One of Merrick's favorite poems begins like this:

T'is true my form is somewhat odd,  
But blaming me is blaming God.

This is Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large and I'll see you at the next opening.