

September 12 - 27, 2003

The Elephant Man

Reviewed September 23
 Running Time 1 hour 50 minutes
 ♦ Potomac Stages Pick



A well structured play telling an absolutely compelling (and mostly true) story with a cast featuring two extremely strong characterizations and one extraordinary one make Port City's season opener a solid pick for those who appreciate fine acting. It should also draw those who simply want to learn a bit about the phenomenon of upper class England in the eighteen-eighties when a freak from a side show became the toast of the town.

Storyline: History records that the deformed John Merrick was plucked from a Victorian freak show to be protected and studied in a hospital in 1884. He became a mover in London's high society before his death in 1890. Bernard Pomerance's Tony Award winning play explores serious issues of social values and human worth.

It was the playwright's fortuitous choice to have the horribly deformed "elephant man" portrayed by an actor without any help from makeup or special prosthetic devices. Because the concentration on Merrick's humanity is achieved through this lack of artifice, it requires an actor of inordinate talent, skill and taste. In Bruce Alan Rauscher, Port City has just such an actor. He has been blurring the distinction between community and professional theater for quite a while now. His performances have earned awards and nominations from the Alliance of Community Theaters as well as the Helen Hayes Awards which recognize outstanding professional work. His performance as John Merrick is likely to earn him more awards: this time on the community theater side only because Port City Playhouse is, after all, a community theater with volunteer artists. It is a performance that would draw praise and recognition in the most professional company in town.

Two of the supporting roles in the play are given superb presentations which is extremely fortunate for they are the two most important roles, other than the title character himself. David Sher is smooth and effective as the young surgeon who discovers Merrick in a traveling freak show and brings him to his hospital for observation. Since he is the prime mover of the events covered by the play, his polished performance makes a major contribution to the evening. The other standout performance is in a role that might not be as important had it been in the hands of a lesser talent. But Barbara Raffaele makes the most of the role of the first woman ever to see Merrick as a man rather than a freak. Through her tastefully underplayed scenes, she allows the humanity of Rauscher's performance to be viewed by the audience through a very sympathetic lens.

Director Joe Schubert manages to compensate for the inevitable unevenness of a large community theater cast both by concentrating the strengths in the major roles and by drawing attention away from less polished performers in a highly atmospheric presentation. Schubert worked with John Downing on a set design that is both flexible and nicely unspecific - essentially a brick wall with multiple archways - and a set painting crew that created a fine brick pattern to make the scenery flats believable. Dick Schwab's lighting plot helps him get the most out of the set. Anna Hawkins' sound design is as bold as any element of the presentation as she underscores scenes with hauntingly appropriate music as well as providing more traditional sound effects and musical transitions between scenes. It is one of the most active and yet least intrusive sound designs to support a community theater production in recent memory.

Written by Bernard Pomerance. Directed by Joe Schubert. Design: John Downing and Joe Schubert (set) Jerry Wolf (set construction) Joe Schubert, Rose M. Kobylinsky and Donna Reynolds (set painting) Donna Reynolds (properties and set dressing) Suzanne Maloney (costumes) Dick Schwab (lights) Anna Hawkins (sound) Douglas Olmsted (photography) O'Malley Pitcher (stage manager). Cast: Rick Bailey, Ian Fore, Elissa Hudson, Tom Kluko, Renee Moyer, Barbara Raffaele, Bruce Alan Rauscher, Debra Salkind, David Sher, Michael Sherman, Cal Whitehurst, Donna I. Winsor.