

Humanity At Core Of Drama



The Port City Playhouse's cast of "The Elephant Man" includes Ian Fore, from left, Bruce Alan Rauscher, Tom Kluko, Renee Moyer, David Sher, Barbara Raffaele, Rick Bailey, Cal Whitehurst, Debra Salkind and Donna Winsor.

By Michael Toscano
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How does an actor express the inner spirit and feelings of a character who has a face unable to display emotion, has difficulty managing speech and lives in a mostly useless, disfigured body? That is the significant challenge facing Bruce Alan Rauscher and one he superbly meets in Port City Playhouse's stunning production of "The Elephant Man."

It may seem precipitous to declare this at the beginning of the season, but there is a healthy chance that "The Elephant Man" will rank as one of the major highlights of the 2003-04 theater calendar. It should not be missed.

Director Joe Schubert and a versatile cast have avoided pitfalls inherent in Bernard Pomerance's play that tells the true story of John Merrick, a horribly deformed man who rose from sideshow freak to be the toast of high society in Victorian London.

Schubert has steered his actors away from melodrama, allowing them to turn in taut, emotionally economical performances that starkly expose the core of the characters. Compelling and uncluttered by dramatic artifice, the play's rich subtexts come into focus and provoke the brain even as the heart is engaged by the humanity of these people, particularly Merrick.

The uniformly effective work of the 12-member ensemble playing two dozen parts is topped by enthralling performances from the three lead actors, most notably Rauscher in the title role. But David Sher, as Dr.

Frederick Treves, the physician who rescues Merrick from squalor, and Barbara Raffaele, as Mrs. Kendal, the actress who introduces him to the salon glitterati of 1880s London, also create gripping characterizations.

Rauscher is compelled, by virtue of Merrick's physical limitations, to avoid using many tools available to an actor, particularly eyes and face. The massive deformities are successfully suggested through a twisted, contorted body and a voice filtered through the slurred speech of a man with a malformed maw for a mouth.

The actor must reach deep inside himself to find Merrick's humanity and the almost childlike innocence that allows him to reflect back something of the character of each person with whom he comes into contact, which affects them greatly and leads to the dramatic impact of this story.

As Dr. Treves, Sher is a study in self-assured Victorian smugness and hypocrisy. He dispenses both kindness and rigid control over his charge, even as he struggles with deep disillusionment and disintegration of his professional certainty. As the man of science nears a crisis of spirit, Sher displays inner tumult but reins it in just as Treves certainly did.

As Mrs. Kendal, Raffaele helps Rauscher complete the portrait of Merrick, allowing him some of his most revealing moments. Treves brought Mrs. Kendal to the hospital at which he found Merrick a home because he thought only a professional actress could hide the revulsion most people exhibited upon meeting Merrick.

Raffaele has a marvelous moment as Kendal first sees Merrick, her face impassive, the struggle between her will and her facial muscles obvious only around the eyes and in an almost imperceptibly strained voice.

Anna Hawkins's sound design is subtle but immeasurably bolsters the introspective mood with an almost subliminal mix of evocative, sometimes gloomy music and various sound effects. The set, from John Downing and Schubert, is simple but versatile, capturing the period flavor and seamlessly allowing a variety of scenes.

Merrick's story had been forgotten for almost a century until it became the subject of a successful book, then this 1977 play, first presented in London. The popular 1980 film follows the same story but was based on different material with a more sensational focus. Port City Playhouse's production is an absorbing and emotionally captivating addition to the play's history.

"The Elephant Man," performed by Port City Playhouse, runs through Sept. 27 at the Nannie J. Lee Center, 1108 Jefferson St., Alexandria. Showtimes are 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, with an 8 p.m. performance Tuesday. For tickets, call 703-838-2880.

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