Warehouse's 'Elephant Man' a riveting production

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THEATER REVIEW

The Warehouse Theatre lately has cornered the local market on theatrical poetry.

The theater is following up **its beautifully** rendered "Metamorphoses" with **an** eloquent **and** frequently moving **production** of **Bernard** Pomerance's "The Elephant Man," running **through Oct.** 29.

The 1979 play is based **on the** true story of **the** tragically **deformed Joseph (or** John, **as he's often known)** Merrick, who lived **in late** 19th century England.

Under the sensitive and detailed direction of Brian Haimbach, the **play** becomes a portrait not only of **dignity and courage in** adversity **but also an** examination of genteel hypocrisy and exploitation.

We first see Merrick (affectingly played by Christopher Joel Onken) **as an attraction** in a grubby **freak** show. Though **treated like** an animal, Merrick **remains** remarkably **gentle and** intelligent.

He's rescued by **Frederick Treves** (an equally compelling **Jason** Shipman), **an** ambitious young **doctor, and** is allowed **to remain** in the London Hospital for the rest of his life.

But nothing is easy in this morally ambiguous world. Treves, for instance, is **a** compassionate figure but also **can be a** condescending prig, treating Merrick like a child.

Merrick, while enjoying relative comfort, becomes **something of a curiosity** for the denizens of high society who visit him **and** donate money **to** the hospital.

Merrick has, in effect, **gone** from freak show **to freak** show.

Pomerance's "Elephant Man," **like** David Lynch's handsomely made 1980 film **of the same** name, offers a poignant account of a horribly mistreated **outcast** who somehow **is able** to retain his warmth, humor and humanity.

But this richly layered play goes beyond Lynch's largely sentimental film. **The** play's backdrop **is an** England collapsing **under** the weight of uncertainty and excess. Victorian verities **are** being challenged by **science** even **as** the **supposed** civilizing influence of colonialism is **called into question.**

Pomerance casts Merrick as a symbolic victim of imperialist **treachery,** underscoring **the** destructive power of intellectual **assimilation. Treves,** likewise, is **a stand-in for an** over-confident **England** that will **have its values** sorely **tested.**

In the Warehouse production, Haimbach brings out the best in his excellent actors, eliciting carefully limned portrayals.

Onken, who has **the** challenging **task** of portraying the misshapen Merrick without the use of prosthetics, offers a skilled **and** committed **performance. He** adopts a strained, halting manner of speech and contorts his face and body into a persuasive representation of the actual Merrick, whose photograph is projected onto a screen in the theater.

Onken's Merrick can weep, but he cannot smile.

Shipman likewise is wonderful as the dignified and self-satisfied Treves, a model of the social order who becomes completely unglued when his faith in science crumbles and his own inadequacies **are** starkly revealed.

The lovely **young** Phyllis Jackson is **a** charming and sympathetic Mrs. Kendal, the actress who befriends Merrick.

Strong multi-character performances are offered by Stephano Andreas, Evan Harris, Michele Labar and Matt Reece.

Shannon Robert, as always, is responsible for the fine set and evocative lighting design. Robert Gowan contributes appropriately atmospheric music.

The Warehouse Theatre's "Elephant Man" is a captivating drama for both the heart and mind. For tickets, call 864-235-6948.

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