



The Elephant Man

by Bernard Pomerance

**Monday 15th to Saturday 20th March 2010
at 8.00pm**

Matinee Saturday 20th March at 2.30pm

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Spotlight

You may notice that the name Birkin appears more than once in the credits for *The Elephant Man*. Regular Rep theatre goers may be familiar with Assistant Director Ian, who has appeared in *Can't Pay, Won't Pay* and *See How They Run* this season. However, we are delighted to welcome Ian's elder son and daughter, Lee and Olivia, into this production. Although this is their first appearance with The Rep Players, they are no strangers to the local stage.

Twenty-two year old Lee first appeared as a one year old as part of a crowd scene in *Damn Yankees!* and went on to make his professional debut as one of the babes in the pantomime *Robin Hood* alongside Little and Large. Lee has also appeared in several shows including *Scrooge: The Musical, Guys and Dolls*, Prince Chulalongkorn in *The King and I* and as The Artful Dodger in *Oliver!*

Away from musicals he has played Benvolio in *Romeo and Juliet* and appeared as Timms in an excerpt from *The History Boys*, part of Scrapbook Productions' *Bennett's Women* at this theatre. Last year he graduated from Birmingham University with an Honours Degree in Business Communications and works as a photographer with E.L.Norman photography in Newcastle.

Olivia, who is eighteen, inherited a talent for dancing from her mother Helen. Her stage debut was at the age of three in the first of many shows with the Jill Clewes Performing Arts Centre. She has also appeared in the professional tour of *Whistle Down The Wind*, the Northern Ballet Theatre's production of *Romeo and Juliet* and several pantomimes. Last year saw Olivia make her television acting debut in the series *Britannia High*.

In musical theatre, productions include *Me and My Girl, Scrooge: The Musical, The King and I, Annie, Big, Honk* and as Madame Thenardier in *Les Miserables*. She currently attends The Academy for Performing Arts and later this year will be appearing as Mrs. Wilkinson in Stage Productions' *Billy Elliot* at The Regent Theatre and as Mrs. Lovett in Stoke Youth's production of *Sweeney Todd*. She has just embarked on a national tour with the production *One Night of Robbie Williams* as a feature dancer and backing vocalist.

The Cast

(in order of appearance)

Chorus:	Kate Lindsay
Frederick Treves:	John Wicks
Carr-Gomm:	Louis Sassi
Ross:	John Collier
Joseph 'John' Merrick:	James Freeman
Voice of Surgeon:	Ian Birkin
Pinheads:	Olivia Birkin, Dawn Birks, Kate Lindsay
Pinhead Manager:	Lee Birkin
Belgian Policeman:	Tom Pear
Conductor:	Lee Birkin
London Policeman:	Tom Pear
Miss Sandwich:	Dawn Birks
Bishop How:	John Collier
Will:	Lee Birkin
Snork:	Tom Pear
Madge Kendal:	Caroline Keen
Earl:	Tom Pear
Countess:	Olivia Birkin
Lord John:	Lee Birkin
Princess Alexandra:	Dawn Birks

*The action takes place between 1884 and 1890 in London.
One scene takes place in Belgium*

The Play will be performed without an interval.

The Crew

Director:	Geoff Legan
Assistant Director:	Ian Birkin
Stage Director:	Richard Masters
Set Designer:	Brian Hadley
Stage Manager:	Jamie Wood
Construction Manager:	Bill Hancock
Set construction:	Mike Adams, John Beeston, Bill Hancock, Peter Logan, Richard Masters, James McIntyre, Jamie Wood
Elephant Man banner painted by:	Roger Taylor
Lighting Design & Operation:	Malcolm Rushton
Sound:	Mike Adams
Props:	Emma Kirk
Costumes:	Diana Halstead
Wigs:	John Cumberlidge
Programme Design:	Janet Smith
Company Photographer:	Peter Croft

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Director's Notes

Elephant or Man?

The Answer is clear..!

In 1884, a brilliant young surgeon, Frederick Treves, happened upon a man living in abject squalor in the slums of London, earning a relatively honest living under the name of "The Elephant Man.". 21 years of age, but born with horrific physical deformities that prevented him from actively engaging with society, Joseph Carey Merrick(forever immortalised as "John" from an error in one of Treves journals) became a source of fascination for the 31 year old Treves. With the benefices of William Carr-Gomm, head surgeon at The London Hospital, Treves was allowed to examine Merrick from a purely scientific standpoint, photographing and detailing the precise disorder that led to his unfortunate "nom de scene"

Such was Treves' fascination that he pressed Carr-Gomm further to obtain a residence for John in the hospital which, thanks to public funding, he did and John was allowed to stay there for the rest of his natural life.

This is the story which playwright Bernard Pomerance portrays in his 1979 Broadway play "The Elephant Man".

As distinct from the "urban myths" surrounding Merrick and the more famous 1980 David Lynch film version (starring John Hurt, Anthony Hopkins, John Gielgud, Ann Bancroft, Wendy Hiller and local born actor Freddie Jones), the play does not portray the brutality exacted upon him during his tragically short lifetime, but rather takes as its premise an idea perhaps best described by actor John Hurt's most famous line from the movie: "I am not an animal! I am a human being! I ...am...a man!"

Pomerance also makes the brave decision not to portray Merrick's appearance literally and rather than encumber the actor with heavy make-up (like Christopher Tucker's Oscar wining prosthetics for the film), prefers to rely on the actor's skill and the audience's imagination to depict the deformity which, more importantly, allows us to see the man beneath the "monster" In fact, it is probably safe to say that the play is more about Treves' story than Merrick's for, as the young doctor gets to know John

better through daily contact and conversation, he rapidly begins to doubt the reasoning behind his motives towards him and the morality of keeping him "caged" in The London, rather than him being caged in the slums.

Merrick becomes a "friend" to dukes, duchesses and royalty who come to visit and give him gifts, but are they there just to "view the freak" as did the street walkers and layabouts? As he becomes more integrated into society from the confines of his well-furnished room, he himself begins to doubt that he will ever truly be welcomed into a world in which he must always be an outsider.

Geoff Legan

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The Play & Playwright

An intensely private man, very little is known about Pomerance's childhood, early education or private life, beyond the fact that he was born in Brooklyn in 1940, was a student at the University of Chicago and moved to live in London in his early 30s where he began working with small innovative theatre groups and writing plays covering a diverse range of topics.

His 1972 play, *Foco Novo*, gave its name to a theatre troupe Pomerance helped to found with director Roland Rees and which produced his early plays. In *Foco Novo* an unnamed Latin American military dictatorship pits its citizens against the state and the guerrilla outsiders against the technologically obsessed Americans. *Quantrell in Lawrence* (1980) explores a bloody episode of the American Civil War involving the James brothers, while *Melons* (1985), set in a New Mexico melon patch in 1906, has its own would-be Treves - Carlos Montezuma - an Indian rights activist torn between the new world of the American colonialist and the ageless rituals of the Native American Indians.

Pomerance's wide-ranging moral and ethical concerns are laudable and in 1987 he published his first novel, *We Need to Dream All This Again*, but it is for his major hit, *The Elephant Man*, which opened at the Hampstead Theatre, prior to New York and eventually Broadway, that he remains best known.

In twenty-two short scenes with titles, Pomerance has written a major play which goes beyond prurient interest in its hunched, malformed central creature, to touch on matters of faith, romance and theatricality itself. The play strips bare Victorian preconceptions of normality and the parameters of faith and features a superb part for a woman - the actress Mrs Kendal, who offers Merrick his one brief moment of Eros.

Highly successful both in Britain and on Broadway, the play sparked interest in its subject and in 1980 a film was made with the same title, but bypassing Pomerance's text.

*Tis true my form is something odd,
But blaming me is blaming God.
Could I create myself anew,
I would not fail in pleasing you.
If I could reach from pole to pole,
Or grasp the ocean with a span,
I would be measured by the soul,
The mind's the statement of the man.*

(A poem by Isaac Watts that Joseph Merrick would use to end his letters.)

The Condition

Over the years, there have been several attempts to identify the exact nature of Merck's medical condition. Originally, he was thought to be suffering from elephantiasis; however, in 1971 Ashley Montague suggested in his book, *The Elephant Man: A Study in Human Dignity*, that Merrick suffered from neurofibromatosis type 1, a genetic disorder also known as von Recklinghausen syndrome.

During 1986 it was postulated that Merrick actually suffered from Proteus syndrome. Unlike neurofibromatosis, Proteus syndrome, named after the shape-changing god Proteus, affects tissue other than nerves and is a sporadic disorder, rather than a genetically transmitted disease.

Eventually, in 2001, in an article in *Biologist*, Paul Spring proposed a new diagnosis, suggesting that Merrick actually suffered from a combination of both conditions.

Merrick's preserved skeleton is still part of the pathology collection at The Royal London Hospital. His remains have never been on public display, but there is a small museum based around his life which houses some of his personal effects and period Merrick memorabilia.

Artist in the Gallery

Christopher Guest - Freelance Artist:

Christopher Guest was born in Shropshire and completed his BA and Masters degrees in fine art at Staffordshire University. He has had work shown in both the UK and abroad and was selected as an emerging young artist in 2002 and has contributed work for Birmingham's bid for European City of Culture.

In 2008, he co-founded Creative Arts North Staffs, an arts organisation working with disadvantaged young people and the community.

In 2009, his solo exhibition, *Unsteady Hands* toured several galleries in Great Britain.

He is now working on a solo exhibition at Manchester's Cornerhouse Gallery, opening in 2010 and a series of exhibitions in Chicago, USA.

Gordon Toon - Exhibition Manager