

THE GENERAL BEAUTY of THE ELEPHANT MAN

What gives your play beauty?

ITS EFFICIENCY: This is a tight script; there's not a wasted word in it. It says what it means and it means what it says, but it feels artful, not blunt. The story moves expeditiously, but clearly, and the audience is taken along for the ride. Relatedly, there is a simplicity and distillation in the dialogue that allows us to track shifting dynamics and alliances among the characters.

ITS STRUCTURE / PARALLELISM: The piece is deliberately structured to guide audience members toward specific questions and offer potential answers. The scene titles point us to key ideas in each vignette; conversations are replayed with variations to get us looking at concepts through a new lens; characters are juxtaposed so that we see them as both ideological opposites / twins. The more we dig, the more we find it to be meticulously constructed.

ITS HUMANITY: While definitely a "think piece," the play also stirs our hearts, not only for the plight of John Merrick, but also for Treves' "rude awakenings," for Mrs. Kendal's desire to be truly seen - and to a lesser extent - for the other characters' hurts and wounds. While unflinchingly letting us see the flaws in these people, the play is ultimately kind to each one of them as it reveals their core hopes and needs - and sets them on paths of self-discovery.

What kind of play is it?

A PARABLE: Pomerance is taking a historical event and reducing it to its basic essence to ask some foundational questions about what it means to be human, the origins of identity, and the benefits and detriments of nature and nurture. These big ideas are concretized in story and narrative, and the characters are painted in bold strokes and primary colors - almost archetypal.

A VERFREMDUNGSEFFEKT PLAY: Following Bertolt Brecht, the play uses several distancing effects that prevent audience members from losing themselves completely in the narrative, making them conscious critical observers. These include the projected titles, large jumps in time and location, montage-style scenes, moments where the fourth wall is broken, and conscious theatricality, among others. The audience should never be so drawn into the story that they're losing the thread of the questions it poses for their own lives in the here and now.

This does not mean, however, that the actors should shy away from authentic emotional connection onstage - a typical misreading of Brecht.

What is it about?

It's about John (Joseph) Merrick, a 19th century British man who became a star of the traveling freak show circuit, before being found abandoned and helpless - and about the renowned Dr. Frederick Treves' attempt to take Merrick into his care, nurse him back to health, and then introduce him into society and civilization in order to help him be more "like us."

It's about the difficulty of defining what "normal" is. And - if it can be defined - is it desirable to pursue the acceptance and adoration of others if it means conforming to certain expectations or modes of behavior that feel antithetical to being one's true self?

It's about the conflict between Nature (associated with authenticity, purity, things flawed but beautiful) and Civilization (associated with illusion/falsity, corruption/hypocrisy, things beautiful but grotesque). It suggests that man-made indicators of "civilization" - Religion, Medicine, Commerce, Art, Law - actually deform and distort our humanity from being its best.

Why is it necessary?

Our world seems to be full of efforts to legislate morality, dictate conscience, and breed conformity; in short, there are many projects afoot to restrict individuality and make us all the same. The play is a reminder of the glory of each unique individual, a cautionary tale about any project that restricts the true self, and an encouragement to persist in being complex humans.

What universal truths does it demonstrate?

When you place a ruler alongside a stick, the nature of each becomes clearer. The presence of a "holy fool" among other people will reveal and expose the deficiencies of their character. "God chose the foolish things of this world to put the wise to shame."

The lines are often blurred between doctor and patient, savior and victim, healthy and ill, beautiful and ugly. What we expect gets turned on its head, and the inverse of what we expected often becomes true.

"The best laid plans of mice and men oft go astray." "The road to Hell is paved with good intentions."

What excites you as an artist about the work?

- * I love working on ensemble pieces, especially when I really trust each member of the group.
- * It's rare for me to return to something that I've directed before; in this case, I did because I'm excited to see in what ways my Chekhov training changes how I tackle the piece.
- * There's an opportunity to create polarity between the authentic, dialed-in performances of the actors and expressionistic / highly theatrical technical elements surrounding the scenes. The way these things rub up against each other will be instructive for an audience, I think.

What moves you as a person about the play?

- * In my life, I've been very dogmatic about and committed to projects that seemed to arise from benevolent principles, but which actually stemmed from an emotional wound, a dishonest motive, or an unexamined personal flaw. I'm interested in exploring how Treves "wakes up" to this tendency in his own life, is found guilty, and then is redeemed.
- * Like Merrick, I've had season in my life when I've felt like a "freak" or misunderstood, and have desired to be connected to people, more like others. I'm no stranger to the pain of wanting to be accepted, and also the tension of not wanting to compromise who I am to do so.

* My life looks different than that of my friends, and I've spent a portion of my time trying to live up to some expected standards regarding my marital status, sexuality, income, job title, and belief systems. At worst, these pursuits find me contorting who I am and have left me unfulfilled. At best, they've forced me to dig deeper for new answers about how to live in a way that feels in accordance with who I truly am and what brings me joy. I'm in the middle of one such season right now, as I explore and redefine what love and romance mean to me.

Governing Images / Metaphors

LAYERING ON-STRIPPING OFF: Following Treves' speech about the dangers of corsets (Scene XIX), I believe there's something here about how the ways we try to cover or "dress up" our natures actually deforms us or makes us grotesque, and that the healthier movement is to strip away falsehood and pretense and to live authentically. This has several potential implications: Does Merrick grow sicker and less innocent the more he is dressed up over the course of the play? As Treves awakens to the bankruptcy of his project and his morality, having to face himself, is he losing layers and trappings? Is the central event in Scene XIV when Mrs. Kendal and Merrick attempt to truly see each other by disrobing one another's presence, only to be stymied by Treves' Victorian moral outrage? Does dress render some of our "civilized" characters grotesque? Do we play with how they look versus how Merrick looks, allowing them to be visibly distorted while he is not?

BUILDING - DECONSTRUCTING: There's something to this idea that Merrick and Treves are both trying to build worlds onstage. Merrick has a model of the church; Treves is trying to build a world at London Hospital in which Merrick can live. At the end of the play, only one of these worlds is left standing. I'm curious about how the built environment changes over the course of the play to reflect the success and failure of Treves' plans.

HOLY FOOL - Once he arrives at London Hospital, Merrick is onstage and visible the entire play. As we watch the other characters behave badly, we should always be aware of the honorable counterpoint and contrast physically manifested in his person - even in low light.