



The Elephant Man

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"The Elephant Man" is based on the life of John Merrick, who lived in London during the latter part of the nineteenth century. A horribly deformed young man, who has been a freak attraction in traveling side shows, is found abandoned and helpless and is admitted for observation to Whitechapel, a prestigious London hospital. Under the care of a famous young doctor, who educates him and introduces him to London society, Merrick changes from a sensational object of pity to the urbane and witty favorite of the aristocracy and literati. But his belief that he can become a man like any other is a dream never to be realized.

The Elephant Man Details

Date : Published January 19th 1994 by Grove Press (first published 1979)

ISBN : 9780802130419

Author : Bernard Pomerance

Format : Paperback 72 pages

Genre : Plays, Drama, Classics, Theatre, Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction

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From Reader Review The Elephant Man for online ebook

R.W. Kennedy says

Is reading a play cheating for the reading challenge? Yeah, well sue me.

The David Lynch cinematic adaptation of this play is great but the play shows us the "deformities" of others, not just the grotesque John Merrick. It must be read carefully and is totally worth a reread. I'd be willing to see a production of this, especially since I have always been fascinated by stories of outcasts and freaks.

Laura says

Available at BBC Radio 7. A seriously disfigured man is rescued from a Victorian freak show.

Marcos says

I would love to see this live. John Merrick's story is one of heartbreak with the longing to connect.

Christy says

Points beautifully to the fact that every one of us is human beneath our skin.

Laura Leaney says

Because I couldn't find a way to steal away from work to go see Bradley Cooper act in this play, I bought a copy to read in the hopes I could just imagine how he might translate the role of Joseph Merrick, the Elephant Man whose undiagnosed medical condition disfigured his face and body so horribly. I am left still feeling the need to see it on the stage.

This short, spare script moves rapidly through twenty-one scenes. Some of the scenes are less than two typed pages. As a result, reading the script probably offers less depth than a live performance where the actors' movements and expressions might deepen the words. Nevertheless, I found the play very moving. The surgeon, Frederick Treves, parallels Merrick in importance. The dynamic between them reminds me of the psychiatrist-patient relationship of Shaffer's fascinating play *Equus*. By examining Merrick and controlling his environment while he lives out his days at The London Hospital, Treves's own failures become apparent.

My favorite part is Scene XII, called "Who Does He Remind You of?" In this scene, the cream of London society speaks short lines about who Merrick reminds them of. All the lines end in "like me." The famous actress Mrs. Kendal says, "Well. He is gentle, almost feminine. Cheerful, honest within limits, a serious artist in his way. He is almost like me." The Duchess says, "I can speak with him of anything. For I know he is discreet. Like me." They see in Merrick what they want to see. Treves later says: "Yet he makes all of us think he is deeply like ourselves. And yet we're not like each other. I conclude that we have polished him like

a mirror, and shout hallelujah when he reflects us to the inch. I have grown sorry for it."

The sad thing about this play is that I still know next to nothing about Merrick, the human being. Still, there is enormous importance in the revelations regarding society's reaction to disfigurement. In the last scene of the play, the administrator for The London Hospital is reading his report to the investors about the death of Merrick. When he asks Treves if he's forgotten anything, Treves says, "Well. He was highly intelligent. He had an acute sensibility; and worst for him, a romantic imagination. No, no. Never mind. I am really not certain of any of it." He exits, then comes back to say, "I did think of one small thing" and the administrator tells him "it's too late."

What, I asked myself, is the "small thing"? I think it was to say that he was a man.

Willow Redd says

Last year, I finally watched the David Lynch film; and as I did with a few other movies last year, thought I would also read the book. However, then I learned that the play had no connection with Lynch's film other than the subject matter, so I put it off. Of course, since the play and the film are based on a real person, the structures of both are similar enough that I could have followed up one with the other... Hindsight.

I've actually been sitting on this book for a while, having picked it up from a friend while we were both taking part in a yard sale. It was this and another book of screenplays that I traded him for a DVD box set. Felt like a fair trade.

It's interesting seeing the differences in interpretation between Pomerance and Lynch. I'll eventually read the actual published history that Treves wrote (along with Montagu's book, both mentioned in the play's introductory note) which inspired Pomerance to write this play.

Zoltán Szabó says

Mint színdarab, tökéletes, egy jobb feldolgozás megtekintése szinte kihagyhatatlan élmény. Mint könyv, igen soványka kis egyórás olvasmány - jó kiindulás, ha színház vagy színházi felvétel megtekintése el?tt el akarod kezdeni az ismerkedést a történettel, de utána már nem nyújt sokat. Ellenben jó néhány drámával és színdarabbal nem biztos, hogy egyszer csak úgy kedvtelésb?l lekaptam a polcról és újraolvasnám.

Majid says

Moving, heartbreaking, inspirational and a lovely, lovely read! Beautifully written as well. I have never been so engaged with a script as much as I was with The Elephant Man. This story is about Joseph Merrick, an individual with hideous deformities who's been dubbed by his 'owner' Freddie Jones, a freak show organizer that dehumanizes and uses Merrick merely as a source of income. Merrick gets rescued by Dr. Frederick Treves, a surgeon who helps him escape the freak show and Jones. This story portrays the darker side of humanity and how human oddities were dealt with, and how looking past physical appearances enables us to realize the beauty deep within each and every individual's soul, no matter how 'odd' they were. I must say, I had to hold my tears back during some parts; it's been such a tough story to digest, but definitely a lovely one that I will re-read!

Bettie? says

Bettie's Books

Lady Day says

The Elephant Man is based on a powerful tale about Joseph Carey Merrick, with the help of a famous surgeon John regains his dignity after years of being a side-show freak. Although I have not read this play by Bernard Pomerance I had the pleasure of seeing this rendition at a local theatrical playhouse. A true story about being different, seeing beauty within people and finding happiness when everything around is grim. Heartwrenching!

Suvi says

Before my last year's trip to London, I somehow failed to check the theater schedule, and on a bus tour I had an incredible sinking feeling when I spotted the theater with *The Elephant Man* sign. That feeling worsened when after the tour I checked the show dates at a ticket booth and noticed the play had closed just on the previous day. The most interesting story in the whole world, one that I've been obsessed about for years, and just a few months before I was disappointed I couldn't see Pomerance's play on Broadway, where it got rave reviews. As an effort to console myself and because the next best thing is to read the play, I loaned it from archive.org.

"[T]he most disgusting specimen of humanity". "[A] perverted object". These are the words Frederick Treves used to describe Joseph Merrick (sometimes mistakenly named as John), one of the most famous figures of the Victorian era, in *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences* (1923). Showing symptoms at a young age, Merrick ended up severely deformed, and had to sleep sitting up to make sure he wouldn't die because of the weight of his head. His deformities also prevented him from working in regular jobs, and after a few years in the workhouse he decided to try his luck in a travelling sideshow. It was when he ended up in London on display at a Whitechapel shop that he first met Frederick Treves. After an unsuccessful stint in Brussels, Merrick returned to London and was eventually allowed to stay at the London Hospital for the remainder of his life.

Fiction about real people is in many ways problematic. As in **David Lynch's** *The Elephant Man* (1980) (whose production company ended up being sued because of the similar plot to Pomerance's play), Pomerance's *The Elephant Man* shows Merrick as the victim of patronizing Treves, and as the center of attention of his high society acquaintances who lavish him with gifts, but don't seem to be interested in him as a person. They all see something of themselves in Merrick, making him a blank canvas where others can project their fears and desires.

It's troubling, because victimizing Merrick more than is necessary turns him into a mere object of pity. It might make it easier to explore the themes associated with his life story, but it's a questionable strategy. In Pomerance's retelling, Merrick is physically abused in Brussels, although despite his reluctance of speaking about his years in the freak show, there's no reason to presume there was any misconduct. According to the newest research, Treves embellished some aspects in his memoir (he didn't realize the freak show was

Merrick's way of earning a living), but unless evidence to the contrary is found, I'd rather see Merrick being remembered as a sensitive theatre-loving young man, who spent time reading books and constructing models of buildings. He did have difficulties, but he tried his best to survive.

If one tries to forget the discrepancies and unfortunate interpretations of Merrick's character, Pomerance's play is absolutely an interesting piece of fringe theatre. With only 21 short scenes (including a striking dream sequence), it offers a different perspective to Merrick's story. He was under good care until his untimely death at the age of 27, but Pomerance challenges to think about the notion of being on display. How many donators and high society members actually cared about Merrick as a human being instead of as a charity case? Was Treves a real friend, or just someone who considered him as an interesting medical anomaly, and who tried to change him into something more normal?

TREVES: Have we nothing to say, John?

MERRICK: If all that'd stared at me'd been sacked - there'd be whole towns out of work.

TREVES: I meant, "Thank you, sir."

MERRICK: "Thank you, sir."

TREVES: We always do say please and thank you, don't we?

MERRICK: Yes, sir. Thank you.

TREVES: If we want to properly be like others.

Trav Rockwell says

John Merrick a courageous, strong and beautiful human being. A short sad life. Brilliant read, page turner, started and finished all in my lunch break. Keen to see the play now.

Wayne Jarman says

This is a great script that leads to a very powerful production on-stage. Having worked with the script (playing the character of Frederick Treves), I found that the language and stage direction easily led to the development of the character - as well as to a finished play that affected the audience and transmitted the messages of the play to the audience.

To those readers who enjoy reading scripts, I highly recommend this one. However, the treatment of a small section of the spoken text took me a couple of reads. For example:

John Merrick (The Elephant Man) speaks "First chance I had to bathe regular. Ly." Initially, I thought the script must have been scanned because this looked like an Optical Character Recognition problem. However, I soon realised that what the writer meant to explain was what I would write as "First chance I had to bathe regular ...ly." - emphasising Merrick's speech impediment.

If you are not a reader of scripts, I highly recommend the viewing of a Production of The Elephant Man as soon as the opportunity arises. A good production will prove very rewarding.

Shlomo Touhis says

The Elephant Man was a moving play which featured a young man going through a problem that no one could understand. He faces a disease that leaves his body disfigured and his face -- beyond hideous. This true story captures the love in which he receives -- the love that he never thought would come to him -- once he is taken under the treatment of a young doctor. While i read The Elephant Man, I tried to picture myself in his un-adored shoes, as i thought it would be nearly impossible. Though, as this is a common classic in writing, I found Bernard Pomerance's literature not at all difficult to understand. He was able to let the reader slip into the life of John Merrick (The Elephant Man) and have the reader believe that they were visiting him themselves. I certainly felt as if this were the case. For, as I allowed myself to sink into the book, I was found myself quite discontented at his hard life. I found myself asking, "how could someone allow a mere 21 year-old man go through anything as horrifically depressing as this?" As I am at an age where I understand more clearly why many people in this world have to take pills and go through serious mental issues due to depression, I see this as a beyond serious case. Throughout the piece, one is left begging for the John Merrick to experience the best of a life, for as his condition might depress him, it also has the potential to kill him. In fact, the reader KNOWS that John Merrick will die, and it is basically guaranteed. It is truly a tragedy, regarding the poor life of this innocent man. One is left to really embrace the fact that we are lucky to have not gone through what John Merrick himself had endured. After I read the book, I was left with a sort of empty feeling, gnawing at me. I took this feeling as curiosity, and went on to immediately research the case of John Merrick. This indeed was based on a purely true story, and after seeing the movie as well, I am left adorned by The Elephant Man.

Craig Nixon says

I remember seeing this movie as a kid when my family were able to afford premium channels on cable. In it, John Merrick, played by John Hurt, depicted a man whose disfigured looks made him a pariah in English society, so much so that he ends up working as a local side-show freak.

After a doctor notices him, he decides to try and help Merrick live out the rest of his short life in as much comfort as possible. The audience rarely sees the Elephant Man during the movie, but when we do, it conjures an ocean of compassion for this seemingly gentle man. The famous ending where John yells out "I am not an animal, I am a man" solidifies David Lynch's movie as a masterpiece.

This play, a quick read of just over 100 pages, has little of that emotion and characterization. The short scenes barely hint at Merrick's life of discomfort and disease, and by the time he dies, we the readers are left wanting more, more background, more dialogue, more profundity. Even after he sees a woman naked for the first time, his comments and the scene in general seem rushed and lacking the pathos it could have had.

Overall, an okay play that almost forces the reader to go and rent the movie once again.

Now that I can afford it.

Carol says

Set in Victorian London, **THE ELEPHANT MAN** is based on the true story of John Merrick. (*real name Joseph Carey Merrick*)

As a horribly disfigured young man, John lived most of his incredibly short life of 28 years as a freak attraction at traveling side-shows until he came to the attention of Frederick Treves, a surgeon at London Hospital, who thankfully took him under his wing giving him an education, an introduction to society and a place to call home.

Reading this sad play, learning how John spent his days, why he couldn't lay down or speak clearly led me to do a bit of research on John's life that brought to light discrepancies in the play, but made for a memorable and touching read.

John was a kind and intelligent man who only wanted to be like every other man.

Elizabeth Olesh says

What is amazing about this play is that it is completely unsensationalistic. The playwright specifies that the role of Merrick should be played without any prostheses, stating that the use of such would be distracting to the action and intent of the play.

So, what is this play? It is an exploration of Victorian England and the mores of the time. It is an exploration of sensationalism. It demonstrates the ways we use other people, especially famous or infamous people, as our mirrors, ascribing characteristics to them that probably aren't accurate because we really have no idea who they are.

Definitely worth a read - or two.

freckledbibliophile says

Just as enjoyable as the movie! Sad story. 4.5 stars

Paul LaFontaine says

A disfigured English man from the late 1800's is sheltered by a doctor who discovers him trying to make money as a freak show attraction. Society embraces him and he becomes a chance for people to reflect on their own lives.

A short play on a fairly well-known topic, I liked the insights that people derived from the interaction with the protagonist. The issue of how and who "views" the oddity runs throughout and makes for a thoughtful experience.

Recommend

Catherine Limbsombe says

The play I read from "The Burns Mantle Theatre Yearbook the Best Plays of 1978-1979" is only a few pages in length. The best line of the entire play, "...Sometimes I think my head is so big because it is so full of dreams.' When dreams can't get out, he believes, something strange must happen." -Merrick

Ah, the Elephant Man exists in a morally exalted state of contemplation, pain, and reverie. Throughout the play you will find the character philosophizing and engaging in thoughtful conversations with those around him. As he questions the justice of man's habits and actions, he "drops flare" on societies warped and accepted modes & customs. The dialogue is terse and tethers the reader to The Elephant Man's nature, his huge heart & sensitivities, for example, making the idea of a benevolent God seem natural & possible despite illusions of the contrary.i
