

THE ROTHERFIELD PLAYERS

THE ELEPHANT MAN - FRIDAY 19 OCTOBER 2012

Our immediate reaction on hearing the Players were going to do The Elephant Man without prosthetics was – how will that work? The answer of course is extremely convincingly when you have malleable young actor like Zach Coe whose almost constant on-set presence as John Merrick was the pivot for many an excellent performance from the rest of the cast. The play opens with Zach displaying his athletic young frame in baggy white shorts, but as the introductions proceed he slowly distorts his face and frame into the anatomical purgatory that became the oft-reviled life of John Merrick. Nothing else in this extraordinary production would have worked without this brilliant and sustained effort.

Straddling the centre of the Hall, this intelligent, minimalist set of neutral grey allows the audience to sit close on the banks of this river of human emotion as the numerous characters drift through the many vignettes that form this multi-scene production. Allan Powell has clearly used all his considerable expertise in directing this fluid complexity of movement, expression and narrative to its faultless conclusion.

Referencing Dickens' cruel villain Sykes, Ralph Miller expertly portrays the brutish elements within working class Victorian life, facilitating Chris Walton-Turner as Dr Treve and Becky Syms as Mrs Kendal to shine in their well-crafted representations of the more humane elements of Society, and as Merrick's main supporters and only true friends. Despite the central tone of pathos running through the play there are sparks of humour including the memorable scintilla of Laura Holmwood's engagingly challenged Pinhead (well supported by Josephine Day and Stacey Brackley) and Brian Wright's Belgian Keystone Cop.

Graham Scott as Hospital Principal Mr Gomm drew a perfect picture of stiff period rectitude tinged with humanity, and Adam Hardy's slightly sepulchral intonations as the Bishop softly showed the same side of the Victorian church culture. If some elements of the script were a little opaque to the audience that did not stop the actors creating some well-acted cameo contrasts – Gussie Penny's role as the crass and cruel Manager of the poor Pinheads contrasting well with the varying degrees of socially fashionable, sometimes reluctant, acceptance of the grotesque Merrick by joyously regal Clare Carruthers (the Duchess), Kate Awcock's slightly ethereal Princess Alexandra and David Penny's foppishly pompous Lord John. Adding dimension to the piece Alan Varley's Ringmaster intoned timely scenic references from above the proscenium arch, from which perch young Joe Thorpe's bell-like voice also soared above the audience.

The level of difficulty in which nursing staff had in coming to terms with Merrick's acute deformity was very well empathised by Kate Organ and Louise Coe as Nurses Porter and Snork, whilst the working classes' capacity for compassion was nicely expressed by David Close and Michael Stanton as Conductor and Policeman.

All credit to producer James Gallifant, expert set and lighting crew of Messrs Cassford, Tasker, Miller and Close together with sound guru Terry Everitt in conquering the significant physical challenges of this complex production.

More than one tissue was eye-dabbed in Merrick's final death scene. Rotherfield Village is accustomed to productions of the highest quality and it takes an outstanding performance to get the well-deserved spontaneous standing ovation this performance received.

Peter Thompson