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Ensemble's evocative 'Elephant Man' fascinates

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Posted: 2:57 p.m. Monday, Nov. 3, 2014

By Bert Osborne - For the AJC

Aside from a coincidental animal motif, what do these three shows have in common: Actor's Express' 2013 mounting of "Equus"; Essential Theatre's staging of "Ravens & Seagulls" earlier this year; and Georgia Ensemble's newly opened version of "The Elephant Man"?

The answer is the skillful David Crowe, who directed them. Each in its way was/is extremely well done. His "Equus," for instance, was designed and delivered with a dazzling flair that somehow alleviated the intellectual overload and emotional aloofness of the material. Conversely, his "Ravens & Seagulls" was a slice-of-everyday-life that was rather simply depicted but quite authentically felt, no matter its lack of any fancy production values.



Jonathan Horne stars in "The Elephant Man" at Georgia Ensemble Theatre. CONTRIBUTED BY MARTINA SCHMIDT

Crowe's "The Elephant Man" combines the very best of both. It's at once stylistically evocative and thoroughly moving.

In the one respect, Linda Patterson's handsome costumes, Bryan Rosengrant's lustrous lighting, Phillip Male's sleek set and Crowe's discerning use of projections beautifully reflect the play's Victorian-era setting. In the other respect, in a pair of fairly astonishing performances by Jonathan Horne and

Sam R. Ross, the show really soars.

Popularized by David Lynch's 1980 film (which told its own variation of the same events) - if not by the highly touted new Broadway rendition of the play, starring Bradley Cooper - Bernard Pomerance's drama follows the amazing true story of John Merrick (Horne), a "grossly

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misshapen” circus freak-turned-toast of high society (at least for a time), taken under the protective wing of a London doctor, Frederick Treves (Ross).



Holly Stevenson (from left), Jonathan Horne and Sam R. Ross appear in Georgia Ensemble Theatre's "The Elephant Man." CONTRIBUTED BY MARTINA ... [Read More](#)

As conceived for the stage, without the layers of prosthetic makeup John Hurt wore on screen as Merrick, Horne is physically challenged to use only his body in portraying the character's deformities.

At first sight, taking his spot center stage, he's tall and rugged and normal. But as Treves stands behind him, lecturing about and detailing the many anatomical afflictions of his "discovery," Horne distorts his face or contorts his body to transform into the disfigured Merrick. Inexhaustibly, he maintains that crumpled posture for much of the play, losing himself in the role so completely and convincingly that you almost forget how strapping the actor really is – until a haunting dream sequence near the end.

Ross' task may be a lot easier from a physical standpoint, but his work is no less dramatically rich or compelling, as Treves weighs medical ethics against scientific certainties, torn between a "charitable act of giving" and an "assertion of authority," plagued by concerns about exploiting Merrick yet again or about whether the actual "freak" might be the good doctor himself. (As incredible as it seems, I fondly remember Ross playing the same character some 20 years ago at his long-gone Down Right Theatre.)

Rachel Garner offers superb support as Mrs. Kendal, a prominent actress of the day who befriends Merrick. In a variety of smaller parts, the fine ensemble also includes Theo Harness, Steve Hudson, Holly Stevenson and Robert Wayne. All the actors relish their scenes, although recurring appearances by a couple of Belgian "pinheads" push it a bit.

Otherwise, chalk up another one for director Crowe, who takes a story of such abject sadness and turns it into a vision of rare loveliness.

THEATER REVIEW

"The Elephant Man"

Grade: A-

Through Nov. 16. 7:30 p.m. Wednesdays; 8 p.m. Thursdays-Fridays; 4 and 8 p.m. Saturdays; 2:30 p.m. Sundays. \$25-\$35. Roswell Cultural Arts Center, 950 Forrest St., Roswell. 770-641-1260, www.get.org.

Bottom line: Stunning.

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