

Theater: Bradley Cooper Gets Ugly; TR Knight Gets Closeted

Theater: Bradley Cooper Gets Ugly; TR Knight Gets Closeted

POCATELLO ** 1/2 out of ****

THE ELEPHANT MAN ** out of ****

THE BEST SHOWS OF 2014

POCATELLO ** 1/2 out of ****

PLAYWRIGHTS HORIZONS

What a pleasure to see actor T.R. Knight back on stage in a role that might have been written for him. Knight (best known for Grey's Anatomy, as well as his excellent work on stage and a recent arc on The Good Wife) plays Eddie, the manager of an anonymous chain restaurant in the small town of Pocatello. The town -- and the restaurant -- have fallen on hard times but Eddie tries to hold it together, arranging "family week" and encouraging staffers to invite their families for a discounted meal. The results, naturally, are disastrous.

Playwright Samuel D. Hunter scored a huge success with The Whale (pun intended) and that has perhaps fueled the ambition of this show. Pocatello is bursting with characters and something to say about the Big Box decimation of America. Eddie's family is still reeling from the suicide of his father, with his mom Doris (Brenda Wehle) barely speaking to them and his brother Nick (Brian Hutchinson) reluctantly coming to town for the first time in years. You've also got an employee named Troy (the solid Danny Wolohan) with an alcoholic wife Tammy (Jessica Dickey); a dementia-riddled father (Jonathan Hogan) and a depressed, maybe bulimic and certainly miserable teenage daughter Becky (an excellent Leah Karpel). Oh and Max (Cameron Scoggins) is a waiter out of jail and claiming to be off the meth as well while waitress Isabelle (Elvy Yost) is almost certain she should have taken that other job that pays a little better.

Adding tension is that the manager Eddie knows the restaurant will be closed by the corporate offices in two weeks but he hasn't told anyone yet. Eddie's waiting for a miracle and miracles don't happen in Pocatello. Looming over all these mini-dramas is the bigger drama of a hollowed-out economy, a hollowed-out community, a hollowed-out America. Eddie just wants his remaining family to sit down for a friendly meal and talk. But he might as well be asking for the moon.

Numerous speeches rush through lists of chain restaurants like Applebee's and Olive Garden or detail the small town way of life that has disappeared. Teenager Becky in particular literally throws up when asked to eat food because -- she says -- she can't stop thinking about the tortured animals that are in it or the maltreated peasants who grew it or the chemicals and sprays that cover it. And don't call her Becky: people in America are so drenched in guilt, we don't even deserve a name. That's one of the funnier lines in the show as delivered by Karpel, who manages to turn the cliché of a surly teenager into a specific and vivid character.

Unfortunately, the show has such big ambitions it tosses in too many plot threads, too many big picture moments and loses track of the (too many) characters. Despite a solid cast (Dickey is the weak link here as the combustible Tammy), they rarely overcome the machinations of Hunter.

But Knight has such a natural likability that you can't help rooting for Eddie. He's a semi-closeted guy -- everyone knows he's gay but it's never spoken about. In a nice twist, instead of the gay brother escaping to the

big city, it's the straight brother Nick who has bolted Pocatello while Eddie feels obliged to not "give up" the way his suicidal dad did after their diner shut down. He's determined to stick it out because Pocatello is his home. Of course, he's also avoiding life (and dealing with his own sexuality) by staying put in a small town where his dating prospects are modest to say the least.

He's paired well with Karpel as Becky. The scene where they first talk feels natural and alive; you become certain that this is what the play will be about: a buttoned-up gay restaurant manager and a smart but miserable teenage girl. Then other, far less interesting plot developments get in the way.

The scenic design by Lauren Halpern is top-notch; it depressingly captures what a run-down chain restaurant can look like in all its depressing glory. The costumes of Jessica Pabst and lighting of Eric Southern are also quietly spot-on. But the sound design of Matt Tierney (perhaps as called for in the script and by director Davis McCallum) is distracting. Bland tunes are piped in over the speakers -- fair enough. But instead of beginning scenes with that annoying drone and then fading it out, the music stays far too present for far too long, making it difficult to hear dialogue. We get the idea quickly; belaboring it just beats the idea home. The same with actors talking over each other (we often have multiple conversations at several tables in the restaurant happening at the same time). This can be pulled off in films with a good sound mix, but on stage the effect is not Altmanesque -- it just makes all the dialogue hard to hear.

McCallum also plays some big scenes at too high a pitch. The play's timely thoughts about how all small towns are pretty much the same now or the way the collapsed economy is crushing dreams would have played better at a more subtle level. Instead we have speech after speech. And Nick's reaction to any reference to the father who killed himself is so over-the-top and angry I suspected maybe there was some other layer to the tale: had the father beaten or molested the boys? Nick wasn't saddened by mention of his dad; he was horrified! And the mother (an always strong Wehle with a small, one-note part) apologizes for their childhood? Again, the choice of words, the way it was staged, the performance of the actors all confused the issues raised in an already busy piece. Quite simply, Eddie was just desperately trying to avoid doing what his father had done: giving up.

T.R. Knight never gives up. Whether endearingly awkward when an employee clearly assumes he's gay or snapping at the staff in frustration and then -- typically -- immediately apologizing, Knight makes the ache and the sincerity of Eddie palpable. When he breaks down in tears at the end, the play may be confusing as to exactly why (happiness? regret? a floodgate of emotions?) but Knight with his skill and charisma makes us feel the presence of a real person on stage, something too rare in this messy, watchable but ultimately unsatisfying drama.

THE ELEPHANT MAN ** out of **** **BOOTH THEATRE**

Somehow, I've never seen anything of *The Elephant Man*. Not the film directed by David Lynch (which is based on similar source material but is not based on this play), not one of the many revivals starring Billy Crudup or David Bowie or numerous other handsome men attracted to this most unhandsome but charismatic figure. So I approached this revival of Bernard Pomerance's drama with all the curiosity of any side show interloper plunking down a few pence for a chance to gawp at the entertainment. Thanks to a talented cast, I got my money's worth (just). But I don't think Pomerance got his.

The story is simple enough. It's the late 1800s and John Merrick is a miserable person. Deformed by an unknown illness, he has been abandoned by his relatives and reduced to a figure of loathing people gaze at with disgust and fear. His "handler" (one can't call him a manager) is cruel and circumstances leave him defenseless and ready to be torn apart by a mob that instinctively hates Merrick and wants him dead just for being alive.

Luckily, Dr. Frederick Treves is alerted. He's already examined this rarest of specimens (one can't quite call Merrick a person, not even if one is a man of science) and is intrigued. Treves rescues Merrick, takes the poor

fellow under his wing at London Hospital and vows to make Merrick's life as normal as possible. To do so, he finally entreats Mrs. Kendall, an actress to pay a visit. Most everyone, especially women, flee in disgust at the sight of him but maybe a star like Mrs. Kendall could at least fake politeness for a while? She is intrigued by this novelty (one can't quite call him an audience, not even when an actress craves an audience) and agrees, only to realize Merrick is a thoughtful, funny and winning person. Soon, visiting Merrick becomes all the rage amongst the upper crust, donations flood into the hospital, Dr Treves gains royalty as a new client and the Elephant Man is clearly back on display. Oh it may be with the best of intentions, but Merrick is still the freak show of the day.

What to say? However it may have played before, this production by Scott Ellis feels...soft. The staging is simple and direct and all the tech elements are handsome. The cast assembled is up to the task, but what task is that? Bradley Cooper is quite good at capturing the wry, intelligent voice of Merrick. He distorts his face and limps and crawls about and we're soon in the mind of this interesting fellow. But that's it for Merrick. He's droll, funny, exceptionally smart and so he remains. In the film, of course, we first learn Merrick speaks when he says, "I am not an animal. I am a human being." It's shocking, revealing and tells us a great deal about this character. The play's Merrick simply begs for help. He's a passive person and once we realize his nature, nothing else surprises us about him. We're told he reflects back the characteristics of whomever he is talking but don't quite see this in action. And is this a calculated move by a person who must depend on others for survival? Or is it merely the nature of this particular man? Or is it something else, perhaps Merrick trying on different personas until he finds the one that fits? We don't know and this production doesn't try to tell us.

Alessandro Nivola is also a puzzle as Treves. Much happens to him in the show: Treves rockets up in fame, lands his employer a windfall, begins hobnobbing with royalty, publishes to great acclaim and is even swindled in some sort of financial deal (a somehow significant plot turn that flits by almost unnoticed). But Treves remains even more opaque than Merrick, despite Nivola's increasing confidence on the stage. Near the end, he has a lengthy speech in which ideas and thoughts and concerns that have apparently been bubbling inside him come boiling out. But the man of the cloth Treves pours his heart out to is quite confused and can only keep saying, "I don't understand! I don't understand!" and we feel the same.

Patricia Clarkson is on more solid ground as Mrs. Kendall. We know this lover of the spotlight, this actress who is always on stage the moment she first speaks. Her scenes with Merrick are the strongest and have an emotional weight the rest of the show sorely lacks. But they are too few. Mrs. Kendall is sent away for daring to see Merrick as a man. Dr. Treves sends her packing in a righteous rage. And why? Because he wants her himself? Because he wants Merrick to need only him? Because he actually sees Merrick as a monster, no matter how compassionate he may seem in his professional capacity? Some conflicted combination of all three?

If we knew more about Treves or more about Merrick beyond his intelligence, this might have more impact, as might the finale where Merrick takes his own life in sorrow. I thought he was smarter than that but in this production of *The Elephant Man*, I barely know Merrick or anyone on stage very well at all.

THE BEST SHOWS OF 2014

Just under the wire, here is my list of the best theater/happenings I saw in 2014. Needless to say, I missed some key events. Only full-time, high-powered critics get to see everything. I saw a lot, but all, all is tricky. Thanks to the artists and venues and publicists that allowed me to see the work they create. I try to keep in mind that everyone involved is striving to create something special. People don't go into the theater to get rich, after all. Hopefully that baseline of respect comes through on even my cruelest reviews. It also explains why I sometimes sound like a show doctor: instead of dismissing a work, I try to wonder how it might be better. If you can't say something nice, say something constructive.

1. [When Father Comes Home From The Wars Parts 1, 2 & 3](#) at the Public/[An Octoroon](#) at Soho Rep (tie)
2. [Guys And Dolls](#) at Carnegie Hall

3. [The Curious Incident Of The Dog In The Night-Time](#)
4. [Allegro](#) at Classic Stage Company
5. [Sense and Sensibility](#) by Bedlam
6. [The Fortress Of Solitude](#) at the Public
7. [Lypsinka! The Boxed Set](#)
8. [Strictly Dishonorable](#) by Attic Theatre Company
9. [The Old Man and the Old Moon](#) by PigPen
10. [The Heir Apparent](#) at Classic Stage Company
11. [Broadway By The Year 1940-1964](#) at Town Hall/ [The National High School Musical Theater Awards](#)
12. [A Raisin In The Sun](#)
13. [Ghost Quartet](#)
14. [Les Miserables/ Aladdin/ Here Lies Love](#)
15. [Dubliners: A Quartet](#) at WNYC

THEATER OF 2014

- [Beautiful: The Carole King Musical](#) ***
[Rodney King](#) ***
[Hard Times](#) ** 1/2
[Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead](#) **
[I Could Say More](#) *
[The Loneliness Of The Long Distance Runner](#) **
[Machinal](#) ***
[Outside Mullingar](#) ***
[A Man's A Man](#) * 1/2
[The Tribute Artist](#) ** 1/2
[Transport](#) **
[Prince Igor at the Met](#) **
[The Bridges Of Madison County](#) ** 1/2
[Kung Fu \(at Signature\)](#) **
[Stage Kiss](#) ***
[Satchmo At The Waldorf](#) ***
[Antony and Cleopatra](#) at the Public **
[All The Way](#) ** 1/2
[The Open House \(Will Eno at Signature\)](#) ** 1/2
[Wozzeck \(at Met w Deborah Voigt and Thomas Hampson and Simon O'Neill\)](#)
[Hand To God](#) ***
[Tales From Red Vienna](#) **
[Appropriate \(at Signature\)](#) *
[Rocky](#) * 1/2
[Aladdin](#) ***
[Mothers And Sons](#) **
[Les Miserables](#) *** 1/2
[Breathing Time](#) * 1/2
[Cirque Du Soleil's Amaluna](#) * 1/2
[Heathers The Musical](#) * 1/2
[Red Velvet, at St. Ann's Warehouse](#) ***
[Broadway By The Year 1940-1964](#) *** 1/2
[A Second Chance](#) **