

Cultural Daily

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Bradley Cooper Shines in 'Elephant Man' Role, But

David Sheward · Wednesday, January 7th, 2015

Two current productions reflect a growing Broadway trend: all-star vehicles in their third Main Stem incarnation. *The Elephant Man* and *A Delicate Balance* are established dramatic fare in limited runs headlined by surefire box-office champs. They are satisfying evenings, but only the latter challenges its audience. I have reviewed both, and begin this week by offering my take on *The Elephant Man*, starring Bradley Cooper and Patricia Clarkson.

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The Elephant Man, Bernard Pomerance’s 1977 biographical work of John Merrick, whose hideous deformity masked a gentle spirit, is a moving portrait of its subject (his real name was Joseph) and a scathing indictment of the puritanical Victorian era in which he lived. Merrick is rescued from a pitiable existence as a sideshow freak by the prominent surgeon Frederick Treves, who attempts to give the misshapen man as normal an existence as possible by introducing him to high society. This includes the actress Madge Kendal. Her sympathetic visits culminate with a brief erotic display when she exposes her breasts to Merrick who has never been looked on with romantic tenderness before.



Bradley Cooper contorts his body to pull off the character of John Merrick. Patricia Clarkson and Alessandro Nivola in background. Photo Credit: Joan Marcus

Director Scott Ellis has emphasized the sentiment and turns the spotlight on film star Bradley Cooper in the title role at the expense of Pomerance’s cool observations. (Sean Mathias took a more objective stance in his 2002 revival.) Ellis chooses to eliminate the Brechtian song warbled by a pair of Belgian “pinheads” to Merrick just before he expires by sleeping on his back, letting his heavy head crush his windpipe, and then adds a syrupy finish by having Mrs. Kendal make a final entrance and embrace the dead Merrick.

It’s laudable of Cooper to attempt this difficult role and he carries it off with expertise and passion, twisting his muscular frame and handsome features into the Elephant Man’s pitiable form. Alessandro Nivola is commanding and compassionate as the conflicted Treves, expressing the doctor’s desire for conformity and his doubts about his strict morality. Patricia Clarkson is delightfully droll as Mrs. Kendal, but overplays her theatricality. Anthony Heald admirably doubles as the avaricious manager and a pious bishop, both of whom exploit Merrick for their own ends. Timothy R. Mackabee’s bare set resembles a stark exhibition hall, lit with unforbearing

sterility by Philip S. Rosenberg and the Booth Theatre exterior is decorated like a period circus. Ellis and company deliver a solid professional staging but a deeper rendering of the script would have produced a richer experience.

The Elephant Man: Dec. 7—Feb. 22, 2015. Booth Theatre, 222 W. 45th St., NYC. Tue, Thu., 7 p.m.; Wed., Fri., Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. Running time: two hours including intermission. \$99—\$169. (212) 239-6200 or www.telecharge.com

This review has appeared previously on [ArtsinNY](#) and [Theaterlife](#).

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