

Thursday, December 25, 1980



Courtney Burr portrays John Merrick, a sideshow freak tormented by Judith Calder in this scene from "The Elephant Man," opening Friday at the Birmingham Theatre.

Touring actor talks of 'Elephant Man'

By ETHEL SIMMONS

Courtney Burr, the star of "Elephant Man," was fresh-voiced and friendly, as he spoke by phone from New York on a recent afternoon.

The versatile actor-producer is back on stage again, after recent stints producing successful Broadway runs of "Harold and Maude" and "The Effects of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds."

He's returning to the role of the grotesque "elephant man," continuing the tour that resumes Friday when the American Theatre Productions version of the Broadway hit opens at the Birmingham Theatre.

The play by Bernard Pomerance won a Tony Award and the New York drama Critics' Circle Award. It continues at the Birmingham Theatre through Jan. 4.

Burr said the tour had begun in the East and the South, playing a lot of university towns and other cities. Audience response has been "extremely favorable," and the cast has played to some standing-room-only houses.

THE SHOW has been touring for about 10 weeks. The company broke after Thanksgiving for four weeks, and "Birmingham is the first date after the break," he said. The Midwest and West Coast will comprise the rest of the tour.

A movie also called "The Elephant Man," but not based on the play, has been playing approximately at the same time of the touring production.

Burr said the movie doesn't seem to have deterred attendance at the play. The film is a good work and many people who have seen it are seeing the play as well, he commented.

While the movie depends strongly on make-up and visuals, the stage production offers "more structure to the actual play," he said. "The magic of theater live" is another facet of the drama.

The real-life "elephant man," John Merrick, was a hideously deformed man who toured as a circus freak before a medical doctor rescued him in Victorian England. Merrick was a brilliant, magnetic personality who became the rage of London society.

BLOND, SQUARE-JAWED and handsome Burr relies on "a simple contortion" to help the audience imagine the grotesque creature. During the play, real photos of Merrick are flashed on a screen for a scene at a lecture.

"I do contort my body, in a pose I sustain through the show. And I walk with a cane," Burr said. The actual deformity is "suggested rather than gruesome."

Burr said he suspects people will cry, "Oh, My God!" upon hearing his description of the character and play. "In point of fact, 'The Elephant Man' has a great deal of comedy and is very moving."

Philip Anglim, an American actor, discovered the play while he was in England. There, he originated the role of "the elephant man" and brought it to Broadway.

Burr Davidson played the role next, and rock star David Bowie is currently starring as "the elephant man" in New York. Courtney said he saw Anglim in the role and the first act of Bowie's performance, which he attended to study technical aspects.

BOWIE IS "androgynous, ethereal. His quality — which he uses in rock performances — is startling." In contrast, "My emotional life is much more on the surface of the work," Burr said.

Theater audiences identify easily with "the elephant man," Burr said, because of the character's strength and courage. "There's a line from the play and real-life in which the doctor, Sir Frederick Treves, says, 'His character is that of an upstanding, handsome young man.' We're focusing in on the soul of this man."

Before going onstage for a performance, Burr does 40 minutes of exercise

for his back, neck and shoulders, "to get extremely relaxed, limber and warm." Following the show, he looks for "a warm restaurant. I take hot baths after for the bones."

He also keeps in shape with massages and a choreographer. "Exercise is always a very good preparation. It helps me get into the mental work of the character as well," Burr said.

Besides the physical movement, the actor uses voice changes in his role of "the elephant man."

"I WORKED ON a form of impediment, then refined it. You see a slight change in his talking pattern. There's a moment in the play when the voice changes. People say, 'Oh, I liked the other character so much!'"

Born in Manhattan, Burr comes from a family with a long history in theater and all the arts. His grandfather, Courtney Burr, was a theatrical producer for 40 years. His grandmother wrote popular song hits.

Because he is both a producer and actor, Burr is able to talk about both professions knowledgeably. "I'm enjoying going back to the acting," he said. "To be a producer is so grueling and time consuming. Months and years go into each production."

The American Theatre Productions touring show of "The Elephant Man" has identical staging and sets to the Broadway play. "The movement on stage is very stylized. The Victorian influence is important to the mood of the play," Burr said.

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