

By Amy Rubin

While the theater news is good in Montpelier, it's very good in Burlington, thanks to a newly formed relationship between the University of Vermont Department of Theater and Vermont Stage Company. Last year, after a season of professional shows, VSC Artistic Director Blake Robison did what most local theater producers thought was impossible: get a non-university play into UVM's Royall Tyler Theatre.

Now, with an on-site office and access to all the things college funds can offer — a state-of-the-art performance space, professionally trained talents who work for nothing, and healthy budgets for sets, costumes, and technical support — VSC has become the state's first real contender for regional theater status. And the school, already known for its strong program, gains a feather in its academic cap by providing a professional venue

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SHOWS OF STRENGTH

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for its students.

Set-ups like this have a solid track record across the country. This week, with Bernard Pomerance's *The Elephant Man*, local audiences get their first peek at the positive results. But the reason for its success is surprising. Despite the presence of two equity imports with regional and off-Broadway credentials, this production's strongest performances comes from a student and a local actor.

UVM junior Gregory Steen exhibits tremendous focus and physical control in the title role of John Merrick, a 19th-century Englishman grossly disfigured by a degenerative bone affliction. Without special makeup or costuming to replicate the so-called "elephant man" appearance, Steen manages — through contorted stance, twisted face, breathy slur and plodding movements — to place Merrick before us.

SEVEN DAYS

But what's most impressive about this achievement is Steen's ability to convey his character's emotions and personality without any change of facial expression. Merrick, you see, was physically incapable of it. If this performance weren't so riveting, it would be exhausting to watch.

Burlington's own John Alexander provides the second reason to see this show. In three widely differing supporting roles, Alexander is rock solid. Whether portraying the fiercely proud Bishop, the self-serving Ross, or the subservient Snork, Alexander finds every nuance. Next time, VSC can save a plane fare from the Big Apple and put Alexander where he belongs: in a lead role.

Credit for these performances can be shared by director Peter Jack Tkatch, who seamlessly moves his cast through an awkwardly structured play. With 21 scenes, which create a stop-start flow and prevent the audience from

achieving full intimacy with the characters, *The Elephant Man* is a directorial challenge. Tkatch rises to it, and gets the most out of his cast, who also benefit from Jeff Modereger's beautiful set and Martin Thaler's stunning costumes. The polished Kermit Brown is exacting as a dignified Dr. Gomm, while UVM senior Maeghan Doolin Labonte shows great promise as Mrs. Kendal. While some student work is stiff, the only notable disappointment is Charles McIver's portrayal of Dr. Treves, the elephant man's protector and observer. McIver never establishes Treves' nature or motives, thus disabling his character's growth.

The Elephant Man is a fine start for the UVM-VSC marriage. Robison and Thaler — also chair of the theater department — may have finally found the way to provide Vermont with year-round professional theater in a permanent home. Bravo. □