



Bradley Cooper (left) as Joseph Merrick and Alessandro Nivola as Dr. Frederik Treves in *The Elephant Man*. Right: Joseph Merrick (1862-1890) in 1889.

# “I Am Not An Animal”

Joseph Merrick was exhibited as a sideshow oddity, The Elephant Man. His heartbreaking life story has been documented on film, the page and, once again, the stage.

IN 1980, *The Elephant Man* hit cinema screens and became an instant hit. It snared eight Oscar nominations, bringing acclaim to director David Lynch and British actor John Hurt for his portrayal of Joseph Merrick, a Victorian-era man suffering from a congenital disorder of gross disfigurement.

While the film was successful in its own right, *The Elephant Man* stage play debuted three years earlier in London. Unrelated to the movie, it was a fringe theatre piece written by American playwright and poet Bernard Pomerance,

and went on to win the 1979 Tony Award for Best Play.

David Schofield was the first actor to portray Merrick in a role noted for its unique and physically challenging interpretation of a poignant and unfortunate character. The part has also been played by Bruce Davison, Billy Crudup, David Bowie and even Luke Skywalker himself, Mark Hamill.

Enter, Bradley Cooper. Known for his Hollywood prowess in such gems as *American Hustle*, *American Sniper* and *Silver Linings Playbook*,

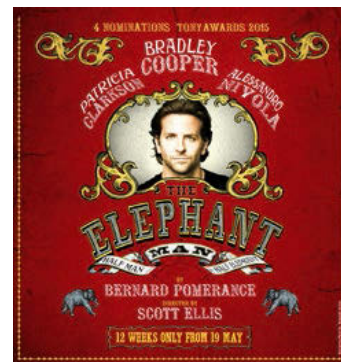


Cooper has already snared four Oscar nominations, and *People* magazine's Sexiest Man Alive title. But if Cooper hasn't already proved he's more than just a pretty face (and body), his portrayal as the Elephant Man has certainly secured his thespian credibility.

During its successful run on Broadway, critics were bowled over by Cooper's performance, calling it everything from "touching" to "breathtakingly beautiful". It is therefore no surprise that he became an instant frontrunner for the prestigious Tony Award.

For those unfamiliar with the play, it should be noted that *The Elephant Man* does not use prosthetics or make up in order to achieve the grotesque disfigurement that Merrick suffered. It is by pure physical acting and connecting with the imagination of the audience that the so-called Elephant Man is brought to life on stage. This is no easy feat, but it's something that Cooper does well. He contorts his body, twists his limbs and grimaces with a slobbering and slurred vocal delivery that brings compassion and empathy. And that is where the play cleverly extends itself.

Merrick's story is a true and sad one, having spent time as a sideshow attraction before moving into the safety of the London Hospital, under the care of Dr. Fredrik Treves. But while a hospital ward is better than a circus freak show, Merrick enters a world where curiosity and sympathy meld to create a new type of angst. This is where the play skillfully uses the Elephant Man as a mirror and sounding board to reflect the other characters troubled personalities. Patricia Clarkson (*The Station*



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*Agent*) plays Mrs Kendal, the London actress who befriends Merrick, while Alessandro Nivola (*Selma*) plays Dr Treves.

The success that the cast, and director Scott Ellis, brought to Broadway has paved the way for the current West End production where Clarkson, Nivola and Cooper have all reprised their roles. What a treat for Londoners.

But it is Cooper who steals the show. In parts of the performance he stands nearly naked wearing the equivalent of Victorian-era boxers, but on this occasion the sight of a Hollywood hunk's physique is far outweighed by his award-worthy performance in one of the most sought-after theatre roles around.

Joseph Merrick was a unique and tragic figures of his time, attracting attention for both the right and wrong reasons. Telling his story requires understanding, dignity and compassion. Cooper brings all of this to the role, and something more.

**MORE:** *The Elephant Man* is playing at London's Theatre Royal Haymarket. For more visit: [www.elephantmanlondon.com](http://www.elephantmanlondon.com)