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Plunging into the 'Belly' of Lifetime Institutionalization

ATW Review

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29th Street Rep



James E. Smith, Heidi James, Gordon Holmes and David Mogentale in *In the Belly of the Beast Revisited*.
 Photo: Fouad Salloum

29th Street Repertory's *In the Belly of the Beast Revisited* begins with a woman screaming in the dark. There's a palpable jump among the audience settled into this company's small Chelsea home as the shriek comes, not from the stage, but rather, the aisle of the theater. In this production, based on the writings of Jack Henry Abbott which have been edited and arranged by Adrian Hall, the roller-coaster of aural and visual stimulus never seems to end as director Leo Farley takes the audience through Abbott's history and an analysis of his actions.

Abbott, as most people may recall, was the convicted killer whose correspondence with Norman Mailer was ultimately developed into a best-selling, widely acclaimed book, *In the Belly of the Beast*. The book, published in 1981, briefly catapulted Abbott into New York's literati and glitterati set. His brush with this crowd came to a crashing end when, just weeks into his release from prison, he murdered a waiter in New York's East Village. When he was denied parole in 2002, Abbott committed suicide.

Hall's script and Farley's direction propels the audience through time and space on Mark Symczak's dual purpose set, where a stark prison cell on one side is offset by a somewhat cluttered office/court space on the other. What emerges is a portrait of a man, who, although never having gone beyond the sixth grade, possesses a certain eloquence and insight into human nature, particularly the instinct to survive in the harshest, and some would argue, inhumane conditions. One also comes to understand that Abbott served not only his prison terms in government institutions, but also his lifetime. (He was placed early on into foster homes and moved from these to juvenile facilities.)

One first encounters David Mogentale's Abbott crouched on the cot on stage, dimly lit (Stewart Wagner creates grand mood throughout), "cooking" heroin in a spoon over the stainless steel sink/toilet in the cell. There's something both feral and compassionate about Mogentale, as he describes how a younger prisoner had been sent to his cell as a "present" after a stretch in solitary. This chameleon-like nature and eerie dichotomy in Mogentale's performance continues through "Beast"; just as one begins to feel comfortable with the man they are watching, a sudden shift in the character will move one from complacency to fear.

Compounding the anxiousness one feels throughout the evening are the performances by Heidi James, James E. Smith and Gordon Holmes, who, as "Readers", play roles from Abbott's sister to prison guards. The clinical distance that these actors provide makes one understand the emotionally deprived world in which Abbott lived. Particularly macabre are Smith's leering portrayal of Mailer and James' slightly titillated Veronique, a woman whom Abbott had hired in 1981 to help him understand the social niceties of the free world in which he briefly found himself.

It's difficult for one to not feel slightly imprisoned, oneself, while watching *In the Belly of the Beast Revisited*. The language is tough, situations are often brutal, and there isn't the patina of slickness that one associates with prison realism, such as HBO's "Oz". At the same time though,

it's a theatrical experience that one relishes, even as one wonders where the next horror might lie.

In the Belly of the Beast Revisited continues through April 3 at 29th Street Rep (212 West 29th Street). Performances are Monday through Saturday at 8pm. Tickets are \$40 and can be purchased by calling 212-868-4444. Further information is available online at www.29thstreetrep.com.

-- **Andy Propst**

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