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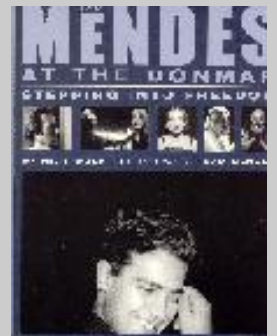
*A CurtainUp Review*

*In the Belly of the Beast Revisited*



*It began on January 21, 1944, thirty-eight years ago tomorrow. That is when Jack Henry Abbott was born. And he went from the belly of his mother directly into the belly of the beast. I mean from one womb into another. I mean from the moment of inception, he was put in jail, not an infirmary, not an incubator, nothing like that. Directly into jail. They called it foster homes.*

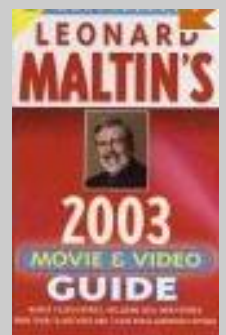
---Reader 1 as Defense attorney during Abbott's trial for the manslaughter, just six months after his parole that owed much to Norman Mailer's support.



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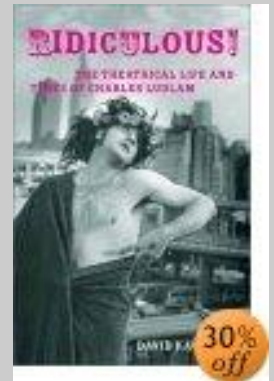
Front: David Mogentale as John Henry Abbott. Rear: James E. Smith, Heidi James & Gordon Holmes (Photo: Fouad Salloum)

Anyone who's been to the 29th Street Rep knows not to expect easy entertainment or uplifting agit-prop. What you get is a no-holds barred look at a nightmarish world of lives lived in the lower depths. One such life currently being excavated from the grave by David Mogentale, one of the company's and this reviewer's favorite interpreters of at once fascinating and repellent anti-heros, is that of convicted killer John Henry Abbott.

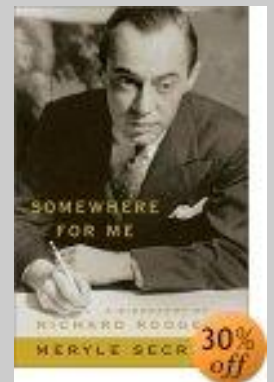
The play, *In the Belly of the Beast Revisited* is based on the book that grew out of Abbott's prison correspondence with Norman Mailer who was so seduced by its vividness that he became an advocate for the publication of the letters and Abbott's release from prison. The "Revisited" differentiates this from an earlier dramatization in the early 1980s in that it is a new adaptation by Adrian Hall that delves deeper into Abbott's psyche by incorporating material from Abbott's second book (*My Return*, 1987) and various court records, newspaper, radio and TV accounts that take us right up to his prison suicide..

Under Leo Farley's vigorous direction and with a strong assist from set designer Mark Symczak, the small stage handily

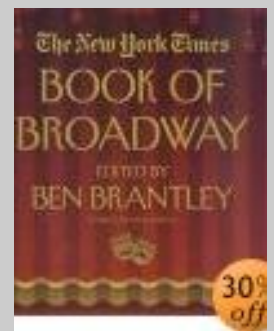
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accommodates the shifts between harrowing prison and courtroom drama -- the latter genre embracing a parole board meeting and the widely publicized trial that sent Abbott back to prison after he stabbed a young waiter just a few weeks before the end of his probation. With the three supporting actors, listed only as Readers 1, 2 and 3, you may think this is a sort of illustrated staged reading, but Farley adeptly steers those readers through a variety of other characterizations; e.g.: prison guards, a court stenographer, defense and prosecuting attorneys, Norman Mailer, the hapless waiter Abbott stabbed to death and his companions on the night of that fateful encounter.

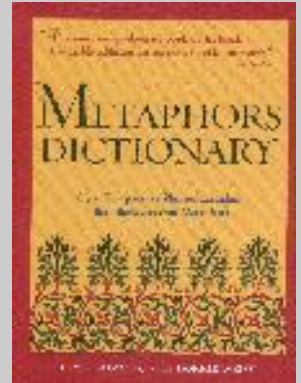
Heidi James, James E. Smith and Gordon Holmes skillfully handle their multiple roles. It's nice to see Ms. James once again after her standout performance in the company's Fall 2003 production of Rona Munro's *Bold Girls* (An interesting aside: That production coincided with Manhattan Theater Club's mounting of Munro's *Iron*, which happened to be a prison play).

Good as the support players are and much as their roles contribute to this play transcending the label of docudrama, the evening belongs to Mogentale, sporting wire rimmed glasses and a mustache to validate Abbott's half Asian background, gives a bone-chillingly complex performance. His recollections of a life lived almost entirely in reformatories and prisons are recreated with a controlled intensity that makes the first act almost too painful to watch. As he relives his time spent in the hell known as the Hole he takes you with him into its utter blackness. He curls up in a fetus-like ball on the floor as he recounts a brutal beating. The actor's powerful athleticism replaces words as a guard unfeelingly conveys news of the death of his mother and he repeatedly throws himself against a metal cabinet. (While he apparently had good feelings about his mother, the details of how she abandoned him to foster care are vague.)

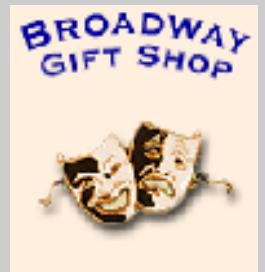
As in the recently opened *Bug* by Tracy Letts (in whose *Killer Joe* Mogentale played the title character in 1994), the prison recollections include some pretty unsettling talk about cockroaches -- but while *Bug* is also dark and unlikely to please light entertainment seekers, it IS a comedy. *In The Belly of the Beast Revisited* is served straight up, without any tension relieving chuckles.

While Mogentale's characterization makes makes us

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uncomfortably aware of how an uncaring system contributes to rather than corrects criminality, he also captures Abbott's knack for self-justification, as in this letter to Mailer: "You're not a 'psycho,' a killer. That doesn't mean you won't kill, you won't do mind-boggling acts of violence. It is hard to bring yourself to these acts, but you take a deep breath, look intelligently at what you must do, and you do it even though you are scared stiff and sick to your stomach." His almost sensual description of another inmate's knife killing of a guard and his own similar act is a sad signal of the killer instinct that people like Mailer failed to recognize as something that would predictably surface when Abbott found himself free and a literary celebrity even as he still lived as a parolee in a seedy New York halfway house. This dual picture of a man who wins your sympathy as someone whose potential was allowed to fall between the cracks but who is unable to turn his talent and anger into a more redemptive story becomes even more apparent during the less physically but no less emotionally lacerating trial of the second act.

Vera Beren's rat-tat-tat sound design and music intensify the unflinching grimness of Abbott's sadly wasted life. Stewart Wagner's lighting demarcates the two simultaneously visible settings and adds immeasurable to the atmosphere.

Unlike the just closed *Exonerated*, which was more upbeat in that it shows at least some changes in the justice system that has freed or exonerated scores of unjustly convicted people, *In the Belly of the Beast Revisited* is tough and unbending as the steel doors of a prison cell in its depiction of one man who had enough writing ability to leave a record of a story that is undoubtedly one of thousands -- a story for which this play offers no alternative endings. Needless to say, it's is not for the faint of heart.

### **Notes and Links**

In an article written by Philip Terzian for *Jewish World Review*(Feb. 15, 2002) after Abbott hanged himself in his cell, the author posits that "IF Jack Henry Abbott did nothing else in his life, he put an end to the budding romance between public intellectuals and murderers" Another writer, Sid Smith of the *Chicago Tribune*, in writing about a 1985 production of the play quoted Norman Mailer's admission that he felt "a very large responsibility" for the knifing committed during Abbott's parole. Smith does point out that Mailer's guilt must have still been mixed with sympathy since he was in daily attendance at the 1982 trial, as was Susan Sarandon who

shortly thereafter named her newborn son Jack Henry!

Want to judge Abbott's writing for yourself? Both his books are still in print and available from Amazon:

[In the Belly Of The Beast/paperback](#) [My Return/hardcover](#)

#### LINKS TO PLAYS MENTIONED

[Bold Girls](#)

[The Exonerated](#)

[Iron](#)

[The Glory of Living](#)-- not mentioned in my review but probably the prison drama which comes closest to matching the grim and grungy sensibility of *In the Belly of the Beast Revisited*.

#### IN THE BELLY OF THE BEAST REVISITED

Written by Jack Henry Abbot; arranged and edited by Adrian Hall

Directed by Leo Farley

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Cast: David Mogentale as Abbott; with Gordon Holme, s Heidi James and James E. Smith as Readers and various characters .

Set Design: Mark Smyczak

Costume Design: Christopher Lione

Lighting Design: Stewart Wagner

Sound Design: Vera Beren

Running time: 1 hour and 50 minutes, including one 10-minute intermission

29th Street Rep, 212 W. 29th St. (7/8th Aves)

[www.29thstreetrep.com](http://www.29thstreetrep.com) [SmartTix 212-868-4444](tel:212-868-4444)

2/23/04 to 4/03/04; opening 3/08/04.

Mon to Sat at 8pm. Tickets, \$40.

Reviewed by **Elyse Sommer** based on 3/05/04 press performance

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