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# In the Belly of the Beast Revisited

### **THEATRE**

29th Street Rep

### **OPENED**

March 8, 2004

### **CLOSES**

April 3, 2004

### **PERFORMANCES**

Mon - Sat at 8pm

### **RUNNING TIME**

2 hours

### **TICKETS**

\$40

SmartTix

212-868-4444



### **CAST**

David Mogentale, Heidi James,  
James E. Smith, Gordon Holmes

### **AUTHOR**

Jack Henry Abbott

### **ARRANGED & EDITED BY**

Adrian Hall

### **DIRECTOR**

Leo Farley

### **SETS**

Mark Szymczak

### **LIGHTING**

Stewart Wagner

### **COSTUMES**

Christopher Lione

### **SOUND**

Vera Beren

### **PRODUCTION STAGE**

### **MANAGER**

Will Schmidt

*In the  
Belly  
of the  
Beast*



*Revisited* is a new version of Adrian Hall's dramatization of the story of Jack Henry Abbott. Abbott became famous for his correspondence with Norman Mailer while he was in jail for having murdered an aspiring actor and waiter in Greenwich Village. The play is based on court records, newspapers, radio and television accounts, and two books written by Abbott. The original version of this play premiered off-off-Broadway in 1985; this completely reworked and updated version was created after Abbott committed suicide in 2002. The text is adapted from court records, newspaper, radio and television accounts, two books by Abbott, and many angry "opinions."

Shown above is David Mogentale as Jack Henry Abbott in *In the Belly of the Beast Revisited* (photo © Fouad Salloum).

nytheatre.com review

by Martin Denton · March 4, 2004

*In the Belly of the Beast Revisited* begins in complete darkness, with the sound of a woman screaming. A nod, perhaps, to the sometimes sensational *noir* theatre that we're used to seeing at 29th Street Rep; or to the conventionally scary stuff that a play about a convicted murderer portends. Whatever you decide to read into this attention-getting opening, know that it's the only Stephen King moment in this show: the horror story that's about to unfold is unsettling, upsetting, and shocking—but it has nothing to do with bogeymen or serial killers. Adrian Hall's play—brilliantly realized here by director

Leo Farley and leading actor David Mogentale—is about the systematic breakdown of a human being by a faceless, soulless bureaucracy. The sheer, reckless waste that's depicted here both chills and boils the blood, shaking us up in ways we just don't see coming.

Jack Henry Abbott, the protagonist of this piece, spent all but nine months of his adult life in prison. He and his sister grew up in foster homes; from the time he was 12, he had left that grievous system of institutions for a worse one, spending his adolescence in reform schools. (His formal education ended with the sixth grade.) After that, he was incarcerated more or less continuously until he committed suicide at the age of 58, with one three-month reprieve in 1981. That was the year he was paroled, thanks to his correspondence with Norman Mailer—he wrote to the famous author about life in prison when he learned that Mailer was researching his book on Gary Gilmore, *The Executioner's Song*. But after just a short time on the outside, he was back in: early one morning, after a night out on the town in Manhattan, he murdered a waiter. Celebrity and talent notwithstanding—for by now, Abbott had written not one but two books, moving accounts of his incarceration—his days as a free citizen were over.

The first half of *In the Belly of the Beast Revisited* introduces us to Abbott, his sad, sad history, and his experiences as an inmate at various American penal institutions. The show is particularly successful on that last point—in the intimate 29th Street space, it's impossible not to be viscerally affected as Abbott, in the person of actor David Mogentale, is systematically humiliated and dehumanized by miscellaneous prison officials and outsiders. We witness the patronizing interviews of psychologists and lawyers; worse, we see him stripped naked by guards and then made to bend over, pushed onto the cold floor of his cell where he will lie, immobile, in the fetal position. We experience with him the conditions of a "blackout" cell, plunged into impenetrable darkness. We hear his accounts of prison life: time spent in solitary, time on the yard, time trying to survive a brutal subculture where rape and knife fights are the norm. At the end of Act One, Abbott quotes from his book *In the Belly of the Beast* relating the circumstances leading to the murder of another prisoner, and given all that's come before it somehow makes a kind of sense to us. Forget recidivism, or anything like that: Abbott's prison experience is a reversion to barbarism. We're outraged: can the penal system still be really like this in a civilized country like

the United States?

Act Two focuses on Abbott's trial for the murder I mentioned earlier. And our attitude shifts, subtly but importantly, for we discover that the inhuman conditions of prison life could not prepare Jack Henry Abbott to live as a "free" citizen like you or me. Even with his poet's soul, Abbott had no tools with which to negotiate the real world with any kind of success; his return trip behind bars was inevitable—ordained, perhaps, the first time he was denied parole for attempting to escape. (Maybe even sooner than that: just watch the news any random night, and listen to accounts of rampant dysfunction in the foster care system.)

The prosecuting attorney at Abbott's trial reads the same passage about the murder of a fellow inmate, and this time it's unbearable. We're left only with the senseless truth, that a human being has been irredeemably given up. Lost.

Mogentale's work here is nothing short of extraordinary: this is an intense performance that will live with you for days and days. His fellow performers James E. Smith, Heidi James, and Gordon Holmes are superb as well, essaying numerous roles and serving as our sometimes reluctant guides into this ugly story. Leo Farley's direction—taut and relentless—serves the piece well, as do Mark Symczak's ingenious unit set and Stewart Wagner's stark lighting.

This is an important work of theatre: compelling drama, to be sure, but more than that, a brutal document of a terrifying fact about our world that we'd rather sweep under the carpet than look at head on. Bravo to the courageous folks at 29th Street Rep for making us look.

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