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THEATER REVIEW | 'IN THE BELLY OF THE BEAST REVISITED'

Inmate Returns to Stardom, This Time Posthumously

By MARGO JEFFERSON

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Jack Henry Abbott called himself "a state-raised convict." He grew up in Utah's foster homes and juvenile correction centers, graduating to adult prison at 19. That would make him just another statistic to most of us. But in 1981 he became a literary celebrity by publishing "In the Belly of the Beast: Letters From Prison."

Adrian Hall has combined Abbott's writing with court records, news reports and "many angry opinions" to create "In the Belly of the Beast Revisited," which is at the 29th Street Rep through April 3.

Six weeks after his parole in 1981 Abbott stabbed a waiter to death outside a restaurant on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Celebrity turned to notoriety, and Abbott returned to prison. One book ("My Return") and 21 years later, not long after a parole request was denied, Abbott hanged himself in his cell with bedsheets and a shoelace.

His life and work are an American-style "Lower Depths." The prose record imagines and speculates about murder, rape, the ties between violence and sex and the lethal codes of prison crime and punishment.

Mr. Hall structures the play as a collage documentary with monologues. Three "Readers" (briskly played by James E. Smith, Heidi James and Gordon Holmes) take many parts: lawyers at the parole hearing that opens the play; prison guards whose stamping feet terrify the young Jack; Norman Mailer, Abbott's literary sponsor ("His letters did not encourage sweet dreams. Hell was now clear to behold"); and Richard Adan, the waiter he killed.

The director, Leo Farley, and the set designer, Mark Symczak, turn the stage into a prison setting. Abbott, played with deliberate calm by David Mogentale, is on one side, confined to his cell, determined to blast through it with his thoughts. The Readers sit at a table on the other side, looking sober and official, amid papers and file cabinets. They cross to Abbott's side only when playing prison guards.

Abbott didn't just live the drama of his life; at a certain point he began to direct it. In the late 1970's, when he read that Norman Mailer was writing "The Executioner's Song," about Gary Gilmore, (another Utah inmate), he began a correspondence with Mr. Mailer,

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David Mogentale as Jack Henry Abbott at the 29th Street Rep.

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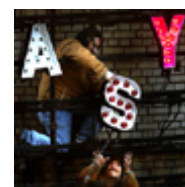
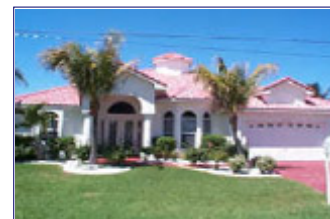


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which led to his own book's publication and to his parole. So Abbott staged his entrance into literature. He managed his theatrical incarnation, too. When Mr. Hall first mounted "In the Belly of the Beast" in 1985, Abbott pronounced it unfair and badly written. After his death, Mr. Hall rewrote the play. He used excerpts from Abbott's second book and from the enraged letters that followed the murder of Adan. He made it a broader critique of the prison system. So we can say that Abbott served as a ghostly dramaturge.

What does it mean, then, that his harrowing story and voice feel so remote? It is partly because they have been overtaken by dramas like HBO's "Oz." It is also that Mr. Hall doesn't fully portray Abbott as either a character or a myth. I respect his and Mr. Mogentale's decision not to play up the myth. But I felt that there were empty spaces where the character should have been.

There are the gaps in Abbott's own narrative. Take the mother he seemed to adore but barely knew. "My memories of her are good," he says, and he later rages against the Mormon cemetery officials who exhumed her body and reburied it in the segregated, Chinese section. Still, how could a man not somewhat resent a mother he barely saw from early childhood on? Did Abbott write anything more about her? If not, must Mr. Hall and Mr. Mogentale take his words at face value and turn them into a tender mother-son moment untouched by ambivalence? Such choices and absences end up flattening this carefully constructed, well-performed play.

Abbott is not in the news anymore; his memory doesn't spawn hate mail or fervent support. Mr. Hall (former director of the Trinity Square Repertory Company in Providence, R.I., and the Dallas Theater Center) has reworked the original play at a time when prisons and courts and sentences, the manipulation of guilt and innocence, are being examined or being forced to examine themselves. It's in the newspapers, it's on television, it's in the long-running play "The Exonerated." So it's appropriate that "In the Belly of the Beast" add its voice.

IN THE BELLY OF THE BEAST REVISITED

Adapted from various court records; newspaper, radio and television accounts; two books by Jack Henry Abbott; and other sources. Arranged and edited by Adrian Hall. Directed by Leo Farley. Sets by Mark Symczak; costumes by Christopher Lione; lighting by Stewart Wagner; sound design/composer, Vera Beren; slide photographer, Diane Greene Lent; production stage manager, Will Schmidt. Presented by the 29th Street Rep, Tim Corcoran and David Mogentale, artistic directors. At 212 West 29th Street, Manhattan.


WITH: James E. Smith (Reader 1), Heidi James (Reader 2), Gordon Holmes (Reader 3) and David Mogentale (Jack Henry Abbott).

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