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New York

In the Belly of the Beast Revisited

Reviewed By: [David Finkle](#)

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Soapboxes come in various sizes and can be decorated with different graphics, but standing on them to deliver messages frequently has the same result: No matter how esthetically the information is presented, it seems vaguely -- or not so vaguely -- undercut by the place from where it's issued.

This observation is a roundabout way of getting to the 29th Street Rep's [In the Belly of the Beast Revisited](#), which has been edited and arranged by Dallas Theater Company's Adrian Hall from what the program describes as "various court records, newspapers, radio and TV accounts, two books by Jack Henry Abbott, and many angry 'opinions.'" The result, as presented by an outfit which since 1988 has specialized in examining bellies and underbellies wherever they bulge in American society, is not unlike that of the just-closed issue-oriented drama, *The Exonerated*. To wit, works such as these may ultimately be impressive and even intermittently theatrical but they don't necessarily add up to traditional theater in anything other than the broadest sense. This fact may not at all bother those who mount these pieces with a pressing agenda, nor may it disturb those who are impatient with the entire notion of the well-made play. The idea is to get a point across in whatever way is deemed effective.

Abbott, who hanged himself in February 2002, is the convict who struck up a pen-pal association with Norman Mailer 25 years ago or more and quickly wowed the famous scribe with his insight, passion, and style to such a degree that an introduction to Random House was obtained. The outcome was the best-selling epistolary account of prison life, *In the Belly of the Beast*. So persuasive was Abbott's autodidact accomplishments -- an inured killer, he also made himself a convincing penitentiary philosopher -- that he was released in 1981 to a Manhattan halfway house and, in a manner of speaking, to Mailer's supervision. A subsequent contretemps at a Lower East Side beanery within weeks of his release ended in the death of Richard Adan, a waiter. At his trial, Abbott maintained that the knifing was accidental and sprang from a misunderstanding; his interpretation of Adan's behavior was based on the skewed ethical code to which he'd become accustomed when locked away. Despite that contention, Abbott was returned to prison for life and denied parole when he applied 20 years later.

There are reasons to have sympathy for this particular devil. (Just so the point isn't missed, sound designer



David Mogentale in
In the Belly of the Beast Revisited
(Photo © Fouad Salloum)

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Vera Beren plays "Sympathy for the Devil" along with other Rolling Stones clicks throughout, plus a good deal of sting-filled music that Beren composed.) Abbott, devoted to his Asian mother, was nonetheless shuttled to various foster homes with his sister from early childhood, was sent to juvenile homes at 13, and only lived nine months of the rest of his life out of some form of incarceration. During his 40-plus years behind bars, he was subjected -- by his account -- to all manner of black-hole degradations that caused him to adapt a tragic *modus vivendi* having little or nothing to do with life as lived beyond prison walls. Eating roach sandwiches in solitary can do terrible things to a man, and obviously did. In today's parlance, it could be said that Abbott became hard-wired for proactive self-defense.

Having adapted Abbott's attention-getting book in 1984 -- ironically, Abbott wasn't that thrilled with the outcome -- Hall has updated the earlier work to include the recidivist's second volume, *My Return*, and additional material right up to and past the suicide. In returning to the Abbott story, he indicates that he continues to believe firmly that the system failed his subject. He is by no means reticent about common and widespread practices that, in his estimation, need extensive and fundamental reform -- just as Abbott needs understanding for what he seems perform to have become due to in humane circumstances. "To the authorities," Abbott insists in a pithy rumination, "there is nothing seriously wrong with anyone getting raped in prison. On the contrary, the idea excites them. They enjoy it."

In the Belly of the Beast Revisited is presented in quasi-documentary form. Abbott (David Mogentale), pacing his cell and expounding on his situation, is discussed and assessed through court records and "angry" opinions by many others (Mailer included) with whom he had contact in and out of prison. The kind of people who sit behind desks and replay taped interviews, these lawyers and other assorted advocate types -- all played by Heidi James, James E. Smith, and Gordon Holmes -- speak on or against Abbott's behalf as if the audience is, by turns, in a jury box or at a hearing or just eavesdropping. This clinical approach is indisputably effective on Hall's terms, but when the playwright decides that he'd better make something dramatic happen, his dramaturgy can be awkward. A short scene wherein the actors march around the stage as if prisoners in a line is especially clumsy and is emblematic of the problem with turning polemics into drama.



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

At the 29th Street Rep, the dedicated folks have always had great feelings for the underdog no matter how sharp a particular canine's canines and, not surprisingly, have therefore put their resources fully at Hall's service -- so much so that the door to the auditorium has been outfitted with bars and there's a closed-circuit television built into the wall above it. Thus, even before the play begins, ticket-holders are subtly introduced to the notion of being observed constantly. (Mark Symczak is the set designer.) Furthering the scary prison feeling, lighting designer Stewart Wagner goes to eerie black more often than is required in most plays. Costume designer Christopher Lione dresses Abbott in the appropriate prison clothes although, for the second act trial, he dons a double-breasted suit to join the unmanacled world.

Perhaps as much as *In the Belly of the Beast* is a call for rethinking incompetent prison policies, it's also a showcase for the company's co-artistic director, David Mogentale. A strapping man who once considered professional baseball as a career, Mogentale over the years has found characters like Jack Henry Abbott to be catnip -- and he may have found the catnipiest of all in Abbott. Wearing a Fu Manchu mustache that gives him a bit of an Asian appearance, Mogentale swings easily from viciousness to scholarly contemplation. (He also swings easily from the pipes above his prison cot.) Stripping once or twice when humiliating

practices are in sway, the actor is completely believable as a man who claims to understand Einstein's theory of relativity and also knows that, at times, there is no recourse for him other than murdering a fellow prisoner. He also affects a sometime stutter, since Abbott declares at one point that he "can cuss without

stuttering." (What does that say about his psychological makeup?) Heidi James, James E. Smith, and Gordon Holmes -- often encouraged by director Leo Farley to speak in the flat tones of people reading testimony -- fill their subsidiary roles more than adequately.

While telling one of his hair-raising prison stories, Abbott stops to say that "mercy is sometimes the hardest thing in the world." The mercy of Hall, Mogentale, and colleagues is commendably not strained, even if the playmaking sometimes is.



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