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Actor twists torso for entire show

BY HOWARD MCEWEN | ENQUIRER CONTRIBUTOR

HIGHLAND HEIGHTS - In the stage directions for his play "The Elephant Man," playwright Bernard Pomerance wrote about playing John Merrick: "Any attempt to reproduce his appearance and his speech naturalistically - if it were possible - would seem to me not only counterproductive, but, the more remarkably successful, the more distracting from the play."

Ken Jones, the NKU Theatre department chairman and the play's director, followed Pomerance's suggestion and will have his lead, Roderick Justice, play the role of the malformed Victorian without makeup.

"The actor must be flexible enough to morph into the general physical outline of the Elephant Man - rib cage far off to the left side of your body, one leg shorter than the other, the right arm is completely useless, and head tilted off to the side," Justice said. "To hold this position for the entire show is the biggest challenge I've ever taken on. It's physically exhausting to have your entire body twisted for so long."

This is not the first physically demanding role that Justice has played. In the Jones direction "The Wild Women of Planet Wongo," he played a robot.

"Every tiny bit of my body was covered, either with costume or silver makeup. Even my eyes. I wore white contacts. Merrick compared to the robot is far more challenging.

"At least I could stand up straight," Justice said. "It's no surprise to hear that many actors who play John Merrick suffer from back problems after the production. However, Mr. Merrick lived 28 difficult years of his life in that state. ... I will not complain."

For Justice, Merrick will be his penultimate role before graduating from NKU. The Pikeville native has been in NKU productions since his freshman year. He has played roles ranging from the robot to a Southern woman in "Batboy" to a 60-year-old man in "I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change." His favorite plays have been "Jesus Christ Superstar" and "Burgertown."

This summer, Justice will appear in NKU's Dinner Theatre "The 1940s Radio Hour." After that, he will work on several one-man shows that he's been developing, as well as travel.

"Australia, London, Chicago, New York, L.A.? Who knows?" he said.

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