

Searching for Mr. Hyde

SAN JOSE REP USES FOUR ACTORS TO CHANNEL THE TORMENTED ALTER EGO OF DR. JEKYLL

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[Mercury News](#)

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Half man, half monster - one persona a paragon of virtue, the other the embodiment of vice and depravity.

"The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" has held us in its thrall since Robert Louis Stevenson penned it in 1886.

A character study in the repressive depths to which members of Victorian society were pressured to go to sublimate the beast within, Stevenson's split-personality tale became an instant blockbuster hit. The novella sold 40,000 copies in six months in Britain and spawned its first stage adaptation, with Richard Mansfield famously playing the dual leading role in London, within a year of publication.

Longstanding fascination

Ever since, this roller-coaster ride has kept us under its spell through countless incarnations: the 1932 film starring Frederic March as an ape-man Hyde; the overtly Freudian 1941 remake with Spencer Tracy, Ingrid Bergman and Lana Turner; the 1997 musical "Jekyll & Hyde," which sired a die-hard breed of fans dubbed Jekkies; not to mention the vintage Bugs Bunny cartoon "Hyde and Hare."

"These iconographic figures from the 1880s, the great Victorian monsters, still have undeniable relevance, especially the idea of the doppelganger," says David Ira Goldstein, who is directing the world premiere of Jeffrey Hatcher's fresh twist on the tale at San Jose Rep.

"We always want to slot things into good and evil, black and white, but people are a lot more complicated than that. There are no pure villains or heroes," he says.

Now Hatcher has reincarnated the creature from a new perspective, acknowledging the infinite complexity of the psyche by throwing out the one-man-vs.-one-monster formula. Viewing the monster through a cracked fun-house mirror, Hatcher splits the villain into four distinct personas in this co-production from the Rep and Arizona Theatre Company.



Mark Anderson Phillips as Hyde and Stephen D'Ambrose as his victim, Sir Danvers Carew, in San Jose Rep's production of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Photo: Tim Fuller

"One wants to surprise the audience. If you don't bring something new to it, it becomes rote," says the playwright, who is best known for stage works such as "Three Viewings" and "Turn of the Screw" as well as the screenplay for "Stage Beauty" (2004).

"The audience will catch up to you very quickly, so you always have to stay a few paces ahead," he adds.

In the new play, the demons are legion. As before, the meek Dr. Jekyll invents a potion intended as a breakthrough of scientific genius, but instead it transforms him into the dastardly Hyde, a man with not one but four faces.

Meet the velvety female Hyde (Carrie Paff), the elder statesman Hyde (the inimitable Ken Ruta); the sociopathic Hyde (Mark Anderson Phillips); and the supercilious Hyde (Stephen D'Ambrose). Each performer sculpts the transformation from man to beast without benefit of masks or makeup in a coup-de-theater that showcases the alchemy of the actor's craft.

"It's an illustration of the idea that evil lurks in the hearts of all of us," Phillips says.

The multiple faces of Hyde reflect the sense that everyone has a demon he or she can't banish, some secret side of oneself, some yearning that must be masked.

More than a monster

"The idea is that Hyde is not just a monster. He's a sick man with a beast inside him that he can't control," Paff says. "We all have dark sides, animal instincts that we try to tame. Jekyll's problem is that he tries to repress and deny his dark side until it explodes."

Phillips, last seen at the Rep in "Long Day's Journey Into Night," plays the Hyde who has anger-management issues. An old-movie buff, the actor envisions his portrayal as a small homage to Frederic March's brutish, leering Hyde.

"My (character) is the one who manifests the animalistic side of Hyde. He's the one who acts out, the one who carries out the violence," Phillips says. "I admire the way March played the role, the way he grunts and bares his teeth. If you watch my Hyde, you can definitely see some glints of that."

For Paff, the trickiest element was navigating the slippery slope of gender identity.



Carrie Paff as Edward Hyde in San Jose Repertory Theatre's production of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Photo: Tim Fuller



Anna Bullard and Mark Anderson Phillips appear in San Jose Rep's production of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Photo: Tim Fuller

"I didn't just want to be 'the girl Hyde!' " she explains. "I wasn't sure if I wanted to be a woman, or a woman playing a man, or some strange creature in between."

Suppressed carnal urges have long been at the heart of the "Jekyll" story. Indeed, the transformation of a man into a woman has also been at the core of several iterations, such as the 1971 Hammer cult-hit "Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde" and the 1995 flick "Dr. Jekyll and Ms. Hyde." Hatcher, for one, delights in the elusive sense of sexuality Paff brings to the part.

"She's got this alabaster face with very strong features. Masculine and feminine qualities play out beautifully on her face, and you can live in that ambiguity."

And yet, for its intimations of Freudian analysis, "Jekyll" remains a Victorian tale fraught with blood and lust, sex and sin. The battle between the id and the superego plays out against a delectable Victorian tableaux of swirling fog, shiny top hats, heaving bosoms and plunging daggers.

"It's a very metaphorical and psychological production," Paff says, "but at the core it is still an old-fashioned melodrama with the kind of sex and violence and gore that makes the audience gasp."

Alas, grappling with the heart of darkness night after night can cast a pall on the actors. Phillips has gone so far as to study big-screen interpretations of violence, such as the cringe-worthy death scenes in "No Country for Old Men," to bring a more savage edge to his strangulations here.

"At the end of the night, you do feel a little icky," Phillips says. "You have to try to find ways to make it less damaging to your psyche."

Paff can't help being sympathetic to Hyde, who here reveals himself to be as much a tormented soul as a clever fiend.

"The revelation of this production is the compassion for Hyde," Paff says. "In the end, you have to feel an affinity for Hyde. It's almost . . . a little sad when he's beaten."

Hatcher approaches the ending a tad differently.

"Death is his only escape," the playwright says. "He's a person who just can't find peace. Just to be able to rest is something devoutly wished for." "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde"



Mark Anderson Phillips as Edward Hyde in San Jose Repertory Theatre's production of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Photo: Tim Fuller

By Jeffrey Hatcher, adapted from the story by Robert Louis Stevenson

By the Mercury News

Where: San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio

When: Opens 8 p.m. Saturday; then 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays, 8 p.m. Wednesdays-Fridays, 3 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays (plus 7 p.m. May 11)

Through: June 8

Tickets: \$15-\$59

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