

'Belly of Beast' gut-wrenching, haunting drama

THEATER Rick Kogan

Those in attendance at the premiere of "In the Belly of the Beast: Letters from Prison" Thursday night at Wisdom Bridge Theater will never forget the performance of William L. Petersen. It will linger and haunt forever.

He is Jack Henry Abbott: Killer, madman, literary genius, Norman Mailer protégé, victim, victimizer. Take your pick. Form your own combination.

In a role that makes massive emotional and physical demands, Petersen is powerfully consistent. He falters not a bit, relents not at all. His character is perfectly conceived and majestically realized. And the centerpiece of a remarkable event.

"In the Belly of the Beast" is an experience of gut-wrenching innovation, vitality and dramatic craftsmanship; 90-some minutes of breathtaking theater.

Robert Falls, Wisdom Bridge's artistic director, has used Abbott's personal letters, interviews, trial transcripts, book (*In the Belly of the Beast*) and a previous dramatic adaptation as the tools for this thought-provoking, intense exploration of Abbott's life.

The questions raised are plentiful. But they all arise from one central issue: Why did Jack Abbott kill Richard Adan? Why did he plunge a knife into the harmless actor in front of a late-night restaurant?

From the age of 12 until his parole under Mailer's egis at 37, Abbott had spent all but nine months in prisons.

Watching the replay of the miserable, brutal course of Abbott's life, through a series of skillfully structured scenes, one involuntarily fosters a sympathy (reluctant perhaps) for this pathetic creature. We see a pile of degradations and a strident macho code combine to create not a man but a "thing."

Petersen employs a panorama of cadences and mannerisms to evoke the many Jack Abbotts: The halting, stuttering court witness; the whipped and whimpering prisoner; the macho posturing; the self-assured writer.

Abbott is a frightening, foreign creature. And played with such potency that the substantial, important work of Peter Aylward and Tim Halligan is virtually engulfed. Called upon to play a variety of characters, including Abbott himself, these two actors perform with great skill.

The direction—the astonishing Falls—is also responsible for the original set—is agile and inventive, precisely punctuated. The striking lighting by Michael S. Philippi is so effective as to be considered a fourth cast member.

Listen: This is theater—in all its blistering, shattering glory.

In the Belly of the Beast: Letters From Prison

Starring William L. Petersen, Peter Aylward and Tim Halligan. A play in one act. Arranged and directed by Robert Falls. Set by Robert Falls. Lighting by Michael S. Philippi. Sound by Jim Kusyk. At Wisdom Bridge Theater, 1559 W. Howard (743-6442), through Oct. 30.

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From prison to the Wisdom Bridge: A killer's letters become a powerful play

By Richard Christiansen

Critic at large

The case of Jack Henry Abbott, 39, convicted killer and celebrated author, came to wide public attention two years ago when his book, "In the Belly of the Beast," was published to great acclaim.

The book, culled from a series of white-heat letters that Abbott had written to Norman Mailer, told of Abbott's life as a "state-raised" inhabitant of the prison system for all but a few months of his adult life. Its vivid account of the physical and psychological horrors of prison life helped make it [with Mailer's backing] a literary sensation in early 1981.

A little more than a year later,

Abbott was behind bars again, convicted of manslaughter in the July 18, 1981, stabbing death of a young waiter in an argument over the use of an employees-only toilet in a New York City restaurant. The stabbing had occurred only six weeks after the recently lionized Abbott had been paroled from a Utah prison.

It was inevitable that this story, which adds drama upon drama, should become the basis for a play. Exceptionally evil and/or abnormal historical figures have been the stuff of theater, from "Richard III" to "The Elephant Man."

Earlier this year the Abbott story did come to the stage in a production titled "Letters from Prison," mounted at the Trinity Square Playhouse in Providence, R.I., by Adrian Hall, one of the country's most inventive stage directors.

Before the actual production, however, at a directors' conference, Hall mentioned his work on the Abbott story to Robert Falls, artistic director of Wisdom Bridge Theater in Chicago.

From that moment, Falls' imagination was fired with the idea of the dramatic material, and he went ahead with his own plans to stage the "Beast."

Having obtained the necessary legal permissions, Falls pored over Abbott's book, some 600 pages of the transcript of the subsequent trial and the theatrical content Hall had shaped from this raw material. Although he did not talk with Abbott, in prison in Missouri, "because I didn't think it was necessary," Falls gathered all the interview transcripts and newspaper stories on Abbott he could find.

In July and August, Falls spent several weeks in New York City interviewing the trial judge, some of the jurors, residents of the halfway house where Abbott had stayed after he had been paroled, officials of the New York State correctional system and people in the neighborhood where the stabbing had occurred.

Thursday, the results of that research, plus weeks of intensive rehearsal, will become public with the opening at Wisdom Bridge, 1559 W. Howard St., of "In the Belly of the Beast: Letters from Prison."

The process of getting the play on the stage has been, for Falls, "maybe the most exciting thing I've ever worked on in the theater."

His first choice to portray Abbott was William L. Petersen, whose work with the Remains Theater as an actor or director in such productions as "Moby Dick" and Caryl Churchill's "Traps" have marked him as one of the city's strongest theatrical talents.

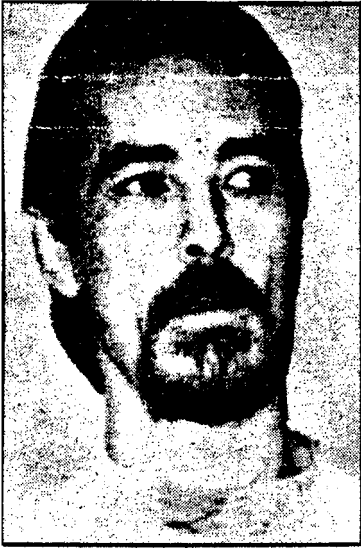
Petersen, busy with another show he was planning with Remains, at first turned down the role; but then he read "In the Belly of the Beast," and, after a restless sleep interrupted by dreadful nightmares, phoned Falls, who was in New York City trying to cast the role, and told him that he was eager to do the play.

Once having decided to take on the assignment, Petersen plunged into the role with extraordinary commitment, losing 18 pounds to get down to lean form and even locking himself in a closet for 20 hours to approximate the experience of Abbott's solitary confinement.

According to Falls, Petersen got into the role so deeply that he and Falls sometimes came near to fist fights at rehearsals when they argued over the merits of Abbott's motivations in a particular scene.

Much of the rehearsal period was spent with Falls and the cast just sitting around a table, discussing and dissecting all the material at hand.

The production, which also marks Falls' debut as a scenery



Abbott: A prison celebrity.

audience needed a break to sort through their feelings."

Abbott's book, which told of the physical humiliations and psychic injuries he had suffered in prison, has been questioned by other writers and fellow prisoners who are not convinced of the truth of his account.

Ed Bunker, a former prison inmate and author of the novel "Straight Time," once described Abbott, who had killed a man in prison and had given evidence against fellow inmates, as "a bad bet, a time bomb ready to go off."

Bunker added that, although Abbott was "a great talent," his book was "full of lies and fiction. Like eating bugs. He never had to eat bugs. I've been more than 30 years in jail and I don't know anybody who ever had to eat bugs to live. If he ate insects, it was because he wanted to."

Falls himself sees Abbott as "brilliant but paranoid and mentally unstable." Raised in foster homes as a child, placed in juvenile detention facilities as a teenager and confined to prison for his adult life, Abbott is, Falls believes, "a man who did not know how to be out."

He wants the stage production, which he likens to "entering a foreign culture," to speak for itself and for the audience then to make up its own mind about the nature of the psyche of Jack Henry Abbott.

The play, Falls hopes, will raise questions about the issues of crime, punishment, justice and rehabilitation and also will "re-

create the immediate experiences without faking any of them."

Most of all, he hopes that it will fulfill a goal of theater that Bertold Brecht, one of Fall's theatrical idols, once stated bluntly and succinctly: "Comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable."

and lighting designer, has changed from the earlier, Trinity Square presentation, which presented the story under a cold, white light and divided the play into a first act dealing with the book and a second act encompassing the trial.

Using most of the material that Hall and his company had developed, Falls instead has arranged and edited the book and trial

documentation so that the play opens with the trial and uses flashbacks and a story theater technique to unravel the story. In addition to Petersen as Abbott, the cast includes two other actors [Tim Halligan and Peter Aylward], who serve as narrators and other characters in Abbott's life.

Originally, Falls had planned to present the play in a single, intermissionless swoop; but because of its visceral content and the barrage of words and images that it fires, he decided to allow for an intermission "because the



Tribune photo by Ron Bailey

Director Robert Falls [right] on the "Beast" set with William L. Petersen, who plays author and convicted killer Jack Henry Abbott.

The Smell of the Streets

BALM IN GILEAD
Steppenwolf Theatre Company

By John Kennedy

Last year at this time, the Steppenwolf Ensemble was heroically blowing the dust off Clifford Odets's period piece of 1930s social outrage, *Waiting for Lefty*. The play itself has all the residual punch of an old editorial on Sacco and Vanzetti. Steppenwolf's performance, though, was another matter. It nearly raised the play's corpse and left some Apollo Theater audiences thinking they were leaving the house with arm bands around their Ralph Lauren sleeves.

Steppenwolf has a talent for picking up bullet-torn flags where they fell in the field and making them wave again. With the current production of Lanford Wilson's *Balm in Gilead*—a sort of urban junkie opera that makes *Hair* look like a Clairol commercial—they are at it again, charging into the recent past. The result isn't nostalgia but two hours of impressive ensemble acting that comes at you like a Brueghel scene leaving its canvas. You may wonder afterward why we should be contemplating the burned-out human ecology of heroin as it reveals itself in an all-night Broadway cafe. After all, it's no longer 1965 and Lanford Wilson is now writing warm and witty plays for 2 characters, not epics for 30. You will not, however, wonder why Steppenwolf can get away with it.

The production is lovingly etched down to the last cold-turkey twitch, and the whole thing twitches mightily.

Gilead opens like a replay of your ten worst New York subway rides. The pimps, hookers, junkies, dealers, hoods, transvestites, and panhandlers are all here, even the little red-faced greasy fellow clutching a shopping bag and spitting out a catechism of unintelligible oaths. They scream, bicker, fondle, tease, jive, and beg until the cacophony sounds like what comes through God's headset when he tunes in late-night Manhattan. Eight or ten overlapping dialogues weld into one deafening monologue of the streets. The effect, like that first step into the IRT at Broadway and 72nd, is more than a little discomfiting. We run our eyes over this throbbing mass, searching for something recognizable: a warm face, a completed sentence, a story.

A story of sorts emerges with the help of Dopey, a grinning, drawling junkie whose eyes slide down every time his grin wrinkles up. Dopey plays stage manager to this mess, popping us in and out of the street-corner action by stopping the action and dimming the lights. The story that rises out of the mess is about Joe and Darlene.

Joe is a small-time dealer whose thoughts are turning big-time. Darlene, fresh from Chicago and stupidly eager for God knows what, is turning tricks until something

with better hours turns up. Boy meets girl, and there's a hope that Wilson might take them home again to Central City. But not much hope. Joe is tied in with Chuckles, the invisible pusher who shadows this junkie landscape like a totem father. And Darlene lost everything when she left Chicago, where she thought she had nothing.

Both of them are caught tightly in Wilson's real subject: the self-contained, self-sustaining, self-destructive world of junk. John Gay's cynical subculture of criminals in *The Beggar's Opera* comes to mind, and so does Brecht's later revamping of it. Like these, *Gilead* lovingly wraps its would-be heroes in a cold blanket of cynicism. "It's all very natural," says Dopey, when he tells us that Joe's advice to Darlene is just one john talking to another hooker. There is no balm, just codes, like everywhere else. The play ends by returning to that opening chaos and subway-ride sensation. Some kind of cycle is complete. Junkiedom has its own law, order, and morality. We can pity these creatures if it makes us feel better, but they're indifferent.

So for all of Wilson's efforts to give us the true smell of the streets, *Balm in Gilead* is no social-message arm-twister. Along with its coolly researched, Brechtian social portrait there's a certain simple love. We think of another city-truck poet,

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Balm in Gilead

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Walt Whitman, riding the trolleys up and down Broadway saying to himself, "I was the man, I suffered, I was there." *Gilead* is almost a musical tragedy. Dopey and his nodding buddies form a heavy-lidded chorus, and the blocking throughout is close to choreography. In the original text, Wilson left room for an onstage band and mid-action set changes. It's this element of love of the crowd that makes the play a natural for Steppenwolf. The

whole scene in this chili dive is thickly crowded, noisy, and dense with ugly needs. The director, John Malkovich, has squeezed just about

every harsh possibility out of Wilson's script and gets the entire production to pass by like the express train. The ensemble—the faces in the windows of that train—is in top form.

There are too many solid character sketches in this production to make individual credits worth much. Gary Sinise's Dopey—the stage manager who's a kind of hopped-up Prospero—is an excellent anchor for the play's mood of casual, almost cheerful doom. Francis Guinan and Laurie Metcalf do a nice job of keeping Joe and Darlene just short of being the sweethearts of the audience. Other Steppenwolf regu-

lars—Glenn Headly, Terry Kinney, Alan Wilder, and Jeff Perry, to name a few—are here and maintaining the family reputation. The parts they're playing aren't the kind that come naturally to a theater group that grew up in Highland Park. Clearly, a lot of people have been doing their sociology homework: this *Gilead* is a carefully observed production.

Bob Dodd assisted Malkovich in directing, and the set and lighting for the grease-and-formica coffee shop were designed by Kevin Rigdon. If you had been there opening night, you could have had White Castle hamburgers at the counter after the show.

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