

Freaks

American horror film, released in 1932, a grotesque revenge melodrama in which director Tod Browning explored the world of carnival sideshows and the “freaks” that starred in them.

The story centres on the machinations of a femme fatale, the “normal” trapeze artist Cleopatra (played by Olga Baclanova), who seduces and marries one of the “freaks,” the little person Hans (Harry Earles), after learning that he has inherited a large fortune. Once the other sideshow performers learn of her self-serving plot to poison Hans with the help of her lover, circus strongman Hercules (Henry Victor), they exact a horrific revenge on the two, stabbing the strongman and viciously mutilating Cleopatra. At the end of the film as originally cut, Hercules is seen singing falsetto after being castrated, while Cleopatra—now tarred and feathered, minus her tongue and legs, with her hands deformed—is shown squawking and performing in her new role as a “chicken woman.” In subsequent cuts the castration scene was removed. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer also filmed a revised ending in which Hans reunites with his original lover, the little person Frieda (Daisy Earles).

Browning, who once traveled with a circus, cast real carnival performers—including people of short stature, conjoined twins, bearded ladies, microcephalics, and limbless sideshow performers. He contrasted their honesty and integrity with the degeneracy displayed by the true monsters in the film, the so-called “normal” people. Called “ghastly” and “repellent” by critics, *Freaks* was banned in several places—including in the United Kingdom for some 30 years. Though it later attained cult status, the controversial film effectively ended Browning’s directorial career.

Production notes and credits

Studio: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Director and producer: Tod Browning Writers: Willis Goldbeck, Leon Gordon, and Edgar Allan Woolf Running time: 64 minutes

Cast

Wallace Ford (Phroso) Leila Hyams (Venus) Olga Baclanova (Cleopatra) Henry Victor (Hercules)

Lee Pfeiffer

Cite

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"Freaks." *Britannica Academic*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 7 May. 2014.
ezproxy.ucentral.edu.co:2215/levels/collegiate/article/Freaks/543640. Accessed 24 Jun. 2020.