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'Freaks,' 1932 Classic, Is a Hot Revival Item

By RON MILLER
Staff Writer

Films today wallow so exquisitely in excess of every kind that it's refreshing to find a 1932 movie that can still shock the youth of the "freaked-out" generation.

That film is Tod Browning's rarely - shown classic "Freaks," now becoming a hot item in the revival cinemas springing up around the country. It played recently to jammed houses in Berkeley and San Francisco.

Now 37 years old, "Freaks" contains scenes no filmmaker could get away with today. Just ask Frederick Wiseman, who ran afoul of the law when he filmed real mental asylum inmates for his "Titicut Follies" two years ago.

Browning used real circus freaks, most of them awesomely deformed, to produce both laughs and chills in his thriller. Film codes today prohibit exploitation of the deformed and similar laws have practically killed off the live freak shows.

Partly because "Freaks" was boycotted by movie exhibitors in 1932 and has never been licensed for television

showing, it has earned a reputation as an underground classic. Yet it deserves classic status on its own merits.

The thin plot of "Freaks" is based on a story called "Spurs" by Tod Robbins, but it owes much to Gorky's "26 Men and A Girl." A beautiful trapeze artist flirts with the circus midget just for laughs, but she marries him when she learns he has inherited a fortune.

Although the other freaks are ready to accept her into their circle, the aerialist is revolted by them and doesn't mince words about it. When they learn she is trying to poison the midget so she can get his money and marry her lover, the freaks capture her and mutilate the poor dear.

Out of this grim material, Browning fashioned a film that chills the spine frequently, holding the audience like a crowd around the scene of a grisly accident.

Some sequences have the natural flavor of fairy-tale insanity favored by young audiences today. An example is the freaks' picnic, a bizarre outing in a bright, pastoral forest clearing. Browning treats them almost like Oz

characters—innocents at play.

Later Browning switches to nightmarish fantasy and the same innocent creatures become malformed shadows advancing on terrified Olga Baclanova through the muck beneath tilted carnival wagons, their inhuman faces illuminated by flashes of lightning. Black Randian, the living torso, slithers after her like a python and Johnny Eck, the boy with half a torso, stalks her on his hands like a giant spider with a face.

But the classic scene is the wedding banquet where the freaks welcome the aerialist into their "family." It's a Mad Hatter's bacchanal. A dwarf scuttles up the long banquet table toward the girl and offers her a drink from the ceremonial goblet shared by all the freaks. It blows her mind.

Browning wisely capitalized on man's natural fear of the physically deformed as well as his voyeuristic tendencies. The audience wants the trapeze artist to get her comeuppance, but it's a queasy experience to put yourself in her shoes.

As a sideshow, "Freaks" is



FREAKS—Members of the cast of the 1932 MGM film, "Freaks" cluster around Marie Dionne for protection. So frightening and realistic was the film that it was practically suppressed when first completed. Now it's a popular item on the revival circuit.

unrivalled. Despite its technical antiquity, it still shocks. Now that film societies and little revival theaters are bringing it back, it is getting a wider viewing than it did when first released.

Browning was the often brilliant director who specialized in the grotesque. He did the original silent "Unholy

Three" with Lon Chaney Sr. and Bela Lugosi's "Dracula." He made his reputation with those films.

Because today's young filmmakers have such perverse tastes, "Freaks" is being shown and many are discovering that it is Browning's masterpiece and a real gem of a film.