

the movies
Louise Snider

'Elephant Man' based on truth but exaggerated

The film version of "The Elephant Man" (PG), except for some dramatic liberties taken in the last half, is largely true.

Based on the memoirs of an English surgeon, Frederick Treves, it is the story of a grossly deformed man, John Merrick, who died in London Hospital in 1890 of an incurable disease, neurofibromatosis.

Merrick's body was covered with spongy skin and tumors. His head was terribly misshapen. He walked with a shuffle, one arm was useless, his speech was hampered by his twisted mouth. Yet imprisoned within this grotesque mass of flesh was a sensitive, poetic soul.

John Hurt as Merrick, performs brilliantly working within severe physical restraints. It took more than six hours to apply his makeup.

Hurt's performance is complemented by John Gielgud's crisp portrayal of the hospital director and Anthony Hopkins' thoughtful, restrained version of Treves, the surgeon who rescued Merrick from his sub-human life as a sideshow freak.

The actors' artistry is further enhanced by the superb black-and-white photography of Freddie Francis, who captures the atmosphere of Victorian London so well.

David Lynch, who directed the film (he previously directed the nightmarish "Eraserhead") excels in bringing out the macabre and bizarre aspects. Unfortunately, he does less well with character development and relationships.

He lets Anne Bancroft so overact her role as an actress who befriends Merrick that we are left completely puzzled by her instant gushing affection for the man.

HE SEEMS to arbitrarily introduce themes and then drop them. The doctor states that in spite of Merrick's deformities there is no sexual dysfunction. After this teaser, there is no further mention of the worldly extent of Merrick's experiences.

Lynch introduces unnecessary fictional subplots which weaken the film. In an attempt to create action and suspense, he manufactures a diversion in which the Elephant Man's former "owner" kidnaps him and takes him abroad for exhibition.

Lynch's instincts were right. The film is lacking dramatic tension. But rather than introduce this exploitation business again, he could have strengthened the film by dealing with character conflict.

What are Merrick's reactions to the world of London society? How does he resolve his need to preserve his privacy and dignity with his desire to be among people? Or, as in the play, more could have been done with the conflicting emotions within Treves, who introduces Merrick to society and then wonders if he is exploiting him.

For a story founded in reality, a little more truth and a little less prevarication would have been appreciated.

what's at the movies

NEW RELEASES

DIVINE MADNESS (R) Energetic and electrifying Bette Midler in film version of the Broadway show.

THE ELEPHANT MAN (PG) Largely true story of grossly deformed man rescued from sordid life by compassionate doctor. Fine acting by John Hurt, Anthony Hopkins and John Gielgud balances out directorial shortcomings.

FIRST DEADLY SIN (R) Cop searches out killer responsible for series of bizarre murders. Frank Sinatra and Faye Dunaway star.

GLORIA (PG) Gena Rowlands plays it straight as ex-mobster's girlfriend who knows how to handle a gun, which she uses to protect boy whose parents have been murdered.

THE GREAT SANTINI (PG) Robert Duval as air force pilot and dominating father in strong story of family conflict and love.

IT'S MY TURN (R) Jill Clayburgh in humorous story as independent woman (again) who falls in love with ex-baseball player during weekend in New York.

HOPSCOTCH (R) Chemistry of Matthau/Jackson pairing works again, but we don't see them together often enough in this halfway humorous (first half) film.

LOVING COUPLES (PG) A comic look at foibles of contemporary relationships, focusing on the love lives of four sophisticates.

ORDINARY PEOPLE (R) Robert Redford's directorial debut is a smash in this extraordinarily well-acted, moving film about a "perfect" family trying to cope with a son's mental illness.

PRIVATE BENJAMIN (R) Goldie Hawn joins the army to escape and find herself.

SOMEWHERE IN TIME (PG) Romance with Christopher Reeve and Jane Seymour. Young man falls in love with portrait of a beautiful woman and goes back in time to find her.

STARDUST MEMORIES (PG) Funny, sad film about what it's like to be Woody Allen (Sandy Bates in this movie). Allen joins ranks of directors who've made movies about themselves making movies.

MOVIE RATING GUIDE

G General audience admitted.

PG Parental guidance suggested. All ages admitted.

R Restricted. Adult must accompany person under 18.

X No one under 18 admitted.



Estranged husband and wife, James Coburn and Shirley MacLaine, celebrate their separation in "Loving Couples," which opened Friday at theaters in metropolitan Detroit.

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