

The Greatest Showman (2017)

Rated PG. Running time: 1 hour 45 min.

Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 4; Language 3; Sex/Nudity 1.

Our star rating (1-5): 4

The getting of treasures by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapor and a snare of death.

Proverbs 21:6

Again I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. Look, the tears of the oppressed—

with no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power—with no one to comfort them.

Ecclesiastes 4:1



The film places Barnum front & center, but for me it is his “oddities” who are central to the story. (c) 20th Century Fox

Was P.T. Barnum an exploiter of his “oddities,” or the

benefactor and protector of those regarded by most of the public as freaks, hideous creatures that should return to their closets and shuttered houses where they had been hidden before the self-styled "Greatest Showman" came along. Australian director Michael Gracey, who hitherto had directed just commercials, advocates for the first interpretation (with a major qualification—more on that later). I thought this was going to be a biographical movie, but instead it is an original musical. The film might be akin to Barnum's "humbug" as history, but as a musical advocating for the acceptance and dignity of the outsider, it could be a delight for those concerned for social justice issues—as long as you lay aside the facts about the conniving man and the circus bearing his name.

After the New York City insurance company that employs him goes bankrupt, Barnum uses deceit to gain a bank loan to open a museum of oddities and curiosities. However, the exotic stuffed animals and such fail to draw a crowd, so the inventive entrepreneur visits and entices such odd people as Lettie Lutz (Keala Settle), the Bearded Lady; a child dwarf whom he renames Tom Thumb (Sam Humphrey); a hair-covered man called Dog Boy (Luciano Acuna, Jr.); the Lord of Leeds, a Russian weighing 500 pounds; and an eight-foot tall man. His chicanery is evident in his truth-stretching advertising—the man's weight is billed as 750 pounds, and the Russian is dubbed The Irish Giant. The showman's bamboozling works, the curious public flocking into the "Museum" in droves. Barnum dresses "Tom" up as Napoleon and has him ride on a large white horse. The Bearded Lady and other oddities sing and dance, and high above the crowd light-skinned black trapeze artist Anne Wheeler (Zendaya) dazzles the audience with her daring—all this beautifully summed up in their ensemble song "Come Alive."

Now a wealthy man, Barnum can afford the mansion that he had long wanted for his upper-class wife Charity (Michelle

Williams) and their two daughters Caroline and Helen (Austyn Johnson and Cameron Seely). Earlier we are shown that they had met as children when Barnum had accompanied his tailor father to fit a suit for her father Mr. Hallett (Fred Lehne). Seeing the children's mutual attraction, Mr. Hallett had forbidden the boy to have any further contact with Charity. The film skips over their long courtship, jumping too quickly ahead to the day that a grown-up Barnum walks out of the Hallett mansion with his beloved. Somehow the two had been able to keep in touch and bring their romance to full blossom.

Barnum has acquired wealth, but not respect. He can afford to send one of his daughters to ballet school, but the other girls mock her because of her father's lowbrow show. At the Museum a gang of rowdies continually express their disdain for the "freaks," and their anger finds expression in the writing of newspaper critic James Gordon Bennett (Paul Sparks) who always derides Barnum's show in print. In turn, Barnum adopted what the reporter wrote as an insult to be the name of his establishment, "P.T. Barnum's Circus."

To gain entry into upper-crust society Barnum cajoles well-respected playwright, Phillip Caryle (Zac Efron) into forming a 10% partnership (in song "The Other Side"), and takes his troupe to England where the latter uses his connections to obtain an audience at Queen Victoria's court. The court retinue gasps at first as the circus troupe marches down the long aisle to stand before the monarch, but Her Majesty is highly amused by a remark made by the now "General" Tom Thumb, and Barnum and company are "in." He also meets popular singer Jenny Lind (Rebecca Ferguson), and realizing that he would rise in status by sponsoring her, offers to bring her to America for a series of concerts. Not shown is his offer of \$1000 per concert and the Swedish Nightingale's shrewdness that she be paid up front before leaving England. (No doubt she had heard reports of the showman's deviousness!) The film also does not reveal that she gave most of her huge tour

profits to charities in her native Sweden and the U.S.

Much of the rest of the film is hokum, such as the rift between Charity and her husband because he leaves her to accompany Jenny Lind on her tour, during which the singer develops more than a business interest in him—the real Lind was a very pious person not at all disposed to such a temptation. The film is at least honest enough to show that though Barnum gathered the “oddities” together, he was by no means their champion. When he holds a gala reception for Miss Lind, the troupe dresses up in their best finery and attempt to enter the ball room, but Barnum bars their way, telling them they are not welcome. It is a shattering moment for the outcasts, making them all aware that despite talent and new-found fame, they will always be considered outsiders, even by their boss. Hugh Jackson makes Barnum as likeable as Robert Preston’s con artist Harold Hill in *The Music Man*, but not even the film’s Hollywood treatment can effectively redeem him.

The outcasts’ feelings are beautifully expressed in the anthem-like song “This Is Me,” which begins with the Bearded Lady singing, “I am not a stranger to the dark/Hide away they say/Cause we don’t want your broken parts/I’ve learned to be/ashamed of all my scars/Run away, they say/No one will love you/as you are...” Her description of her outcast situation morphs into defiance, and soon the other oddities join her in a rousing refusal to accept their oppression, “Won’t let them break me//down to dust/I know there’s/a place for us/For we are glorious...” This spirited resistance by the oppressed is probably an anachronism—in my research I haven’t found evidence of it, only of Barnum’s exploitation of them for profit—but for me, at least, it is a redeeming factor in a production that might have presented Barnum as the white savior. And what a song, one that therapists might consider piping into their waiting rooms or using with their dispirited clients! *

An interesting subplot that leads to a dance-duet that literally takes flight, *La La Land*-like, is the romance between playwright Phillip Carlyle and aerialist Anne Wheeler seen in their song "Rewrite the Stars," which they sing while twirling on ropes and a trapeze. The two are drawn to each other, but his resolve to marry melts when he notes the disapproval of his racist parents. This sad episode, hauntingly reprised in their song, "Everything Keeps Us Apart," reminds me of *South Pacific* in which U.S. Marine Lt. Cable falls in love with the Polynesian Liat, but breaks away from her because of his prejudiced parents in his native South.

Besides such social justice concerns, the stirring music is another reason to take in this film. John Debney and Joseph Trapanese's music and Benj Pasek and Justin Paul's songs are delightful, the words lifted on high by their tunes and driving beat. (Available on-line, I've enjoyed listening to them several times while writing this review!) There is plenty to criticize in this film—indeed, its treatment of history could qualify it as a fantasy film—but also much to revel in and to remember, and even to celebrate.

*Hear and see the lyrics of "This Is Me" at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRIrJFQBb00>

To see a montage of colorful clips from the film see the YouTube "[Light it Up](#)" at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xzvxbGDgGlk>

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the January issue of Visual Parables.