

# The Elephant Man

David Lynch, UK 1980

Script by Christopher De Vore,  
Eric Bergren and David Lynch,  
from the book by Sir Frederick  
Treves, and *The Elephant Man: A  
Study in Human Dignity* by Ashley  
Montagu

Anthony Hopkins ... Frederick Treves  
John Hurt ..... John Merrick  
Anne Bancroft ..... Mrs. Kendal  
John Gielgud ..... Carr-Gomm  
Wendy Hiller ..... Mothershead  
Freddie Jones ..... Bytes  
Michael Elphick ..... Night Porter  
Hannah Gordon ..... Mrs. Treves  
Helen Ryan ..... Princess Alex  
John Standing ..... Fox  
Dexter Fletcher ..... Bytes' Boy  
Lesley Dunlop ..... Nora  
Phoebe Nicholls .... Merrick's Mother

Music ..... John Morris  
Cinematography ..... Freddie Francis  
Film Editor ..... Anne V. Coates  
Casting ..... Maggie Cartier  
Production Design ..... Stuart Craig  
Art Direction ..... Bob Cartwright  
Set Decoration ..... Hugh Scaife  
Costume Design ..... Patricia Norris



Cinema, as befits its popular origins in the circus shows of the early 1900s, has long been attracted to tales of the grotesque and the spectacular. It is a safe place for the dangerous. They're only actors. The camera stopped. Nobody got hurt. It also became a place for perverse imaginations to construct their own freak shows: for all the gloss of high production values, it is always dragged back to the edgy and dirty. Cheerful gentility is always aimed for, but rarely sells well.

Tales of outsiders and the discarded have always sold well, especially if there is an element of the true story

to justify them. John Merrick's was one such, that had not been touched until David Lynch happened on it when looking for material for a second feature film. Joseph Carey Merrick (his proper name) lived from 1862 to 1890. Born with serious deformities of head and skin now known as Proteus Syndrome, he nevertheless completed school in Leicester despite cruelty from his father and stepmother (his mother died when he was 9), but after failing to find work he entered the Leicester Union Workhouse as a destitute, and after four years there offered himself, aged 21, to travelling showman Sam

Torr to be exhibited as a freak. He ended up in Whitechapel at a “gaff shop” where a young doctor, Frederick Treves, from the neighbouring London Hospital found him and retrieved him from the exhibitors, the point in 1884 at which the film’s narrative starts.

David Lynch also started as an outsider, though much modern independent cinema now looks to him as an inspiration. An artistically-gifted boy born in 1945 in rural Montana, his childhood mixed both material comfort and psychological trauma, with much moving across the US from one ingrown rural community to another with his agronomist father. At art school in Philadelphia and then Los Angeles, he embraced city life and began to make short films with college equipment. His first feature film *Eraserhead* [1977] was shot in wrecked industrial locations on cheap black-and-white film stock, delved into eerie dream territories and bodily taboos, and rapidly became a cult horror classic, relying on embarrassment and surreal imagery rather than gore and suspense, with a final scene that has rarely been bettered for ickiness.

*The Elephant Man* shows tensions of its own. More straightforwardly narrative than *Eraserhead*, and using what became Lynch’s signature style of dream montage and dark edge-lit shadows, it is also a director dealing with a filmic language and culture not entirely of his choosing. The gothic cinematography was by the venerable Freddie Francis, who brought three decades of lighting and directing Hammer tosh to the task, and though released in 1980 it could have been shot forty years earlier, a style that extends to the chilly serifs of the titles: early Hitchcock is never far away. A cast of British top-drawer actors have a lot of quiet fun ragging the young American by putting on their best cod-Dickensian whenever they can get away with it (which is often, but since when did John Gielgud ever do immersive acting?), though the central character of Treves uses Anthony Hopkins’s gift for portraying good men challenged by inner inhibitions, a trope he perfected in *Remains Of The Day* [1993].

The story of a disfigured man adrift in the *laissez-faire* cruelty of Victorian London can easily be played for sentiment, and Lynch flails at grasping the subtleties of the English class system - lots of gracious ladies, squalling tarts and Cock-er-nee roughnecks straight out of *Pygmalion*, which at moments it resembles -

but the strength of the film is the sense that kindness and gentility of the sort shown - eventually and sometimes grudgingly - to Merrick, is a thin crust that has to be worked for; underneath it the seething mass of human callousness is never far away. From *Eraserhead* Lynch brought an eerie soundtrack of grating and rumbling and pumping, with steam and dripping water as indicators of the pitiless city beyond the quiet hospital. Sound montage has always been a hallmark of his directing style: he has worked on numerous musical and video collaborations with composers and artists, and the soundtrack album to the TV series *Twin Peaks* [1990] was almost as prominent an artefact as the programme itself.

Merrick is saved, then rejected then saved again, then abducted by his original “owner” (a magnificent bit of scenery-chewing bravura by Freddie Jones as Bytes, with Dexter Fletcher as his “boy” looking out winsomely in hope of a remake of *Oliver!*), ending up in a Brussels circus - loosely based on a real incident - where he hits rock bottom. Penned in a cage of screaming monkeys by the drunken Bytes, he is released by a tribe of circus dwarves in a moment that eerily recalls the “we accept you, one of us” scene in Tod Browning’s notorious *Freaks* [1927], one of Lynch’s great influences.

Returning to London, he finds only Treves can guarantee him the peace he craves. The quiet ending is ambivalent, as he finally manages to sleep in a bed like a normal person after a night at the variety theatre: Merrick died aged 27 from a dislocated neck from sleeping on his back, which his damaged head could not support. He never left the safety of institutional care: his skeleton is on display at the Royal London Hospital. Treves, who was knighted in 1901, conducted the autopsy.

Lynch never made a film in Britain again. His subsequent career has delved ever deeper into the peculiar paranoias and signifiers of modern America (with the whimsical exception of *The Straight Story* [1999] which also reunited him with Freddie Francis), but with the same concern as here: under the rational mind always lies the steam and horror of the id and the damaged and repressed memory. “Lynchian” is now a mode of Americana all of its own, but the Hitchcock who made *Rebecca* and *The Thirty-Nine Steps* and then conquered America in his own way, would probably recognise much in this film to approve of.



It was a very, very difficult film for me, because I was in a place

where a lot of people thought I didn’t belong. I had made one feature no one had heard about [*Eraserhead*], and here I am, born in Missoula, Montana, making a Victorian drama. I think a lot of people thought: Who is this nutcake? Who was I to be doing this?



...I always loved smokestack industry, and I love towns or cities that have grown up around factories. So here is Victorian England, and I don’t know this land, but I know factories, I know this is the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, so that side of it resonated with me. Then one day I’m standing in East London Hospital. A derelict hospital, but it still had beds in the wards. Thousands of pigeons, broken windows, but long, glorious hallways, fireplaces, all the details. I’m there in the hall looking into a ward and a wind entered me, and I was back in time. I knew it: 100 per cent. Victorian England. And I said: “Now I know it. No one can take it away from me.” It just came in.

...But if we’d tried to do *The Elephant Man* even a year later, we couldn’t have. They were redoing the wharf area and just tearing out all the old places we’d found, that had been there for who knows how many hundreds of years. We were so lucky to get certain places. The feel of Victorian England was still there. You could go down the street and see people coming towards you from the 1800s. It was a different London.

David Lynch talks to Tom Huddleston  
*Time Out*

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