

Elephant Man must be seen and felt

by Michael McCarthy

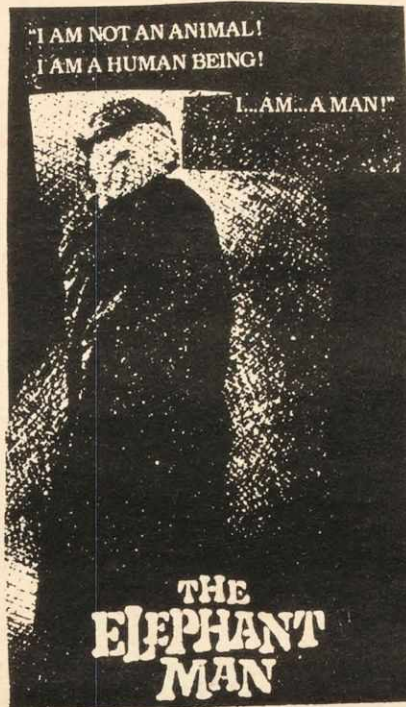
The **Elephant Man** is a very moving, very sad motion picture, based on the life (if the horrible ordeals through which he suffers can be so-called) of John Merrick, a severely deformed young man who was exhibited in freak shows under the name which serves as the title of the film. Director **David Lynch** cuts through the stifling rigour of society and the attractions of "civilized man", to the essence of humanity; the qualities which make us deserving, or undeserving, of our difference from and superior status over the rest of the animals. The film over-

powers attempts to analyze it coolly from a distance, and thrusts inexorably into the heart, battering down the mask of control and releasing, or dragging out, our usually repressed feelings. It lays seeds of questioning and sympathy that rapidly burst from the soul as passionate empathy, shock, outrage, and deep, deep pain at what we are seeing, both on the screen and in ourselves.

According to the movie, a beautiful young Englishwoman, mauled (in her fourth month of pregnancy) by an elephant, gives birth to a deformed baby with monstrous head, twisted spine, and grotesque skin. In his

maturity, John Merrick causes women to scream and men to turn away in disgust. One man, however, is moved to tears when he sees him in one of the freak shows which has been Merrick's only life. The man is a doctor, and he gives John refuge in a hospital. Heretofore regarded as an imbecilic, dumb non-entity, it develops that only Merrick's sensitivity and fear of contact with those whom his appearance disgusts has made him seem incapable of understanding. He is, in fact, a superior man in every sense other than physical, with a love of literature, sculpture and his fellow man.

He becomes accepted by a few friends, and an object of curiosity whom society figures visit frequently, all impressed by his refined manners, concern for others, and creativity. He is attacked, however, by a group of unfeeling, uncomprehending "normal" people, and is abducted to another circus. He undergoes terrible abuse, but eventually is helped by fellow "freaks" to return to London. There, despite his deformities and secluded life, he is happy among his friends in the short



time left to him on this earth.

John Hurt is incredible in the lead role. Beyond the enormous physical demands of his character, he must show emotion despite an unchangeable expression and reveal the soul of a man who has never been allowed to live like a man, all of which he does brilliantly. He goes from a speechless, frightened creature in a hospital, to a man who bursts into tears over kind treatment from a beautiful woman, to a sensitive soul concerned about his friends, through a return to brutal abuse and then back again.

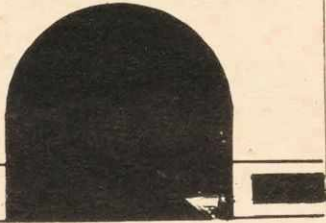
Anthony Hopkins is flawless in support as Dr. Frederick

Treaves, who saves Merrick from the freak show, but gains a reputation from him, and therefore wonders if he is really any better than the circus entrepreneur. **John Gielgud** impresses as the governor of the hospital, as does **Anne Bancroft** as a prominent actress who sees the humanity and soul of Merrick and befriends him.

The film is in black and white, which is fitting for the portrayal of dirty, bleak industrial London during the reign of Victoria, where most of the story occurs. The impact of the film is more visual than verbal, but the script is well-paced and relentless.

Regardless of what details of the film are fictional, it succeeds devastatingly in making us understand emotionally that people, be they white, black, short, ugly, communist, female, crippled, or whatever, are all human. It is disheartening to feel in ourselves the knowledge that we mistreat others the way Merrick was mistreated—we assume the exterior is the essence of the being. Not Merrick, or people like him, but *we, ourselves*, are the inhumans, for ignoring the inner, true human qualities and rejecting anyone who doesn't fit our false, unnatural and superficial concept of "normal". We are the freaks. We are the monsters. May works such as **The Elephant Man** give us the understanding we need to change.

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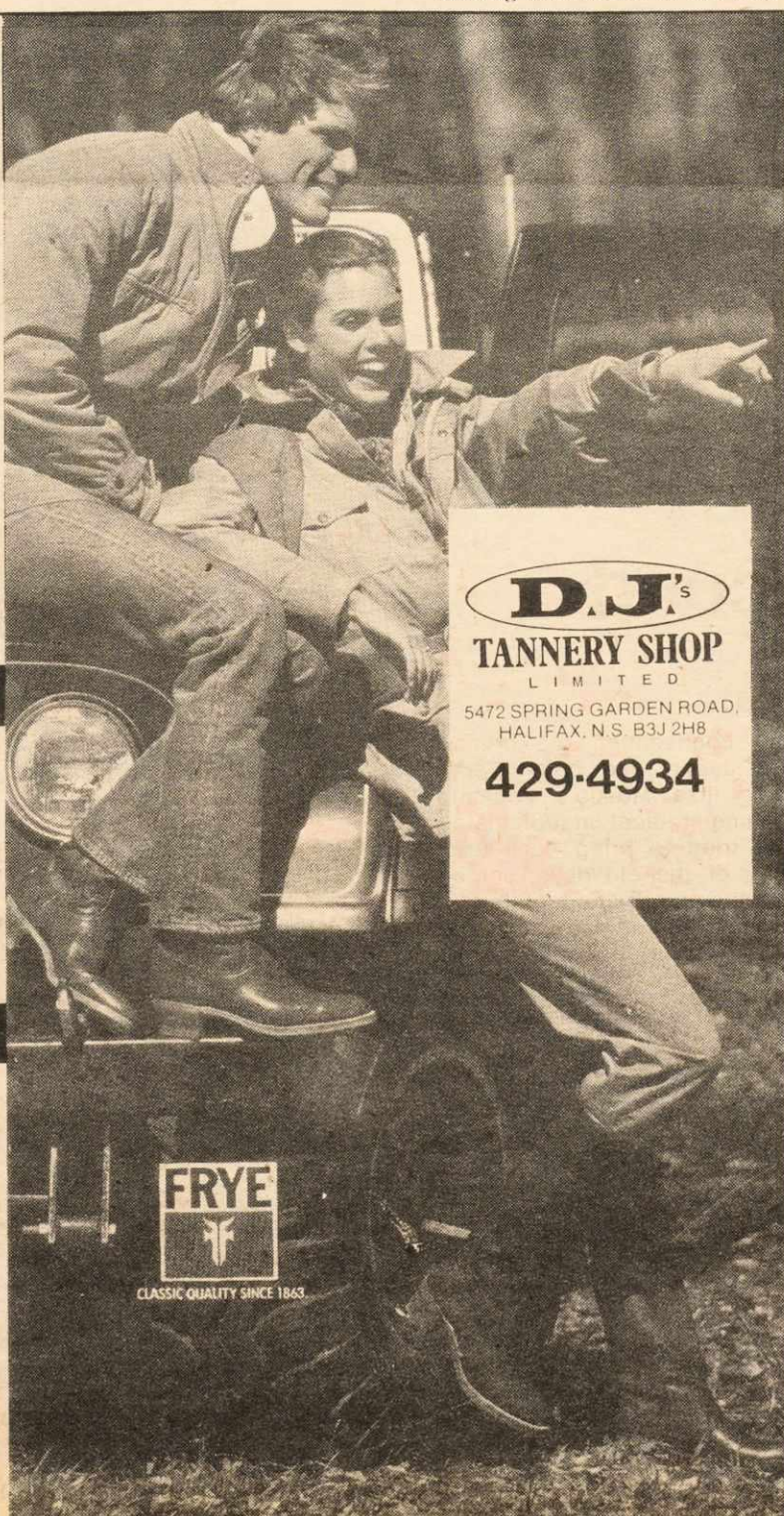
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CBC's Africa week

The CBC 'Africa Week Schedule' was an impressive piece of broadcasting, one which brought an awareness and understanding of Africa to all those who listened.

The program, which ran four hours daily from October 6-10, showed the diversities and similarities of the African continent, in terms of political, social and cultural factors. Problems of censorship and suppression afflicting many African writers and other artists had particular emphasis.

The program represented the global aspects of problems encountered in international exchanges and interdependence and their effects on the respective African Governments.

For example, the French system of colonization ("assimilation" in French) led to a hold over such French colonies after independence where till today they maintain a number of troops and actually help to maintain the positions of such African leaders despite their numerous crimes. The case of Emperor Bokassa of the Central African Empire is a classical example. In 1966 the French engineered a coup to have him installed on the Central African throne; thirteen years later in 1973

they had him removed.

The "Biko" play was a classic piece of work, bringing out not only the issues specific to South Africa but ones that face the world with respect to human indifference to suffering and injustice. The play shows the plight of Steve Biko who was murdered in a South African jail for peacefully criticizing the undemocratic nature of the South African system of apartheid. He was a man who held fast to his principles in spite of the torture he endured.

I would like to recommend that a radio series be done once a month or bimonthly to bring to the attention of the Canadian community and others of development in Africa. With some exceptions, most coverage now tends to be sketchy and unrepresentative. I would also say the TV side of CBC could have such a feature to give a visual side of the continent.

Despite the 20 hour exposure period, the time constraint did not enable them to bring out as much about the societies of countries in Africa. More time would have given a broader insight into the various countries in Africa. Congratulations to CBC, we would like to hear more. Keep it up.