

# The Elephant Man (film)

***The Elephant Man*** is a 1980 biographical drama film loosely based on the life of Joseph Merrick (referred to as "John" in the film), a severely deformed man who lived in London in the late 19th century. The film was directed by David Lynch, produced by Jonathan Sanger, and executive produced by Mel Brooks (who was uncredited, to avoid audiences anticipating the film being in the vein of his comedic works, although his company Brooksfilms is in the opening credits). It stars John Hurt, Anthony Hopkins, Anne Bancroft, John Gielgud, Wendy Hiller, Michael Elphick, Hannah Gordon, and Freddie Jones. *The Elephant Man* is generally regarded as one of Lynch's more accessible and mainstream works, alongside *The Straight Story* (1999).

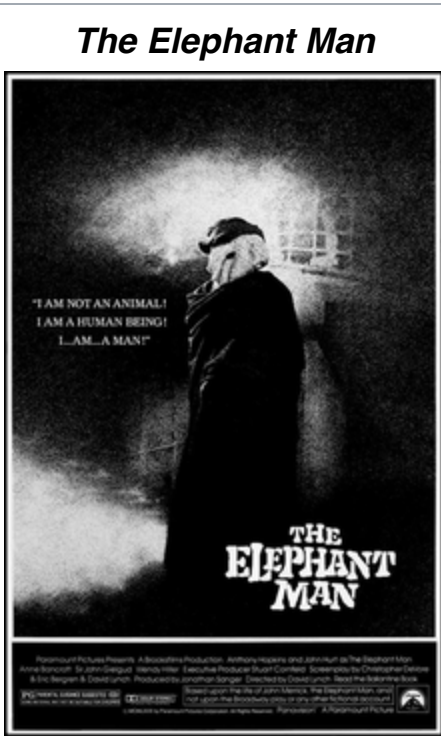
The screenplay was adapted by Lynch, Christopher De Vore, and Eric Bergren from Frederick Treves' *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences* (1923) and Ashley Montagu's *The Elephant Man: A Study in Human Dignity* (1971). It was shot in black-and-white and featured make-up work by Christopher Tucker.

*The Elephant Man* was a critical and commercial success with eight Academy Award nominations, including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Adapted Screenplay, and Best Actor. After receiving widespread criticism for failing to honour the make-up effects, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences was prompted to create the Academy Award for Best Makeup the following year. The film also won the BAFTA Awards for Best Film, Best Actor, and Best Production Design and was nominated for Golden Globe awards. It also won a French César Award for Best Foreign Film.

## Plot

Wild African elephants strike down Merrick's mother, who writhes in anguish. Afterwards, an infant Merrick is heard crying.

Frederick Treves, a surgeon at the London Hospital, finds John Merrick in a Victorian freak show in London's East End, where he is kept by Mr. Bytes, the brutish ringmaster. His head is kept hooded, and his "owner", who views him as intellectually disabled, is paid by Treves to bring him to the hospital for examination.



Theatrical release poster

<b>Directed by</b>	<u>David Lynch</u>
<b>Screenplay by</b>	<u>Christopher De Vore</u> <u>Eric Bergren</u> <u>David Lynch</u>
<b>Based on</b>	<i>The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences</i> by <u>Frederick Treves</u> <i>The Elephant Man: A Study in Human Dignity</i> by <u>Ashley Montagu</u>
<b>Produced by</b>	<u>Jonathan Sanger</u>
<b>Starring</b>	<u>Anthony Hopkins</u> <u>John Hurt</u> <u>Anne Bancroft</u> <u>Freddie Jones</u> <u>John Gielgud</u> <u>Wendy Hiller</u>
<b>Cinematography</b>	<u>Freddie Francis</u>
<b>Edited by</b>	<u>Anne V. Coates</u>

Treves presents Merrick to his colleagues and highlights his deformed skull, which forces him to sleep with his head on his knees, since if he were to lie down, he would asphyxiate. On Merrick's return, he is beaten so badly by Bytes that he has to call Treves for medical help. Treves brings him back to the hospital. Merrick is tended to by hospital matron Mrs. Mothershead, as the other nurses are too frightened of him. Mr. Carr Gomm, the hospital's Governor, is against housing Merrick, as the hospital does not accept "incurables".

To prove that Merrick can make progress, Treves trains him to say a few conversational sentences and part of the 23rd Psalm. Carr Gomm sees through this ruse but, as he is leaving, Merrick begins to recite the whole of the Psalm. Merrick tells the doctors that he knows how to read and has memorized the 23rd Psalm because it is his favourite. Carr Gomm permits him to stay, and Merrick spends his time practicing conversation with Treves and building a model of a cathedral he can see from his window.

At tea with Treves and his wife, Merrick is so overwhelmed by their kindness that he shows them his mother's picture. He believes he must have been a "disappointment" to his mother but hopes she would be proud to see him with his "lovely friends". Merrick begins to take guests in his rooms, including the actress Madge Kendal, who gives him a copy of *Romeo and Juliet*; they play some lines from it and Kendal kisses Merrick.

Merrick quickly becomes an object of curiosity to high society, and Mrs. Mothershead expresses concerns that he is still being put on display as a freak for this audience. Treves begins to question the morality of his own actions. Meanwhile, a night porter named Jim starts selling tickets to locals who come at night to gawk at the "Elephant Man".

The issue of Merrick's residence is challenged at a hospital council meeting, but he is guaranteed permanent residence by command of the hospital's royal patron, Queen Victoria, who sends word with her daughter-in-law Alexandra. However, during one of Jim's raucous late-night showings, Merrick is kidnapped by Bytes. A witness reports this to Treves, who confronts Jim about what he has done; Jim is then fired by Mothershead.

Bytes takes Merrick on the road as a circus attraction once again. During a "show" in Belgium, Merrick, who is weak and dying, collapses, causing a drunken Bytes to lock him in a cage at night with some apes and leave him to die. Merrick is released by his fellow freakshow attractions. Upon returning to London, he is harassed through Liverpool Street station by several young boys and accidentally knocks down a young girl. Merrick is chased, unmasked, and cornered by an angry mob. Before collapsing, he cries "I am not an elephant! I am not an animal! I am a human being! I am a man!"

Policemen return Merrick to the hospital and Treves. He recovers some of his health but is dying of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. Treves and Mothershead take Merrick, accompanying Princess Alexandra, to see a magical pantomime. Kendal comes on stage afterwards and dedicates the performance to him, and a proud Merrick receives a standing ovation from the audience.

<b>Music by</b>	<u>John Morris</u>
<b>Production company</b>	<u>Brooksfilms</u>
<b>Distributed by</b>	<u>Columbia–EMI–Warner Distributors</u> (United Kingdom) <u>Paramount Pictures</u> (United States)
<b>Release dates</b>	October 3, 1980 (New York City) <sup>[1]</sup> October 10, 1980 (United States)
<b>Running time</b>	123 minutes <sup>[2]</sup>
<b>Countries</b>	United Kingdom United States <sup>[3]</sup>
<b>Language</b>	English
<b>Budget</b>	\$5 million
<b>Box office</b>	\$26 million (North America) <sup>[4]</sup>

Back at the hospital, Merrick thanks Treves for all he has done and completes his cathedral model. He lies down on his back in bed, imitating a sleeping child in a picture on his wall, and dies. He is consoled by a vision of his mother, who quotes Lord Tennyson's "Nothing Will Die".

## Cast

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- Anthony Hopkins as Frederick Treves, a doctor who takes John from the freakshow to work in the hospital
- John Hurt as John Merrick, an intelligent, friendly, kind-hearted man who is feared by most people in his society because of his severe deformity.
- Hannah Gordon as Ann Treves
- Anne Bancroft as Madge Kendal
- John Gielgud as Francis Carr Gomm
- Wendy Hiller as Mrs. Mothershead
- Freddie Jones as Mr. Bytes, the evil ringmaster (based on Tom Norman<sup>[5]</sup>)
- Frederick Treves (grandnephew of Dr Frederick Treves) as Alderman
- Michael Elphick as Jim Renshaw, the dishonest night porter
- Dexter Fletcher as Bytes' boy
- Helen Ryan as Alexandra, Princess of Wales
- John Standing as Fox
- Lesley Dunlop as Nora, Merrick's nurse
- Phoebe Nicholls (picture)/Lydia Lisle (footage) as Mary Jane Merrick
- Morgan Sheppard as man in pub
- Kenny Baker as plumed dwarf
- Pat Gorman as Fairground Bobby
- Pauline Quirke as prostitute
- Nula Conwell as Nurse Kathleen, one of Merrick's nurses

## Production

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### Development

Producer Jonathan Sanger optioned the script from writers Christopher De Vore and Eric Bergren after receiving the script from his babysitter.<sup>[6]</sup> Sanger had been working as Mel Brooks' assistant director on *High Anxiety*.<sup>[7]</sup> Sanger showed Brooks the script, whereupon he decided to help finance via Brooksfilms, his new company. Brooks' personal assistant, Stuart Cornfeld, suggested David Lynch to Sanger.<sup>[8]</sup><sup>[7]</sup>

Sanger met Lynch, and they shared scripts they were working on (*The Elephant Man* and Lynch's unrealized *Ronnie Rocket*). Lynch told Sanger that he would love to direct the script after reading it, and Sanger endorsed him after hearing Lynch's ideas. However, Brooks had not heard of Lynch at the time. Sanger and Cornfeld set up an *Eraserhead* viewing at a 20th Century Fox screening room; Brooks loved it and enthusiastically agreed for Lynch to direct.<sup>[7]</sup> By his own request, Brooks was not credited as executive producer to ensure that audiences would not expect a comedy after seeing his name attached.<sup>[9]</sup>

### Casting

Dustin Hoffman wanted the role of John Merrick, but Sanger rejected the idea, saying "We're always going to be looking to see where the Elephant Man ends and Dustin Hoffman begins". Lynch considered his friend Jack Nance, who he worked with on *Eraserhead*, for the role, but he cast John Hurt in the role after seeing *The Naked Civil Servant*.<sup>[10]</sup> At the time, Hurt was still making *Heaven's Gate* which had fallen badly behind schedule due to director Michael Cimino's perfectionism. Hurt spent so long waiting for something to do that he performed the role of Merrick in the interim before returning to *Heaven's Gate* to complete shooting.<sup>[11]</sup>

## Filming

The budget was \$5 million, \$4 million of which was raised from Fred Silverman of NBC.<sup>[6]</sup> The remainder came from EMI Films.<sup>[12]</sup>

For his second feature and first studio film, albeit one independently financed,<sup>[13]</sup> Lynch provided the musical direction and sound design. Lynch also tried to design the make-up himself, but the design didn't work.<sup>[6]</sup><sup>[14]</sup> The makeup, now supervised by Christopher Tucker, was based on direct casts of Merrick's body, which had been kept in the Royal London Hospital's private museum. The makeup took seven to eight hours to apply each day and two hours to delicately remove.<sup>[6]</sup> John Hurt would arrive on set at 5 am and shoot his scenes from noon until 10 pm. After his first experience of the inconvenience of having to apply the makeup and perform with it, he called his girlfriend, saying, "I think they have finally managed to make me hate acting."<sup>[15]</sup> Because of the strain on the actor, he worked alternate days.<sup>[6]</sup>

The film is bookended with surrealist sequences centred around Merrick's mother and her death. Lynch used Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* to underline the climax and Merrick's own death. Composer John Morris argued against using the music, stating that "this piece is going to be used over and over and over again in the future... And every time it's used in a film it's going to diminish the effect of the scene."<sup>[16]</sup>

## Post-production

Following their return from England with a print, Lynch and Sanger screened *The Elephant Man* for Brooks, who suggested some minor cuts but told them that the film would be released as they had made it.<sup>[8]</sup>

# Lawsuit

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A West End play of the same name was enjoying a successful Broadway run at the time of the film's production. The producers sued Brooksfilms over the use of the title.<sup>[17]</sup><sup>[6]</sup>

# Release

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## Box office

*The Elephant Man* was a box office hit, grossing \$26 million in the United States.<sup>[4]</sup><sup>[6]</sup> In Japan, it was the second highest-grossing foreign film of the year with theatrical rentals of ¥2.45 billion, behind only *The Empire Strikes Back*.<sup>[18]</sup>

## Critical response

On review aggregator Rotten Tomatoes, it has an approval rating of 92% based on 63 reviews, with an average score of 8.5/10. The site's critical consensus reads, "David Lynch's relatively straight second feature finds an admirable synthesis of compassion and restraint in treating its subject, and features outstanding performances by John Hurt and Anthony Hopkins."<sup>[19]</sup> On Metacritic, the film has a weighted average score of 78 out of 100 based on 16 critic reviews, indicating "generally favourable reviews".<sup>[20]</sup>

Vincent Canby wrote: "Mr. Hurt is truly remarkable. It can't be easy to act under such a heavy mask ... the physical production is beautiful, especially Freddie Francis' black-and-white photography."<sup>[21]</sup>

A small number of critics were less favourable. Roger Ebert gave it 2/4 stars, writing: "I kept asking myself what the film was really trying to say about the human condition as reflected by John Merrick, and I kept drawing blanks."<sup>[22]</sup> In the book *The Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture*, Nadja Durbach describes the work as "much more mawkish and moralising than one would expect from the leading postmodern surrealist filmmaker" and "unashamedly sentimental". She blamed this mawkishness on the use of Treves' memoirs as source material.<sup>[23]</sup>

*The Elephant Man* has since been ranked among the best films of the 1980s in *Time Out* (where it placed 19th)<sup>[24]</sup> and *Paste* (56th).<sup>[25]</sup> The film also received five votes in the 2012 *Sight & Sound* polls.<sup>[26]</sup>

## Accolades

*The Elephant Man* was nominated for eight Academy Awards,<sup>[27]</sup> tying *Raging Bull* at the 53rd Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Actor in a Leading Role (Hurt),<sup>[28]</sup> Art Direction-Set Decoration (Stuart Craig, Robert Cartwright, Hugh Scaife), Best Costume Design, Best Director, Best Film Editing, Music: Original Score, and Writing: Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium.<sup>[29]</sup> However, it did not win any.

Industry experts were appalled that the film was not going to be honoured for its make-up effects when the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences announced its nominations at the time. A letter of protest was sent to the academy's Board of Governors requesting to give the film an honorary award. The academy refused, but in response to the outcry, they decided to give the make-up artists their own category. A year later, the Academy Award for Best Makeup category was introduced with *An American Werewolf in London* as its first recipient.<sup>[6][30]</sup>

It won the BAFTA Award for Best Film, and other BAFTA Awards for Best Actor (Hurt) and Best Production Design, and was nominated for four others: Direction, Screenplay, Cinematography and Editing.

The film is recognized by American Film Institute in these lists:

- 2005: AFI's 100 Years...100 Movie Quotes:
  - John Merrick: "I am not an animal! I am a human being. I am a man." – Nominated<sup>[31]</sup>

## Home media

The film has been issued many times on VHS, Betamax, CED, LaserDisc and DVD. The first DVD was released on December 11, 2001, by Paramount Home Entertainment.<sup>[32]</sup> The version released as part of the David Lynch *Lime Green Box* includes several interviews with Lynch and Hurt, and a Joseph Merrick documentary.<sup>[33]</sup> This material is also available on the exclusive treatment on the European market as part of Optimum Releasing's StudioCanal Collection.<sup>[34][35]</sup> The film has been available on Blu-ray since 2009 throughout Europe and in Australia and Japan but not in the US (however the discs will play in both region A & B players).<sup>[36]</sup>

A 4K restoration (created from the original camera negative, supervised by Lynch) was carried out for the film's 40th anniversary, and was released in a director-approved special edition in both Blu-ray and DVD formats from The Criterion Collection in the United States on September 29, 2020.<sup>[37]</sup> The restoration was also released on 4K Ultra HD Blu-ray (including a remastered Blu-ray) in the UK in April 2020.<sup>[38]</sup>

A tie-in novelization by Christine Sparks was published by Ballantine Books in 1980.<sup>[39]</sup>

## Soundtrack

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The musical score of *The Elephant Man* was composed and conducted by John Morris, and it was performed by the National Philharmonic Orchestra. In 1980, the company 20th Century Fox Records published this film's original musical score as both an LP album and as a cassette in the United States. Its front cover artwork features a masked John Merrick against a backdrop of smoke, as seen on the advance theatrical poster for the film.

In 1994, the first compact disc (CD) issue of the film score was made by the company Milan, which specializes in film scores and soundtrack albums.<sup>[40]</sup>

### Track listing for the first U.S. release on LP

#### Side one

1. "The Elephant Man Theme" – 3:46
2. "Dr. Treves Visits the Freak Show and Elephant Man" – 4:08
3. "John Merrick and Psalm" – 1:17
4. "John Merrick and Mrs. Kendal" – 2:03
5. "The Nightmare" – 4:39

#### Side two

1. "Mrs. Kendal's Theater and Poetry Reading" – 1:58
2. "The Belgian Circus Episode" – 3:00
3. "Train Station" – 1:35
4. "Pantomime" – 2:20
5. "Adagio for Strings" – 5:52
6. "Recapitulation" – 5:35

## In popular culture

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Michael Jackson used excerpts from the film in his song "Morphine" from the 1997 remix album *Blood on the Dance Floor: HIStory in the Mix*.<sup>[41]</sup>

The Jam's former bassist Bruce Foxton was inspired strongly by the film, and in response wrote the song "Freak" with the single's cover making a reference to the film.<sup>[42]</sup>

Actor Bradley Cooper credits watching the film with his father as a child as his inspiration to become an actor. Cooper played the character in a Broadway revival of *The Elephant Man* play in 2014.<sup>[43]</sup>

In season 3, episode 21 of *The Simpsons*, "Black Widower", Lisa daydreams of Aunt Selma's new boyfriend as the Elephant Man.<sup>[44]</sup>



The 1992 film *Batman Returns* parodies the iconic line "I am not an animal. I am a man." In one scene, the Penguin, after being called Oswald, angrily yells "I am not a human being! I am an animal!"<sup>[45]</sup>

British TV presenter Karl Pilkington often has cited it as his favourite film. Pilkington's love for the film brought many new features to his various podcasts and radio shows.<sup>[46]</sup>

Musician Michael Stipe loves the film and cites it as an inspiration for the R.E.M. song "Carnival of Sorts (Boxcars)".<sup>[47]</sup> Another R.E.M. song, "New Test Leper", quotes the line "I am not an animal."<sup>[48]</sup>

Musician Nicole Dollanganger featured a sample of the film in her 2012 song "Cries of the Elephant Man Bones".<sup>[49]</sup>

Musician Mylène Farmer's song "Psychiatric" from the 1991 album *L'autre...* is a tribute to the film and John Hurt's voice is sampled throughout the song, repeating several times: "I'm a human being, I'm not an animal".<sup>[50]</sup>

## See also

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- The Elephant Man* (play)
- The Elephant Man* (1982 film)

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- *The Elephant Man* (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0080678/>) at [IMDb](#)
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