

THE BUTTERFLY CIRCUS

Joshua Weigel (director); Joshua Weigel, Rebekah Weigel (writers)
Doorpost Film Project, 2009. Runtime: 20 minutes.

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This short, beautifully filmed story opens with a line of cars and trucks traveling a dusty road. A young boy looking out a car window notices a sign: “30 miles ahead . . . Carnival Side Show . . . Oddities. . . Curiosities.” “Hey, look, can we go there?” the boy asks of the adult man driving the car. The man replies, “Ah, Sammy, you’re breaking my heart . . . *We’re* all the circus you need, kid.” “But they have rides,” the boy protests. He turns toward the back seat and asks the man wearing a top hat and vest, “Can we, Mr. Mendez?” Says Mr. Mendez, “Why not?”

Evening falls as the car approaches a carnival site. The viewer discerns that the story is set in the era of the Great Depression, not only from the model car in which the group is traveling, but also from the mood of despair evoked by the rich musical score and brooding camera work. Mr. Mendez, Sammy, and their companions pay a visit. We hear an invitation from a fortune teller: “Sit down . . . I tell you all about your fate.” We see young Sammy enjoying a carousel ride . . . and a high-pitched, nasal voice exhorts the crowd: “Come on in, ladies and gentlemen, we have the best freak show in town.”

We enter the freak show tent. The camera moves quickly from stall to stall, passing the usual side show attractions: a bearded lady, Siamese twins, and a “fat lady” who “not unlike a large heifer . . . is a woman of extraordinary weight . . . who has a peculiar appetite for whole chickens.” Finally, the barker arrives at a small curtained stall that we realize must conceal the main attraction: “And now ladies and gentlemen, gather in. A perversion of nature, a man, if you can even call him that, whom God himself has turned his back upon. I give you . . . the limbless man.” The curtain is ripped open; a split second of silence is followed by gasps, then laughter. Onlookers sneer, shake their heads and point fingers. Judgment and contempt on their faces, they stare at the torso of a limbless man sitting atop a stool. Men, women and children gape, and eventually turn away, eyes reluctantly letting go of the grotesque sight before them. Two young boys left behind exchange looks, cruelty in their eyes. One turns and throws a large tomato. The limbless man, his eyes wide, tensely anticipating the hit, turns his head to protect himself, having no hands, no arms to shield his face. He is powerless to avoid not only the splat of the tomato but the humiliation that results. The barker joins, with a malevolent laugh. The second child grabs a tomato and as he cocks his arm to hurl the fruit, we see a hand reach out and grip the child’s arm. The camera moves upward to reveal the face of Mr. Mendez, whom we saw in the opening scene in the car. His compassionate face stares at the barker. The laughter stops, and the boy drops the tomato. As the boys scatter, Mr. Mendez walks forward, removes his top hat, kneels before the limbless man and says slowly and deliberately, “You are . . . magnificent.” The viewer still doesn’t know who Mr. Mendez is, until the tattooed man in the next stall tells the limbless man that Mr. Mendez is the “Showman” of the Butterfly Circus.

Mr. Mendez’s circus offers a different kind of entertainment than the usual intrigues of fortunetellers with crystal balls, titillating peeks at those born with physical abnormalities, and

geeks. The Butterfly Circus has no side shows. Instead, Mendez creates a world of beauty: a spectacle of acrobats, trapeze artists, contortionists, fire eaters, escape artists and strong men meant to inspire, to instill awe and draw attention to the beauty of human capacities. The Butterfly Circus presents wonders.

As ringmaster of the Butterfly Circus, Mr. Mendez finds the physical prowess of his performers, “the way they move,” “astonishing” and “humanity perfectly splendid.” And yet like any circus director he is motivated by his belief that “what this world needs is a bit of wonder.”

The Butterfly Circus is a short, twenty minute film that tells the stories of the Butterfly Circus and Will, the limbless man. Their stories reveal the generative power of relationships within community, and the potential for personal healing, for love that seeks to empower the beloved and effect transformation. As we are introduced to the various performers of the Butterfly Circus—Otto the escape artist, George the strong man, Poppy, the oldest man in the air, and Anna the trapeze artist—we learn that joining the Butterfly Circus allowed each of these characters to overcome the brokenness in their lives and to find meaning in this world and their place in it.

Will is a handsome, tragic figure, barely able to tolerate the degradation inflicted upon him. He is trapped in the shameful circumstances of a human being who is displayed for voyeuristic purposes. He has a spiritual need to have his worth and dignity affirmed and respected. Clearly he will never have a satisfying life with the carnival, which showcases and shamelessly exploits his physical disability. This marketplace mentality reduces Will to a commodity for commercial profit, though his spirit has not yet been devoured by the carnival. We discover that a shred of hope lives in Will when he manages to sequester himself in one of the Butterfly Circus wagons and ride out of the carnival undetected. He is prepared, in the words of Paul Tillich, “to be grasped by the power of love.”

The actor Nick Vujicic, who plays Will, is a Christian preacher and motivational speaker who addresses audiences worldwide on the topics of disability, hope, and finding meaning in life. He was born without arms or legs as a result of a rare disorder known as tetra-amelia.

The butterfly, although a very common symbol, is an effective device in *The Butterfly Circus* that not only symbolizes the transformation we witness in Will, but also provides the event, and its release, around which the community comes together in solidarity and delight. Each member of the community, like each member of the audience, has an opportunity to identify with the promise the butterfly embodies from cocoon to flight. Exploring this familiar metaphor can also serve as a foundation for viewer discussion.

Adults will enjoy this film and may even be moved by its invitation to escape the confines that limit our existence in this world. *The Butterfly Circus*, however, is an invaluable resource for a young audience. The excitement of the circus is subdued in *The Butterfly Circus* but the entertainment is still novel. The story is engaging. The actors are realistic.

The photography offers the viewer a number of compelling visual moment: for example, the mirage-like vision of the circus performers at dusk as they approach a shantytown. The

original music serves the film well with swelling violins, triumphant brass, and sweet melodies capturing the spiritual messages of inspiration and hope.

This short film is an outline for a future feature-length film, but for now, the short film can be purchased on DVD at *The Butterfly Circus* website: www.thebutterflycircus.com.