

review: **The Residents Freak Show**

by Ivan

Type: Exploration

Publisher: The Voyager Company

Retail Price: \$69.95

Street Price: \$39.00

Requires: 256 color Mac, 3350K free RAM, 500K free HD space, 640x480 color monitor, Double-speed CD-ROM drive, System 7, QuickTime 1.6 or higher, Sound Manager 3.0

Protection: None

Imagine Cyan's classic *The Manhole* on a serious acid trip, and you've got an idea of what to expect from *Freak Show*, by 3D illustrator Jim Ludtke and The Residents. On the surface, this multimedia CD-ROM is a trip to a bizarre side show full of twisted human oddities, the sort of attraction that was popular world wide up until about the middle of this century. The sub-human denizens of the show (simply called "freaks" before the advent of the PC movement) are the result of impossible birth defects, horrific accidents, and worse. But beyond the slick facade of the big top's banner lies a world full of quite human pain, misery, hopes and dreams.

Freak Show began life as a one-time comic book anthology, published by Dark Horse Comics in 1992. It was a collaborative effort by a number of artists who each contributed a short piece about some side-show attraction. What Ludtke and The Residents have done is to take those comic book stories and expand them into a full multimedia experience by adding 3D graphics, animation, music and new story material. The result is an unusual but striking blend of storytelling styles and methods. Some of the stories are presented in almost their original comic book form, usually one panel at a time with background sounds, music and sometimes a voice-over. Other have been chopped to bits and told MTV style through the music of The Residents. Several of the sideshow characters have also been brought to life, so to speak, by translation into the 3D world. The glue that holds *Freak Show* together is the 3D virtual side show environment in which all the characters and stories exist.

As with any good side show, though, the show is only as good as its freaks. And here we get into the meat of the matter. Stylistic issues aside, *Freak Show* is about human freaks. But more importantly in this case, it's about the human souls that reside within the oppressed flesh of these pathetic beings. *Freak Show* is about heartbreak and alienation

and desire and fear and sorrow and joy. Each of the attractions at this bizarre side show have their own tragic story, and as we explore, we learn to feel pity and compassion for these, our less fortunate fellows.

s an example, I offer you Herman the Moleman. In the course of our exploration, a monocled, top-hatted, barker introduces us to Herman. Though other acts will parade their deformity before you on their own private stage, Herman is reclusive. To see him, we must search for him, peeping through portals in the dirt-filled glass walls of his trailer. Maddening glimpses of a rapidly moving blur are all we see until we sneak around back and actually enter the trailer.

Inside, we find a couple of remnants of Herman's former life, a framed photo of a smiling blonde woman and a stand up baby Steinway piano. These two normal items are surrounded by a network of dirt and cobwebs. While inside, we can look out through the same portals through which we peered in earlier. Doing so reveals a series of curious, almost grotesque faces who gawk in at us, making us feel as though we've become a part of the attraction.

A little further into the trailer, and we'll finally find Herman himself, cowering under a blanket in a chest of drawers. We actually feel bad, disturbing the poor little guy. If it'll make us go away, he promises to tell us the story of how he wound up becoming the Moleman.

Herman's story, told in a slow, nasal, southern drawl, is one of loneliness, high emotions, and betrayal. Herman, then Eddie, was a lonely albino who, after the death of his mother,

had only two friends. Kay and Gil worked in the university library where Herman the night janitor. Kay and Gil and Eddie would dine together, and Eddie would play piano for his two friends. Eventually though, a romantic entanglement between Kay and Gil brought down the wrath of Kay's husband, and Kay was killed, Gil wounded. Kay's husband was also killed, in turn, by Gil. Fleeing the scene, Gil forced the frightened Eddie to drive him away. But the sun came up, blinding Eddie's sensitive albino eyes and he drove the car off a cliff! Gil was killed instantly, and Eddie became a fugitive from the law.

iscovering a dank cave, Eddie moved in, letting the dirt cake over his sensitive skin, sleeping during the day and prowling at night. One night, Eddie was discovered by the members of the side show, given a job as a freak and a comfortable place to live, and now all he desires is to never see the sunlight, or another human being, again.

With Herman the Moleman, as with other members of the show, we're given the opportunity to understand the human being behind the freakish mask, and that's largely what Freak Show is all about. We all understand about being the outsider, about losing loved ones, about being unable to fulfill dreams. Freak Show shows us that these misshapen creatures are merely victims of forces that effect us all.

Though the half dozen or so characters who are brought to life within the virtual world of Freak Show are all fictional, we do also get a glimpse into the real world of side show attractions. The CD also contains photos and verbal essays covering nearly 100 of history's most well-known side show freaks.

We can read about Chang & Eng, the original Siamese twins. Joined until death, Chang &

Eng married separate women, had 22 children between them, and eventually died after one of them developed a drinking problem. Then there's Margarete Clank, "More Than One, Less Than Two," who had most of an entire parasitic twin dangling from her abdomen.

And there's Dolly Dimples, the fat lady who used the proceeds of her act to build a house with reinforced concrete floors and extra wide doors. And Eli Bowen, "The Legless Wonder." Bobby Cork, half man, half woman. Christine Delait, the bearded woman. All of these and more. All of them, people who just wanted the same things the rest of us want — to live an enjoyable life, get married, raise kids, and not die miserable and alone. Many of them succeeded, despite their deformities. Which, I like to think, means there's hope for the rest of us.

Navigating the world of Freak Show is simple, and uses a fairly standard directional cursor which changes to show you which way you can go depending on where you position the cursor. Movement is done via full motion animation, as with *The Seventh Guest*. Though, unlike T7G's sweeping camera pans, you generally only move a few virtual feet at a time, and you can usually turn left or right, go backwards, etc. One complaint I have with the virtual world navigation is that it all takes place within a very small window. Fortunately, viewing particular objects up close will frequently give you a full screen window. Another complaint is an excess of dithering that makes everything look grainy and dim.

And, finally, the music by The Residents is very entertaining. I'd never heard of The Residents before buying this CD, but I enjoyed the music. I should also mention that, since this is a project of The Residents, it also has a catalog of The Residents merchandise built into the presentation.

Ultimately, *Freak Show* may not appeal to all. Fans of subcultural phenomena such as *Yummy Fur*, *Bob Dodd and the Church of the Subgenius*, *Frederico Fellini*, and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* will probably enjoy *Freak Show* the most.

Pros

- Many hours of exploration

Cons

- Heavy dithering detracts from art
- Much of the QuickTime navigation takes place in a too-small window