

Freak Show (12A)

Directed by Trudie Styler



'18 USA 1hr 31mins

Fri 29 June for at least one week

Based on the award-winning cult novel by legendary club kid James St. James, *Freak Show* is a wonderfully queer fish out of water high school comedy/drama about a gay teen who decides to enter a Homecoming Queen contest.

Born to be fierce and fashion-forward, Billy (Alex Lawther) is sent to stay with his dad after his party-loving mother (Bette Midler!) checks in to rehab. His flamboyant Oscar Wilde-meets-Boy George style doesn't go down too well at his new school, and he makes an enemy out of the self-appointed mean girl (Abigail Breslin) when he decides to go up against her for the crown of Homecoming Queen.

Boasting a brilliant soundtrack, jaw-dropping outfits and a feel-good story, this defiant coming of age tale is rally cry for letting your freak flag fly. All hail to everyone who dares to be different!

This article by Ryan Gilbey featuring an interview with director Trudie Styler and Alex Lawther originally appeared on theguradian.com on 14 June 2018

It's early on a Tuesday morning. A car pulls up outside a north London members' club. "Trudie is arriving!" someone calls. A small delegation goes out on to the pavement to meet her. "Trudie" is Trudie Styler. In a black beret with a little star on the front, the 64-year-old resembles an upmarket Wolfie Smith. The website of her film production company, Maven Pictures, tells us that she is "an award-winning and prolific film producer, director, environmentalist, human rights activist and Unicef ambassador". She also has everyone's personal number and has homes everywhere and is married to Sting and, no, we are not here to discuss their extended tantric sex sessions in which climax can be delayed for up to three weeks, or until the next fiscal year, whichever arrives sooner.

We are meeting because she has directed her first feature film – *Freak Show*, a high-school comedy-drama about difference, individuality and self-expression – and we have to get this in the bag over breakfast because the film's lead, Alex Lawther, needs to dash straight to rehearsals for the West End transfer of his Calais-set play *The Jungle*, and Styler has a flight to catch. Off anywhere nice? "I'm going to Dublin for Sting's musical, *The Last Ship*, and then I'm going on to the French Open."

In wanders Lawther, the 23-year-old star of *The Imitation Game*, *Ghost Stories* and the Netflix hit *The End of the Fucking World*. In a checked shirt and glasses, running a hand blearily across his bedhead, he could pass for a young Morrissey. He

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falls into Styler's arms and their embrace lasts so long that I start to feel like a gooseberry. "Trudie has something special," he says once we have convened upstairs around a wobbly table in an empty room. "It's because she's a performer herself. She can talk to an actor, which is a vital thing that a lot of directors don't always know how to do. They're a bit frightened of actors. Whereas – and this sounds very nebulous – I felt almost as if Trudie was as much a part of playing Billy as I was."

That's Billy Bloom, the flamboyantly queer 17-year-old hero of *Freak Show*, who is raised and then abandoned by his highly theatrical mother and cast adrift at a Texas school where his classmates don't take kindly to his wardrobe. One day he's sashaying down the corridor as Marilyn Monroe, the next he's a bloody-eyed, chalky-faced bride of death, complete with train trailing in his wake. When the taunts and abuse become a regular occurrence, he adapts his outfits accordingly: ski goggles, or a beekeeper's veil, provide some defence against the missiles and spit-balls.

Lawther particularly enjoyed dressing up as Zelda Fitzgerald and Uma Thurman in *Pulp Fiction*. "Anything where there was a literary or filmic inheritance was fun. And the mermaid was ... interesting." That mermaid get-up has it all: turquoise hair, marine sequins around the eyes, bubbles emanating from an unspecified outlet to the rear.

"It's a bubble machine, Ryan!" Styler says, mock-sternly. "You do actually see it, if you go back and look."

Were we not meant to assume the bubbles were coming out of his bum?

"No!" she exclaims in horror.

"That hadn't occurred to me," Lawther says. "I quite like that."

Did he take any costumes as souvenirs? "Trudie kindly gave me the Adam Ant-style pirate jacket and the orange Vivienne Westwood shirt."

"They'll be hard to wear as a civvy," she points out.

I ask her if Sting brought home the unforgettable winged posing-pouch that he wore in *Dune*. "I haven't seen it if he did," she laughs; it's fair to say we all seem a bit disappointed by that.

Styler has been producing and executive-producing movies for decades, everything from *Moon* to *Snatch* to *American Honey*. What surprises did she encounter now that she is a feature film-maker herself? "The biggest one was that I was doing it at all. We had a director, but he quit for personal reasons." Who was that? "I'd rather not say." (I ask the PR later. "I don't have that information," she says.) Having put a year of preparation into the film, Styler offered to take the reins. "Everyone was enthusiastic about that, so it meant: 'OK. Now I'm in. Let's go. Whoah!'" The "whoah" turns out to be a reaction to the table lurching sideways, almost upsetting Styler's coffee, but it seems appropriate under the circumstances.

Along with the original director went the actor playing Billy's mother, so Styler entreated her Central Park West neighbour Bette Midler to step in. "I wanted to use actors who championed diversity in real life and Bette has been a lifelong activist." John McEnroe, who recently pilloried his fellow tennis veteran Margaret Court for her homophobia, plays Billy's PE coach. "He's a great improviser," says Lawther, "though we had to calm him down on the swearing sometimes." Styler was already chums with McEnroe. Who would have guessed? We should probably take it as read that she knows everyone. "I don't know everyone!" she protests unconvincingly. Maybe not. But the "thank yous" in the end credits go on for quite some time. (Darren Aronofsky, Cary Fukunaga, Paul Haggis and Steven Zaillian all gave her notes after early screenings.) And let's not forget it was she who introduced Guy Ritchie to Madonna. She also introduced Guy Ritchie to a film career, which is harder to forgive.

It's understandable that she has found a small part in *Freak Show* for her own daughter, Mickey Sumner, who was so impressive as Greta Gerwig's flinty best friend in *Frances Ha*, as well as room on the soundtrack for songs by another daughter, the musician Eliot Sumner. And yet there's no role for Styler's husband, despite a full acting CV that includes *Quadrophenia* and *Plenty*. Where is thy Sting? "It's true. He's not in it. But he did give us five notes for the dirge that's playing when Billy dresses as Zelda. We didn't have a composer at that point and I needed something for Alex to perform to on set. So I said to Sting: 'Can you do a five-note dirge for me?' He said: 'Are you being serious?' I said: 'Yes, and I'm leaving in five minutes.' So he went to the piano and just ... did something."

When Billy is advised in the film to "tone it down", the phrase seems to inflame his extravagance, and soon he is putting himself forward as homecoming queen. But there's something quite alienating in the movie about the money he has at his disposal. Would the story not have worked just as well if he was not a child of fabulous and limitless wealth, with the means to conjure an entire Mardi Gras parade on the sports field? "The film is about a kid who you think has everything," Styler says. "Yes, he lives in a big, posh house, but big posh houses can be like mausoleums. The opulence is there, you see it, but it isn't felt or celebrated. It doesn't matter how rich you are. If you're not happy, you're not happy."

As well as being rich, it is also notable that Billy is virtually sexless, save for a bit of innocuous mooning over a soccer jock. Even the recent, candy-coloured *Love, Simon* ended in a full-on gay snog. Why no action for Billy? "I think he's dealing with a lot," Styler says. "His mum infantilised and then abandoned him, and he's got all this trouble at his new school, so we don't even get a chance to see how sexual a being he would be under other circumstances. He's too busy practising his speeches and trying to be a better orator."

Freak Show may have a millionaire hero who never does anything more lustful than flutter his eyelashes, but it may provide some succour to viewers going through the sort of victimisation that Billy endures. "We all feel like we're freaks at school," Styler says. "You don't feel pretty or clever enough. Nothing is comfortable until college, when you can finally be as weird as you want." Is it different for children growing up now? "I'm not sure," says Lawther. "When I was Billy's age, the conversations I was having with my friends weren't nearly as advanced or complicated as the ones I hear today between young people. I find their understanding of gender and queerness, and the politics behind that, quite daunting and thrilling."

"Sting and I have six children between us," Styler points out, "and they've all been through similar things." So the language changes but the experience doesn't? "I think so. I had a tough time at school. I had vivid scars from a road accident when I was younger. I had a friend called Vivian who had a birthmark all over her face so she was called Beetroot and I was Scarface. The bullying got so bad that my mum took a lunchtime job at my school so she could keep an eye on me. No one was going to screw with this 20-stone dinner lady!"

The film builds up to its own slogan: "Let your freak flag fly." It's a bit of a tongue-twister. What does it mean? "Everyone has a freak flag inside them," Lawther says. "Whether they're brave enough to show it is another matter. It's about finding an individual honesty. At the start of the film, Billy is dressing for other people, to provoke or attack or just as a defence mechanism. Then he finds this inner honesty, which means he can let people in." He looks faintly apologetic. "Is that a bit highfalutin for nine o'clock in the morning?"

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