

BERSERK!

BERSERK! (1967) is a non-stop kitsch-fest filled with unforgettable moments. Billed as "The Shocker Calculated To Drive You BERSERK!", it succeeds in doing just that for a variety of reasons—none of which the producer originally intended. Most notably, the inadvertent hilarity results from the seemingly endless parade of cheap but hysterical circus acts and an outrageous performance by Joan Crawford. It's one of those films that is so bad that it's a joy to experience.

The silly narrative concerns Monica Rivers, the tough-as-nails owner and ring-master of a traveling circus. A killer is stalking the performers. One by one, they are snuffed out in a variety of ways: a high-wire artiste is hung before an audience, someone is literally sawed in half during a magic act, and another does a free-fall flop onto a bed of spikes. Ouch! Later, it's discovered that the murderer is Rivers' daughter; the poor girl only wanted her mother's attention. (We won't even comment on the glaring plot flaws, except to note the fact that several murders have already been committed by the time Rivers' daughter shows up!)

Although the troupe is known as The Great Rivers Circus, the head shields worn by the elephants read (appropriately) "BS"—for the actual Billy Smart Circus used. (Speaking of plugging, one scene includes a prominently displayed Pepsi sign for all of Joan's soft-drink fans.)

Throughout BERSERK!, a series of hilarious acts are displayed. These include Jody, the Wonder Elephant (who cautiously steps over and between a bevy of supine, Las Vegas type show-girls), and Phylis Allen and Her Intelligent Poodles (a spunky batch of flying fur whizzing through a series of tried-and-true canine acrobatics). It would be remiss not to mention the delightfully excruciating tune sung (or rather lip-synched) by a quartet consisting of a dwarf, a skeleton man, a strong man, and a bearded lady. As they enthusiastically sing "It Might Be Me", a chuckling Joan looks on.

The New York Times began their review: "Joan Crawford is back and the circus has her, or rather she has the circus. . . ." The aging glamour-puss struts through the big top in gravity-defying tights (designed by Edith Head!), smart suits, and negligees—often revealing a set of alarmingly well-preserved, fish-netted gams. Also, Joan must have had a stipulation in her

contract regarding proper lighting. Invariably, her face is shot in brilliant light and framed by diagonal bars of shadow. Instead of softening her features, though, what results is a bizarre, Kabuki-like mask.

As Monica Rivers, ever the determined trouper, Joan keeps the show on the road at any cost. Her dialogue is peppered with some real screamers. At the start of a cat-fight with nemesis Diana Dors, Joan lashes out, "You slut! You miserable ingrate!" Later, describing her difficult life in the circus world, she explains, "There's nothing certain in show business. We've eaten caviar, we've eaten sawdust." Some of the best lines are reserved for her seduction scenes with muscular (and often shirtless) Ty Hardin. In one scene, the star (who, in 1967, was in her early 60s) tries to strike a deal with the gold-digging Hardin by offering "25 percent of the circus and 100 percent of me".

Toward the middle of the film, Monica's daughter Angela (Judy Geeson) unexpectedly arrives on the scene. She's been expelled from her ritzy English boarding school. By the finale, we discover that Angela is not as angelic as she appears. (Poor Joan, she never seems to have much luck raising children. At least she made a decent mother to Trog.) In the last few harrowing moments, Angela gets her comeuppance in the form of a rather poorly aimed lightning bolt. If there is a moral to be found in BERSERK!, it could be a warning never to try to fool Mother Nature. . . or Mommie Dearest!

—Michael O. Yaccarino

