

## *Freaks* (1932): Dysmorphisms, Solidarity and Revenge

Miguel Abad Vila

Centro de Saúde Novoa Santos. Rua Juan XXIII, nº 6. 32003 Ourense (Spain).

Correspondence: Miguel Abad Vila. Avenida de la Habana, nº 21, 2º. 32003 Ourense (Spain).

e-mail: [mabadvila@hotmail.com](mailto:mabadvila@hotmail.com)

Received 29 December 2007; modified 7 February 2007; accepted 17 March 2008

### Resumen

In a circus in which several people with significant physical deformities make their living as sideshow attractions, a voluptuous trapeze artist and her brawny lover attempt to take advantage of a midget in order to take possession of his fortune. When the beauty's intentions are unmasked and this humiliating lover's deception is discovered by the little fellow, the revenge of all his handicapped colleagues culminates in a horrifying dramatic ending for the unscrupulous trapeze artist and her strongman lover.

*Keywords:* Dysmorphisms, Disability, Handicap.

*Somebody's got to be unafraid to lead the freak parade...*

Big & Rich, an excerpt from the *Freak parade*.

### Technical details

**Title:** *Freaks*

**Country:** USA

**Year:** 1932

**Director:** Tod Browning

**Screenwriter:** Willis Goldbeck, Leon Gordon, Al Boasberg and Edgar Allan Wolf (not given credit) based on the original short story "Spurs", by Clarence Aaron "Todd" Robbins.

**Cast:** Wallace Ford, Leila Hyams, Olga Baclanova, Roscoe Ates, Henry Victor, Harry Earles, Daisy Earles, Rose Dione, Daisy Hilton, Violet Hilton, Schlitzie, Josephine Joseph, Johnny Eck, Frances O'Connor, Peter Robinson, Olga Roderick, Koo Koo, Prince Randian, Martha Morris, Elvira Snow, Jenny Lee Snow, Elizabeth Green, Angelo Rossitto, Edward Brophy and Matt McHugh.

**Color:** Black and white

**Runtime:** 64 minutes

**Genre:** Drama, Horror

**Production Company:** Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

**Synopsis:** Both 'normal' and 'handicapped' performers work in a circus. Hans, one of the midgets in the circus, falls in love with the beautiful trapeze artist, Cleopatra. She apparently loves him in return, but in truth what she really wants is Hans' money because her secret lover is Hercules, the strongman of the circus.

### A disturbing and innovative film

*"Freaks" is not a documentary. It is a Hollywood movie... Todd Robbins.*

Let's imagine for an instant that we acquire the marvellous ability to travel in time. We are now in 1932. Let's close our eyes for a minute and use our imagination to transport ourselves to a cinema hall in the United States (a). Let's make ourselves comfortable in our seat to attend the debut of this fantastic and controversial film. What disturbing surprises does it have in store for us?

**1. The Story's Main Characters.** Suddenly, we encounter a diverse group of people who really suffer from different physical and mental disabilities. They

were marginalized in the society of that time due to their deviation from its prevailing model of beauty (and those of our modern society as well). This strange situation seems very different from those portrayed in other later films, such as for example in *The Elephant Man* (1980) by David Lynch, or in *Mask* (1985) by Peter Bogdanovich, in which their deformed main characters are interpreted by actors whose appearance is disfigured by way of characterization tricks and complex make-up effects. It seems that the shooting of *Freaks* had to be carried out practically in secret, in an attempt to avoid the accusations (which had already begun circulating around the studios) of the exploitation of helpless, deformed and handicapped beings (Figure 1).

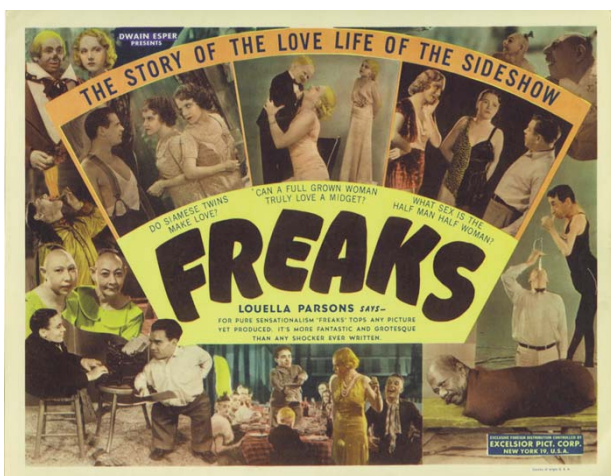


Figure 1: The main characters (American lobby card)

2. The cinematographic treatment of the sexual relationship between the fascinating and arrogant trapeze artist Cleopatra (Olga Baclanova) and the sensitive midget Hans (Harry Earles) could suggest a veiled intimate contact between these two characters, a topic which was completely taboo and could be contested by the censure which was in force in the United States at that time. We will just mention here that even in the United Kingdom in the year 1963, this film received the rating of X.

3. Finally, as stated in the opening text, the discovery of a wide range of side-show phenomena and its staging is not carried out within the concise context of a scientific or social documentary, but rather in the middle of a commercial Hollywood film that aspires to compete at the box office with other classics of the horror genre such as, for example, the successful *Dracula*, starring Bela Lugosi and directed by Tod Browning himself in Universal Studios in 1931.

a.- In Spain, it debuted on July 18, 1997, although in the 70s it could be seen at the Sitges Festival.

## The Precursors

In *Monsey's Magazine* in the year 1923, the writer Clarence Aaron "Todd" Robbins published an original short story titled *Spurs*. In it, he narrated the store of Jacques Courbé, a French circus midget who fell head-over-heels in love with his sensuous work-mate Jean Marie, a pretty and athletic horsewoman. The turbulent relationship between them, and the dwarf's discovery of the beauty's betrayal with her brawny male circus partner (Simon La Fleur) trigger the drama which provides the literary foundation for the later development of *Freaks* (for this and other cinematographic data consult 1). Here, this lover's triangle is present again (Figure 2).

They say that when one offends a person with a deformity (in this case a dysmorphism) or with a disability, one likewise offends all similar persons, who are the disabled brethren of the person being offended.



Figure 2: The love triangle from *Freaks*

In his renowned movie *Freaks*, the versatile film director Tod Browning elevated this axiom to its most sublime expression. He himself was a seasoned expert in the exclusive world of the travelling circus, of fairground attractions, in which he had worked as a clown, an actor ("The Living Corpse"), a magician, a dancer and an endless array of other sporadic participations in vaudeville.

But there exist other celebrated works of his which have been considered precursors to *Freaks*. In them, the director tackled harsh stories related to circus freaks. Thus, in *The Unholy Three* (1925), a midget (Harry Earles), a crazy ventriloquist (Lon Chaney) and

a strongman (Victor McLaglen) made up a band of ruthless robbers that operated under the cover of an innocent pet shop. He also did this in *The Unknown* (1927), in which a lover's triangle made up of side-show freaks appeared (Figure 3).

In 1930, Browning repeated the filming of *The Unholy Three*, this time in a sound version, this being the only recorded performance of Lon Chaney outside of silent film; he died shortly afterwards of lung cancer.

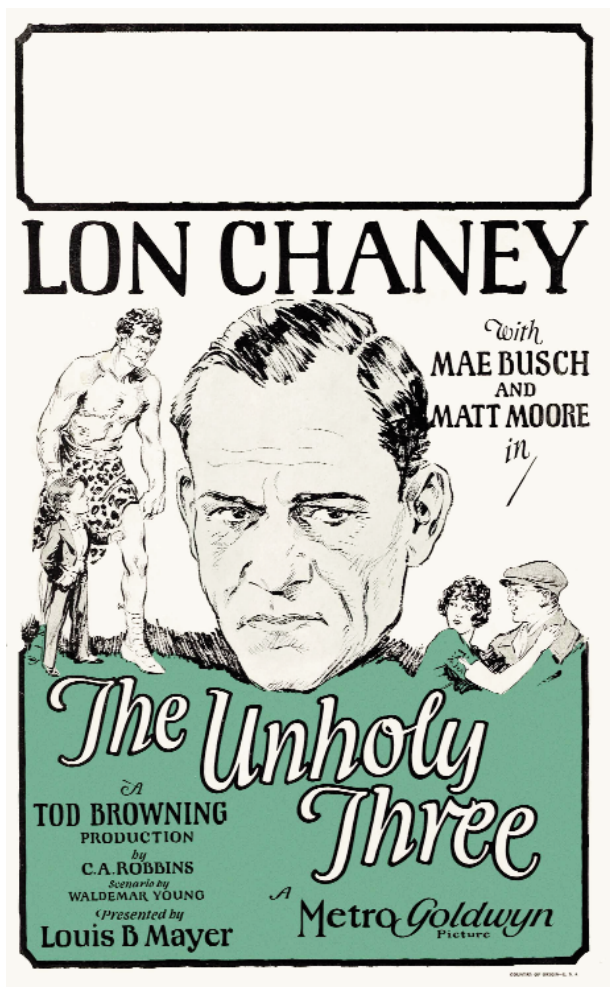


Figure 3: One of the films that was a precursor to *Freaks*, *The Unholy Three* (1925) (American Poster, window card)

### The “Freaks” and their Pathologies

Now, from a medical point of view, let's take a look at the supposed clinical cases that Browning showed us in his controversial film.

**1. The Midgets:** The character of Hans, the real main character of the film, is interpreted by Harry Earles (his real name was Kurt Schneider) (1902-1985)

(Figure 4). Previously, this very same diminutive actor had played the role of the delinquent midget in *The Unholy Three* (1925). Years later, he would also be part of the cast of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) by Victor Fleming. With him was the charming Frieda, personified by Daisy Earles, the actress also known as the “Midget Mae West”. Often, these two were erroneously taken to be a married couple. Really, they were a brother and sister who belonged to a family of German midgets (they had another two sisters with the same pathology who were named Grace and Tiny). They had emigrated to the U.S. during World War One. The four acted together on repeated occasions under the stage name of “The Dancing Dolls” and “The Doll Family”.



Figure 4: The hypophyseal dwarfs, Hans and Frieda

All of them suffered from the same disorder, known as hypophysary dwarfism, the cause of which is a deficiency (complete or partial) of the human growth hormone (GH). From the physiopathologic point of view, this problem can be due to a disorder of the hypothalamus (the absence of the factor of the hormone that liberates growth) or to a genetic mutation of the GH itself in the hypophysis. This results in individuals of short stature, with an infantile appearance, with small but proportioned head, trunk and extremities. This set of symptoms could also be due to a resistance or insensitivity to the GH. These characteristics distinguish the siblings from achondroplasiac dwarfs, whose dwarfism mainly affects the growth of the extremities (for more information, consult 2 and 3).

Achondroplasiac dwarfism is the most frequent type, and it manifests itself unquestionably already at birth. This is a hereditary bone growth disorder, of a

dominant autosomal type, although it can also occur as a consequence of spontaneous mutations. The intelligence of these individuals is usually completely normal. Rarely do any of them reach a height greater than 150 cm (for more information, consult 4).

Of all of the achondroplasiac dwarfs who performed in *Freaks*, we highlight above all the figure of Angelo Salvatore Rossitto (also known as Little Mo, or Angelino) (1908-1991), playing the role here of Little Angelo (Figure 5), the midget who danced on the guests' table with the "loving cup" which was supposed to seal the lover's bond between the pretty trapeze artist and the midget Hans. It was precisely Little Angelo who was the first to suffer the ridicule of the haughty Cleopatra, a triggering event for the merciless vengeance of the freaks. Even though he barely measured 89 cm, he was one of Hollywood's most prolific actors, participating in more than 70 films between 1927 and 1987. Extremely aggressive in the defence of the fundamental rights of his 'small' colleagues, Rositto was one of the founders of the association "Little People of America". At the end of his career, he even acted with Mel Gibson in the third film of the successful saga *Mad Max*. He passed away at 83 years of age.

**2. The Human Skeleton:** also known as Peter Robinson (1879-?) (Figure 6). In general, in the world of circus performers and fairground attractions, we can distinguish two main types of 'human skeletons':

a) Those who are probably affected by an extremely rare disease called Fibrodysplasia ossificans progressiva (Myositis Ossificans Progressiva), a group



Figure 5: Little Angelo (achondroplastic dwarf) standing on the table



Figure 6: Peter Robinson, the human skeleton (standing)

in which we highlight the classic Claude Ambroise Seurat. He exhibited himself as a phenomenon in the fairs of Europe at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His impoverished figure was also immortalized in a drawing by Francisco de Goya himself, who had the opportunity to see him perform in 1826 in a Bordeaux circus. Another noted phenomenon belonging to this group was Jonathan Richardson Bass, whose muscles and cartilage hardened progressively until his body became completely petrified. In contrast to other 'ossified' subjects, Bass always exhibited himself standing, supporting himself with harnesses against a vertical panel. According to witnesses who saw him, he never talked about pain and he fed himself perfectly on the basis of a special liquid diet. Because he could not move, he usually lived in a coffin. While he was being shown in the Huber Museum in New York, he contracted a fatal pneumonia that sent him to the grave at the age of 62. Finally, a similar situation was endured by Roy Bard, born in 1884 and completely normal until the age of 24, when the ossifying disease began on his left hip, then leaving his body totally rigid in only 4 years.

b) Other living skeletons may have suffered severe disorders of the muscular apparatus: skeletal, diverse muscular dystrophies or strange illnesses such as the so-called leprechaunism (facial dysmorphism, atrophy of the adipose subcutaneous tissue –lipoatrophy- and muscular hypotrophy), total congenital lipodystrophy (Seip-Berardinelli syndrome) or generalized lipodystrophic diabetes. Here, cases can be classified such as: Dolly Regan (1919-1994), the most famous female skeleton; or James Coffey (exhibited in Barnum & Bailey circus, with a height of 180 cm and a weight of 32 Kg); Percy Pape (of the Ringling circus, who measured 186 cm and barely weighed 31 Kg); Harry V. Lewis

(who performed in the two big circuses, measuring about 170 cm and weighing little more than 36 Kg); Isaac W. Sprangue (Barnum circus, who weighed only 20 Kg and was 168 cm tall); or Peter Robinson himself (Ringling circus, with an approximate weight of 27 Kg)<sup>5</sup>.

Another charming characteristic of these gaunt artists is that several of them married particularly fat women, side-show actress colleagues who were cast members in their shows. Pete Robinson did so with Bunny Smith, a robust beauty who reached the weight of 200 Kg. In *Freaks*, this living skeleton starred in a pleasant scene in which he handed out cigars to his circus colleagues in celebration of the birth of his daughter (fruit of the relations with his wife in fiction, "The Bearded Lady", played by the taciturn Olga Roderick "Madame Olga"). Those who knew him in life remember Pete Robinson as an affable but very stubborn fellow, especially when arguing about politics.

**3. The Bearded Lady:** her real name was Jane Barnell (1871-?). If there was an actor or actress among those who participated in the filming of *Freaks* who really regretted it, it was without a doubt Olga Roderick (Madame Olga) (Figure 7). This evident discomfort can be observed in each and every one of the scenes she performs in, even in the tender scene in which she is portrayed lying exhausted in bed surrounded by all of the other freaks, an unhappy convalescent after the birth of her daughter (another future bearded lady?), fruit of her relationship with the "Human Skeleton".

The physiopathology of hirsutism is related to a hormonal disorder frequently caused by the



Figure 7: Olga Roderick, the bearded lady after giving birth to her daughter, surrounded by her colleagues (American lobby card)

abnormal increase in androgens, which provokes alterations in the menstrual cycle, sterility, and an overall increase in body hair<sup>6</sup>.

On other occasions, it is a result of a specific phenomenon in certain coetaneous areas (hypertrichosis) and which leads to the localized increase of an exceptionally thick and robust body hair, as is the case of the famous Madame Clofullia (1831-?), who even managed to have two children, or of the Baroness Sidonia of Barczy (1866-1925), who also had offspring. There is an interesting vision of the bearded lady in Art History<sup>7</sup>.

**4. The Bird Girl:** this role was played in the film by Koo Koo (1880-?), Minnie Woolsey/Minnie Ha Ha (Figure 8), a woman who probably suffered from Virchow-Seckel syndrome. This was described for the first time in 1892 by Rudolf Virchow, who called it "bird-headed dwarfism"; later, in 1960, Seckel would characterize this condition as we know it today<sup>8</sup>.



Figure 8: Koo Koo, the bird lady

This is an extremely rare congenital disease (1/10000 live births), of an autonomic recessive nature, characterized by the delay of intrauterine growth, microcephalia, proportioned dwarfism and a peculiar facial appearance (a pointed and prominent nose, abnormally large eyes, a narrow face, lowly-planted ears, ogival palate and micrognathia). Clinodactyly and microdactyly can also be detected in the extremities. Those affected by this syndrome usually present varying degrees of mental retardation. Koo Koo suffered from severe short-sightedness, which forced her to wear thick glasses. Those who knew her remember her as having a kind-hearted and affable nature.

**5. The Hermaphrodite:** of Austrian origin, Josephine/Joseph was presented to the public with half the body of a man and the other half of a woman (Figure 9). Doubts exist as to whether this was really a case of a hermaphrodite or if it was a circus trick. It is very interesting that, like other similar freaks (as for example Albert/Alberta, 1899-1963, or Freda/Fred, 1908-?), the half of the body with the more developed musculature and masculine features was always the right side, while the left side was more delicate, hairless and generally endowed with a breast with feminine characteristics.



Figure 9: The hermaphrodite, Half-Woman, Half Man

Currently, the correct thing is to speak of intersexual states of the human species, with the term 'hermaphrodite' reserved for other species which are able to produce masculine and feminine gametes simultaneously. The presentation of these genetic disorders is extensive and varied in human beings, with the presence of diverse genital malformations such as a hyperdeveloped clitoris or an atrophied penis (for more information, consult 9). In the cases we are concerned with, there is recorded evidence that Freda/Fred had fully formed male sexual organs. In the case of Albert/Alberta, we are also witnessing the case of a man (named Harry Caro) impersonating a woman, to the point that he even went so far as to wear a false prosthesis of a female breast which he filled with birdseed<sup>10</sup>.

**6. The Microcephalics:** under the care and constant protection of Madame Tetrallini, there are three innocent characters who can be classified in this group: the sisters Jeannie Lee (1912-?) and Elvira Snow (1900-?), also known as Zip and Pip or "The Snow Twins" despite the fact that Elvira was 12 years older than her sister; also, there is the pleasant Schlitzie

(Figure 10), Simon Metz (1881-1861), the famous character in fairground attractions such as "The Last Inca" or "The Missing Link". All of them had severe mental disabilities, although their extreme kind-heartedness made them seem like helpless children.

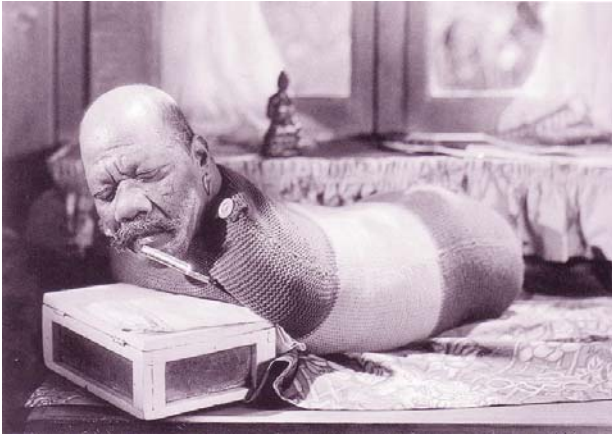
Most of the microcephalics resulted from a deficient growth of the brain during the foetal or neonatal stages, because cerebral expansion is responsible for the appropriate cranial growth. Primary causes come into play in the aetiology of this malformation (diverse syndromes of a genetic origin: Down, Cornelia de Lange syndrome [CdLS], and trisomes 13 or 18), or secondary causes (such as German measles and congenital toxoplasmosis)<sup>11</sup>.



Figure 10: The Microcephalics Schlitzie and the Snow twins (Zip and Pip)

**7. Amelia and Phocomelia:** Amelia is defined as the total absence of one or several limbs, while phocomelia is characterized by the lack of the middle and proximal segments and of the extremities, a condition that causes the hands to be directly inserted into the scapular spine and the feet into the pelvis. In most cases, the cause is related to genetic defects (as for example the Roberts phocomelia syndrome), whereas cases originating from environmental factors are much less frequent (such as those unfortunately caused by thalidomide).

Various characters who have these types of malformations appear in *Freaks*: Above all we highlight Prince Randian, "The Living Torso" (1881-1934) (Figure 11), a native of British Guyana who had all four extremities missing since birth. Married and having fathered 5 children, he starred in one of the most impressive scenes in the film, in which he was able to roll a cigarette and light it calmly using only his lips.

Figure 11: Prince Randian, *The Living Torso*

Another prodigious phenomenon included in this group was Johnny Eck, the “Half Boy” (1911-1991) (Figure 12), who was born in a twin-birth and lacked both the lower part of his abdomen and his legs (his brother was completely normal). After a long life dedicated to show business, he died at 80 years of age.

We will conclude with two beauties. First, Frances O'Connor (1914-1982) (Figure 13), also known as the “Living Venus de Milo”, who made up for the congenital absence of her arms by having an extreme ability with her feet, which enabled her to eat, drink, write and even dress herself, as did Martha Morris (?), the “Armless Wonder”, whose lack of arms had its counterpart in the phocomelia of her legs.

Figure 12: Johnny Eck, *Half Boy*

**8. The Siamese Sisters:** the twins Daisy and Violet Hilton (Figure 14) were born in Brighton in 1908. The tragedy of their life began at the very moment of birth, because they were sold by their own mother and exhibited for years in numerous fair-ground attractions. They were joined at the thighs and

Figure 13: Frances O'Connor, *Armless Girl*

at the waist, with independent vital organs, but with a common circulatory system. When they were finally freed from their exploitation by a judicial order, they became the masters of their own artistic destiny, coming to be the best-paid artists of this type in their time. The Hilton Siamese twins died together in 1969, victims of an epidemic of the Hong Kong flu.



Figure 14: The Siamese twins Daisy and Violet Hilton

As a curiosity, we will mention that the presence of Siamese sister or brothers was one of the most crowd-drawing numbers in circuses and sideshows, so much so that on some occasions they were even faked, as was the case with the famous Austrian brothers Adolph and Rudolph at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### The Remake

In 1966, the director Byron Mabe and the producer David F. Friedman carried out an extravagant repeat of the film by Tod Browning under the



American poster (three sheet) with the main characters

strange title of *She Freak*. The plot unfolds around the perversity of a circus artist (who even goes so far as to burn a midget) until Shorty the dwarf and his “troupe” of freaks decide to intervene in the affair.

Part of this article has been published in:  
<http://medicinaycine.blogspot.com/2007/08/freaks-la-parada-de-los-monstruos.html>

## References

- 1.- Cinefania. Freaks, Freaks, Freaks!!! [database on the Internet] Cinefania. Base de datos de cine fantástico [updated 2002 Jun; cited 2007 Oct 7]; [about 11 p.]. Available from: <http://www.cinefania.com/terroruniversa/index.php?id=65>
- 2.- Kemp H. Growth Hormone Deficiency. eMedicine [series on the Internet]. 2006 Apr 19 [cited 2007 Oct 7]; [about 18 p.]. Available from: <http://www.emedicine.com/ped/topic1810.htm>
- 3.- Wetterau LA, Flor A. Laron Syndrome. eMedicine [series on the Internet]. 2006 Jul 10 [cited 2007 Oct 7]; [about 17 p.]. Available from: <http://www.emedicine.com/PED/topic1277.htm>
- 4.- Grace Park JH. Achondroplasia. eMedicine [series on the Internet]. 2006 Apr 4 [cited 2007 Oct 7]; [about 20 p.]. Available from: <http://www.emedicine.com/PED/topic12.htm>
- 5.- Hartzman M. Pete Robinson “Human Skeleton” [database on the Internet]. An Encyclopedia of Novelty & Variety Performers & showfolk. Sideshow History.com fantástico [updated 2005 May 28; cited 2007 Oct 7]; [about 2 p.]. Available from: <http://www.showstory.com/robinson.skeleton.html>
- 6.- DMedicina.com. Enfermedades de la piel. Hirsutismo [homepage on the Internet]. Madrid: Unidad Editorial; 2008. [cited 2007 Oct 7]; [about 3 p.]. Available from: <http://www.dmedicina.com/salud/piel/hirsutismo.html>
- 7.- Montoya V. La mujer barbuda. Almiar. Margen Cero. [series on the Internet] [cited 2007 Oct 7]; [about 3 p.]. Available from: <http://www.margencero.com/montoya/barbuda.html>
- 8.- Siere. Síndrome de Seckel [homepage on the Internet]. Madrid: IIER- Instituto de Enfermedades raras-ISCIII- Epidemiology. [cited 2007 Oct 7]; [about 3 p.]. Available from: [http://iier.isciii.es/er/prg/er\\_bus2.asp?cod\\_enf=2451](http://iier.isciii.es/er/prg/er_bus2.asp?cod_enf=2451)
- 9.- Hutcheson J, Snyder III HM. Ambiguous Genitalia and Intersexuality. eMedicine [series on the Internet]. 2006 May 26 [cited 2007 Oct 7]; [about 26 p.]. Available from: <http://www.emedicine.com/ped/topic1492.htm>
- 10.- Hartzmann M. American Sideshow. An encyclopedia of history's most wondrous and curiously strange performers. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher / Penguin; 2005. p. 109-110.
- 11.- O'Reilly D. Microcephaly. Medline Plus. Medical Encyclopedia [database on the Internet]. Bethesda: National Library of Medicine (U.S.). [updated 2007 Sep 11; cited 2007 Oct 7]; [about 3 p.]. Available from: <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/003272.htm>