



The Museum of Wonders

If Todd Browning's "Freaks" ever were to be turned into an Italian opera — or David Lynch decided to direct a summer-stock revival of "Cabaret" — it might look a lot like Domiziano Cristophro's very bizarre, "**The Museum of Wonders.**" The characters who gather to celebrate the good fortune of the wee circus owner, Marcel (Fabiano Lioi), and his dancer bride, Salome (Maria Grazia Cucinotta), don't share the same physical deformities as sideshow attractions in "Freaks." There's a strongman, mystic, sword-swallower and fire eater, tattooed and bearded ladies, a transvestite or two, and a creepy master and mistress of ceremonies. Civilians come to their little theater to marvel at things people now take for granted. (A professional tattooed lady wouldn't stand out in any crowd, today.) It's the drama of the characters' personal attitudes toward themselves, each other and so-called normal people that Cristophro accentuates with his brilliant lighting design and special visual effects. Salome shows her true colors by adding poison to her diminutive lover's drinks and attempting to steal away with the strong man, Sansone. Marcel diagnoses his own malady before Salome can make her getaway, however, causing the other museum attractions to exact their punishment on the fiends. For all of its horror conceits, "Museum of Wonders" is an unusually artful blend of Italian genres. The acting is quite good, by any standards, and the score mixes elements of tragic opera and carnival midway music. — *Gary Dretzka*