

Amazing Barnum Revival Will Astound the World!



Christopher Capozziello for The New York Times

David Gesualdi in his Bethel, Conn., studio, creating clay designs for a life-size statue of P. T. Barnum, who was born in Bethel 199 years ago.

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BETHEL, Conn.

We interrupt our nostalgic return to Bethel, N.Y., for the greatest concert in history to travel to Bethel, Conn., birthplace of the man who dreamed up the Greatest Show on Earth.

And with a no-doubt titanic P. T. Barnum revival around the corner, it's not a bad time to reconsider the man who during his life was perhaps the most famous American on earth, has been hailed as "the architect of the modern culture industry," coined the term "show business" and never said, "There's a sucker born every minute," but didn't have to.

It was a long time ago. And if you don't count shows like "Jackass," the collected works of Sacha Baron Cohen and half of what's on the Internet, we're a long way from General Tom Thumb and hoaxes like Barnum's attempt to con people into believing that a blind, 80-ish slave named Joice Heth, whom he bought and emancipated, was really 160 years old and that she had been a nurse to George Washington.

Still, if he were around to view the summer's endless cavalcade of amusements, you could bet that Phineas Taylor Barnum would feel right at home.

Variety is reporting that [Hugh Jackman](#) will play Barnum in “The Greatest Showman on Earth,” an original musical film that focuses on one of his greatest triumphs, his promotion of the singer Jenny Lind, the Swedish Nightingale. This perhaps gives it a leg up on another Barnum biopic reported just last month.

It seems like pretty great timing for the folks from the Bethel Historical Society, who have hired a local sculptor, David Gesualdi, to create a life-size bronze statue of Barnum in honor of the 200th anniversary next year of his birth in Bethel on July 5, 2010.

Mr. Gesualdi, whose sculpture design shows Barnum, hat held high, stepping jauntily into the fray, sees him as a distinctly contemporary character, the inventor of hype and buzz, his three-ring circus his era's version of multitasking.

“He kind of walked a fine line between being honest and dishonest in his approach to putting on a show, but at the end of the day, he left everyone with a smile on their face,” the sculptor said. “He was kind of the father of modern marketing.”

Barnum didn't come up with his three-ring circus until he was already an international celebrity in his 60s, and the “sucker” quote was essentially said about him, not by him.

But, in truth, his real achievement was much more profound than what he's best known for. Born when the nation was just 34 years old and organized amusements were just about nonexistent, Barnum more or less invented the world of endless entertainments, hype and promotion that we know today.

He made money on museums, theater and lectures, promoted acts like Jenny Lind and also served as mayor of Bridgeport and in the state legislature, after crusading as a fervent abolitionist. He wrote an autobiography that sold over a million copies, becoming perhaps the first American entrepreneur to extend his brand across numerous platforms.

He realized that Americans were more interested in being entertained than in being certain that every bit of what he presented was entirely accurate. And in the process, he proved that marketing and promotion — he got 30,000 people to greet the arrival of Lind, whom almost no one in America had ever heard sing — were as important as the product being sold.

Barnum created the first reserved seats and the first matinees, transformed entertainment from rowdy male-oriented spectacles to ones that also attracted women

and children, created the first public aquarium, the first celebrity marketing campaigns, the first venues with national audiences.

At the [Barnum Museum](#) in Bridgeport, which plans to market a Barnumesque Connecticut twofer of Barnum's 200th birthday year and [Mark Twain's](#) 175th next year, the executive director and curator, Kathleen Maher, said the best comparison was to Walt Disney.

"Like Disney, he was interested in every kind of entertainment," she said. "In his day, he'd bring people from countries around the world to New York in their traditional clothing, like a human exhibition. Today we call that Epcot."

So from Michael Jackson's career to the endless marketing of Woodstock to the weird, truth-challenged theatrics of summer politics ("Step right up and see the amazing panel of death! Watch, if you dare, as it unplugs Grandma!"), there's a reason why the term "Barnumesque" survives more than a century after his death.

In his day and beyond, Barnum was more admired than reviled, and even the critics often saw him as a rough-hewn transitional figure, reflecting the raffish sensibilities of his fledgling country. So, *The Times of London*, which often depicted him as an uncouth defiler of the cultural landscape, on his death in 1891 saw him as almost a classical figure and "a typical representative of the age of transparent puffing through which modern democracies are passing."

It's proving to be a long, long passage.