

Cultural Daily

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Frankenstein's Conundrum

Sylvie · Wednesday, September 4th, 2019

At first I knew nothing at all. But I studied the ways of men and slowly I learned: how to ruin, how to hate, how to debase, how to humiliate. And at the feet of my master, I learned the highest of human skills, the skill no other creature owns: I finally learned how to lie.

— Frankenstein

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Mary Shelley, who published her novel, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, more than two centuries ago, would be startled to discover that it continues to occupy a prominent place in the world. Her *Frankenstein* began its life as a relief from boredom and sleeplessness. It was her contribution to an informal ghostwriting contest.

Mary and husband-to-be, the poet Percy Shelley, were visiting with Lord Byron on the shores of Lake Geneva during the unseasonably wet summer of 1816 that kept them all indoors. The contest was Byron's idea, as anti-dote to the rain. Allegedly inspired by a nightmare or a waking dream, Mary's resulting *Frankenstein*, initially written as a short story, revealed itself to have longer legs and be far less a ghost story than a lesson in humanity.

So forget Boris Karloff and those filmed *Frankensteins*, famous but shallow commercial distortions of the original. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was always about much more. London's 2011 National Theatre production of Nick Dear's adaptation of Mary Shelley's novel (superbly recorded for NT Live and featuring Benedict Cumberbatch), hewed closely to her book and intent, and was deeper and more interesting.



Michael Manuel, center, in *Frankenstein* at A Noise Within.

This adaptation has now surfaced as the opener of Pasadena's A Noise Within's ambitious 2019-20 season. (Next in line will be the equally tantalizing choice of August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean* and Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*.) Faithful to Shelley's novel in its profoundly human terms, this *Frankenstein* is a complex examination of the nature of good and evil. The hideous creature that scientist Victor Frankenstein (Kasey Mahaffy) created in his hubristic attempt to best nature, prompts the question about who the real monster might be: the egocentric scientist or his miserable creation?

After all, The Creature, as the “monster” is named if he is named at all, is an innocent. He didn’t ask to be created, but now that he’s alive he possesses human instincts. He hungers for a friend, he wants to find love, he wants a lover and he wants to be *good*. Fear and rejection are thrust upon him by others because his unfinished physical appearance does not meet the prevailing standards of acceptable looks, let alone beauty. And we all know how fear and rejection corrupt.

The idea is not new, but Mary Shelley’s creation was unusual. It straddled a fine line and walked away with the popular imagination. While Michael Michetti’s perceptive direction and Dear’s economical stage adaptation combine to deliver a polished and moving production at A Noise Within, there are other artists involved that have also made major contributions.



l-r, Harrison White & Michael Manuel in *Frankenstein* at A Noise Within.

Chief among them is designer François-Pierre Couture for his inventive setting of suspended four-by-fours, representing the forests and other landscapes and interiors that are visited by the play. Locales are varied by the simple use of rearrangements of the massive beams or shifts in their positions. Complementing what is already a startling visual is Jared A. Sayeg’s furtive or angular or simply shadowy lighting that intensifies the disquieting eeriness of the general atmosphere.

And then there is actor Michael Manuel. His height, big voice and anguished roar are precise counterparts in his nuanced delivery as The Creature, one who emanates a taste for kindness as quickly as he/it gives in to ruthlessness in the face of danger. It is a vivid performance that benefits from Angela Santori’s make-up that wisely refrains from going too far with the creepiness. Manuel is the large, imperfect hunk, who lumbers and terrifies more than he walks (Rhonda Kohl contributed the effective movement), but is not so repellent that we do not warm up to the intelligence of his words when his mind finally finds them. The early sequence of his primitive awakening and early moments of struggling self-discovery is particularly well done.



Michael Manuel and a blindfolded Van Brunelle in *Frankenstein* at A Noise Within.

Most remarkable perhaps is the absence of hesitation with which Shelley, Dear and Manuel show us The Creature’s response to fear—the immediacy with which he kills, instantly shedding all allegiance to anyone when rejected or endangered. (A rape scene, cut from the production, demonstrates even more starkly this capacity for instant amorality, as if his maker simply forgot to inject a component of morality into the final product.)

The balance of the cast is strong, its standouts being Erika Soto’s Elizabeth, Victor’s empathetic bride-to-be, and Harrison White as the blind and kindly retired Professor De Lacey, who compassionately teaches The Creature almost everything he/it knows.



Michael Manuel & Erika Soto in *Frankenstein* at A Noise Within.

If there is one regret, it is that neither Dear’s script nor Michetti’s production find a way around the anti-climactic ending, when The Creature and Victor Frankenstein, who have pursued one another in mutual agony, find themselves alone together at the North Pole.

“You and I, we are one,” says The Creature. It’s the end of the road and both know it. It cries out for a scene of mutual destruction in a terminal blizzard which is implied, but not delivered. I

guess we can't have everything. Or... couldn't we?

Top image: Michael Manuel, center, as The Creature in Frankenstein at A Noise Within.

Photos by Craig Schwartz

WHAT: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, adapted by Nick Dear

WHERE: A Noise Within, 3352 E. Foothill Blvd., Pasadena, CA 91107.

WHEN: Today, 7:30pm; Sep. 6, 8pm; Sep. 7, 2 & 8pm; Sep. 8, 2pm. Ends Sep. 8.

HOW: Tickets start at \$25, available on line at www.anoisewithin.org or by phone at 626.356.3121 or in person at the box office, 3352 E. Foothill Blvd., Pasadena CA 91107. Students (w/ID), an hour before performance: \$20.

Groups (10+): \$25-\$50, up to 35% off; students, from \$18. Ask for Deborah Strang.

PARKING: In the adjacent Metro Line parking structure.

RUNNING TIME: Two hours, no intermission.

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