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Serious take on Frankenstein opens

2 musicals about Frankenstein, a drama and a comedy, open on and off-Broadway

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NEW YORK (AP) _ An icebound ship somewhere in the Arctic spots a dog sled gliding across the ice with an astonishingly large man _ a creature made from stolen bones and body parts and reanimated by Victor Frankenstein. It is the opening of Mary Shelley's 1818 Gothic novel, "Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus," a story told and retold and now on stage in two musicals.

"Frankenstein," a musical based on Shelley's novel at off-Broadway's 37 Arts Theater, starring Hunter Foster in the title role, Steve Blanchard as the creature and Christiane Noll as Dr. Frankenstein's love interest, Elizabeth.

This dramatic interpretation of the fantastical tale is not to be confused with Mel Brooks' "Young Frankenstein," a musical based on his riotous 1974 film parody. It opens on Broadway Nov. 8 at the Hilton Theatre and stars another Foster, Hunter's younger sister Sutton.

The two may be alike in name, but aside from the sibling connection, the shows couldn't be more different.

"Frankenstein" is a dramatic adaptation, stretching across ages and continents to recount the tale of the doomed Dr. Frankenstein, and includes details and nuances from the novel long forgotten in the Hollywood culture that produced a string of Frankenstein movies beginning with the 1931 classic starring Boris Karloff.

The off-Broadway show delves into the creature's emotional growth and some brutal murders committed



along the way.

It's serious stuff.

The Brooks musical, however, is anything but. You know that plot _ it's the story of Frederick Frankenstein, who inherits the Transylvania digs of his famous grandfather, the man who created the monster.

Shelley's novel tells the story of a scientist who learns how to reanimate flesh and creates a man by stitching

together body parts taken from the dead. The creature then rises up against his creator.

The book is said to have spawned an entire genre of horror literature, and its themes have been borrowed widely in theater and film. Some adaptations are truer to the book than others, and some are downright spoofs. The most famous Frankenstein is nothing like Shelley's description — Karloff's bolted, black-suited monster. Along the way, popular culture has even confused the "creature" with the creator, and the monster is now widely known as "Frankenstein," when that's the name of the doctor who made him.

Creators of the "Frankenstein" musical, Mark Baron (music) and Jeffrey Jackson (book and lyrics), said they wanted to return to Shelley's roots because there just wasn't any need for elaboration.

"This story has everything you'd ever need, right there in the text. We just had to find the right way to tell the story," Jackson says. "This story is really about our universal desire to conquer death, to hang on."

Baron and Jackson say the production is something of a hybrid that asks more of the audience than a traditional musical. There isn't much time wasted on location and setting. Instead, the show exists on one industrial-looking set with a large video screen and a massive light fixture that could almost create the lightning used to bring the creature to life.

Also, major scenes familiar to the audience — including the famous lightning bolt/come alive scene — occur offstage. And Frankenstein does not spend stage time carting around limbs to create his creature.

The actors move in and out of a Greek-like chorus and utilitarian period clothes to play several different roles. The musical also stars Mandy Bruno as Justine, the family's governess, Eric Michael Gillett as Victor's father and Becky Barta as Victor's mother.

But as the creature, Blanchard wears no makeup.

Director Bill Fennelly said it was a conscious choice, one of his conditions for working on the show.

"The idea behind not using prosthetics or makeup is rooted in the idea that I think we create our own monsters

based on things we don't understand, deep-rooted fears and things we don't see," he says.

Blanchard, who played the Beast in Broadway's "Beauty and the Beast," is thankful he's onstage without elaborate costuming, and drew from more personal experiences to flesh out his character. Even without the added makeup, he acts as if he's not quite human, walking awkwardly in jerky movements. Blanchard says he plays the role with the feeling that his skin is stitched too tight.

"Imagine waking up one day in the same bones: You're flesh and blood, but you have no soul, and you have no idea where it went. ... You're simply a reanimated piece of housing that houses your muscles," he says.

The creature in "Young Frankenstein," though, hams it up for laughs. Shuler Hensley appears as the monster, played in the movie by Peter Boyle. Roger Bart appears as the young Frankenstein (the Gene Wilder role). The musical also stars Megan Mullally (of TV's "Will & Grace") playing Elizabeth (Madeline Kahn in the film), and Christopher Fitzgerald as Igor (Marty Feldman in the movie).

Foster, one of many actors who played Leo Bloom — a role originated by Matthew Broderick — in "The Producers," was initially determined to play the title role in Brooks' new musical.

"It's one of my favorite films of all time," he says. "I kept hearing, 'Oh Matthew's going to do it, Matthew Broderick is going to play the part,' and even then I said, 'Well ... if Matt doesn't do it ...,' and then my sister called and she had gotten cast as the love interest. That sort of took care of that." No way was Foster going to get romantic with sis.

But Foster says he's really pleased with his current role off-Broadway, and took the part in "Frankenstein" because he thought it was a great story and concept.

The show's creators say they aren't worried about being eclipsed by the Brooks' production across town, and the two musicals complement one another.

"It's a win-win for the audience this year, and we already have people who have made it a theater weekend for themselves," says Jackson.

