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AN AP ARTS REVIEW:

'Frankenstein' brings classic to life

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NEW YORK (AP) — No sexy Inga, no green monster — and what is most important, no \$450 seats.

"Frankenstein," a new musical now on view at 37 Arts, does have a last name in common with Mel Brooks' Broadway version, however. Hunter Foster has the part of Victor Frankenstein in this production, while his sister, Sutton Foster, can be seen a few blocks away in the role of Inga.

Playing the serious Victor is a departure for Foster, best known for his comic turns in "Urinetown," "Little Shop of Horrors" and "The Producers," yet he is completely captivating in his portrayal of the tortured scientist whose creation brings not acclaim, but despair.

No comic romp, this is a sincere and faithful retelling of the Mary Shelley novel "Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus."

The story's hard edges are reflected in the cold and industrial scenic design by Kevin Judge. Two metal mesh staircases — one short and one tall — dominate the stage, which also makes elegant use of projection screens to enhance the various locations or illustrate the passage of time. The lighting, by Thom Weaver, is starkly atmospheric, and, despite being slightly reminiscent of a heavy-metal arena concert, quite effective as well.

The spare set contrasts effectively with the beautiful 18th-century costumes by Emily Pepper — Christiane Noll's gowns are particularly lovely — and leaves the storytelling, which is almost all sung-through, to the universally talented cast. The hard-edged pop score, by



Steve Blanchard and Christiane Noll in *Frankenstein*. Photo by Carol Rosegg.

Mark Baron, is heavy on the orchestration, despite the use of only six musicians. Most melodies are stuffed with lyrics (by Jeffrey Jackson, who also wrote the book) in pattern-song style.

Memorable numbers include the anthemlike "The Coming of the Dawn," poignantly sung by Foster, and two lovely ballads: "Dear Victor,"

flawlessly voiced by Noll, and "Your Father's Eyes," heartbreakingly expressed by Eric Michael Gillett as Victor's father, Alphonse.

Complementing Foster's performance as Frankenstein is the equally strong Noll as his fiancée, Elizabeth. She is the perfect mix of strength and vulnerability with a soprano so rich and enveloping that you wonder how Victor could ever leave her side.

Supporting cast members Mandy Bruno, as the servant Justine, and Struan Erlenborn, as Victor's young brother, William, are also standouts. Their scene together is one of the more affecting in the show.

Commanding the stage, however, is Steve Blanchard, as the "Creature." No green face paint, neck bolts, or platform shoes — just a recently hanged man whose body is claimed by Frankenstein and who is reanimated into a monster clearly in excruciating pain, both physical and mental. The depth of his despair is always apparent — especially in songs such as "The Walking Nightmare" and the agonizing "These Hands." Blanchard, perhaps best known for playing the Beast in Broadway's "Beauty and the Beast," is completely emotionally unmasked and stripped bare.

This "Frankenstein" brings the classic story thrillingly to life. No green giant, but you won't miss him.

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