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The Journal News

This 'Frankenstein' is more man than monster



Hunter Foster in "Frankenstein," a musical based on Mary Shelley's novel. Photo by Carol Rosegg.

**By JACQUES LE SOURD
THE JOURNAL NEWS**

The theater world is buzzing about the two musical "Frankensteins."

It's a good idea to see the little one first if, like me, you don't have much background in the "Frankenstein" tradition.

There's the big, \$20-million "Young Frankenstein," courtesy of Mel Brooks, that opens next week at the cavernous Hilton Theatre on 42nd Street.

And there's the little, vest-pocket-sized "Frankenstein" that opened

last night at 37 Arts, off 10th Avenue.

The big one is based on Brooks' cult movie. It makes fun of the long cinematic tradition of scary, and not so scary, "Frankenstein" movies.

The little one is a serious stage adaptation of Mary

Shelley's "Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus," first published in London in 1818.

The big one stars Tony Award winner Sutton Foster. The little one stars her brother, Hunter Foster.

Hunter Foster's "Frankenstein" is an elegant production in which the monster isn't green and is not held together by bolts. As played by Steve Blanchard, this oversized "creature" is downright handsome, despite a few discreet ticks and twitches.

And Frankenstein, the creature's creator, is a neat professorial type who basically has the same unusual gift as the hero of this season's "Pushing Daisies" on TV: He can bring the dead back to life.

The story, adapted by Gary P. Cohen and told through book and lyrics by Jeffrey Jackson, is dark but consistently engaging. It concerns itself with the emotions of real human beings, including the creature who has been executed for murder, rather than a standard blood-and-guts adventure.

The almost sung-through musical has a score by Mark Baron, which will put you in mind of "Les Miserables."

This is not an intimate score with soft little ballads. It's written as a large musical in a contemporary Broadway style, with lots of choral numbers. Even songs that deliver what is essentially dialogue for two people have the singers singing full-blast into each other's faces.

The approach does not dim the show's considerable entertainment value.

Is this indeed a musical for kids? Most assuredly, though probably not for anyone under 10.

Director Bill Fennelly maintains a remarkably consistent tone for the piece, on a sleek black set by Kevin Judge that is enhanced by the stately real-life projections of Michael Clark, and the dazzling lighting of Thom Weaver.

As Frankenstein - who is, of course, the scientist and not his creature - Foster conveys the tortures of guilt at what he has done.

He is visited by the consoling ghost of his father Alphonse (Eric Michael Gillett), and by his wife, Elizabeth (Christiane Noll), who isn't sure quite what he's up to.

Frankenstein is no mad scientist, but one who has taken science into new and uncharted territory that is rife with ethical problems.

When the lonely creature begs him to fashion a companion for him, Frankenstein does so, only to be overcome by remorse. He murders the creature's bride, and unleashes a chase sequence that would seem to be all about revenge. Yet the show ends on a note of surprising tenderness.

What is amazing about this show is how much fun it turns out to be, while it presents a front of supreme seriousness in its faithful adherence to the novel.

This is painless homework for next week's big "Frankenstein."

"Frankenstein"
Running time: Two hours, with one intermission.
Ticket prices: \$41.25 to \$69.25.
Theater: 37 Arts, 450 W. 37th St.
Phone: 212-307-4100.

