

## They've created a monster

BY PETER FILICHA  
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

You'd think that two unknowns who wrote a musical version of "Frankenstein" would be buying voodoo dolls of Mel Brooks and boxes full of pins.

Not at all. Mark Baron and Jeffrey Jackson, respectively the composer and wordsmith of the new off-Broadway musical at the 37 Arts Theatre, are very grateful that Brooks chose this season to premiere his musical, "Young Frankenstein."

"We view Mel's show as a complete blessing," says Baron. "After all, there are so few off-Broadway shows that pop up on anyone's radar before they open. We've already received a lot of attention simply because Mel's show is up the road five streets away."

"All that the two shows share are the three syllables of the word 'Frankenstein,'" says Jackson. "We're not in competition, anyway, because Brooks' show is a spoof, while ours is a serious story."

Both shows are in previews. "Frankenstein" opens tomorrow, while "Young Frankenstein" opens

exactly one week later.

Baron, 38, and Jackson, 46, aren't even upset that Shuler Hensley, who played The Creature during their show's development, is now playing the same role in Brooks' musical.

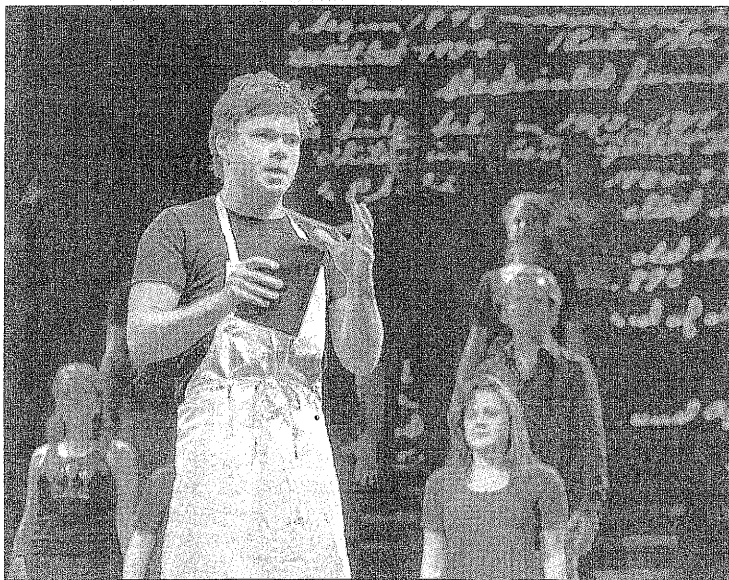
They're amused at yet another casting coincidence: Hunter Foster, who will portray Victor Frankenstein, is the brother of Sutton Foster, who's appearing as Inga, the yodeling lab assistant, in "Young Frankenstein."

Hunter Foster was also Leo Bloom in Brooks' "The Producers" for much of its Broadway run.

"I asked Sutton if Mel even knew we were around, and she thinks he doesn't," Foster says with a smile. "Whatever attention he gets, we're right behind him, the little-bitty fish that swims along with the shark and gets whatever food the shark tosses off."

This "Frankenstein" began nine years ago, when Baron was working as musical director for Plays-in-the-Park in Edison, not far from his Metuchen home. Gary P. Cohen, the troupe's producing director, had an

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MIA SONG/THE STAR-LEDGER

Hunter Foster, as Victor Frankenstein, during a rehearsal of "Frankenstein," a new off-Broadway musical.

## MONSTER

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### One 'Frankenstein' helps another

idea: a musical version of "Frankenstein." Baron said yes.

"Many people told me I was crazy. I responded by saying there aren't many stories that every man, woman or child on this planet has heard of. So Gary and I started and wrote a show that emulated the bigger musicals of the time — 'Les Miz' and 'Phantom,'" he says, looking a bit embarrassed that he followed the trend.

In 1999, Jackson, an actor from Gladstone, performed at Plays-in-the-Park. Cohen and Baron recruited him for a reading of "Frankenstein" as Victor, creator of The Creature. An enthusiastic Jackson suggested some rewrites and a novel way to market the show: While musicals routinely offer backers' auditions, Jackson said a DVD would allow producers to watch at their leisure. He'd direct it, too, with his rewrites in place.

"I'd say 50 percent of the words in the show were mine," says Cohen, "and 50 percent were Jeff's."

Hensley, a resident of Montclair who was then playing Jud Fry in "Oklahoma!" on Broadway, was en-

### NEW YORK STAGE

#### Frankenstein

**Where:** 37 Arts Theatre, 450 W. 37th St., New York

**When:** Now in previews, opens tomorrow. Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays at 8 p.m., Wednesdays at 3 and 8 p.m., Saturdays at 2 and 8 p.m., and Sundays at 3 p.m.

**How much:** \$41.25-\$69.25. Call (212) 307-4100 or visit [www.FrankensteintheMusical.com](http://www.FrankensteintheMusical.com).

gaged to play The Creature. He's since been replaced by Steve Blanchard.

Playing Elizabeth, who's romantically linked to Victor, is Christiane Noll, who originated a similar role in "Jekyll & Hyde." The Maplewood resident says Elizabeth is a deeper Victorian heroine.

"She's a strong, sassy lady, the epitome of Mary Shelley," Noll says, referring to the author of the 1816 novel. "Mary was the original feminist, and Elizabeth is very much like her."

Baron and Jackson express delight and surprise that the show is on board. Back in 2003, the collaborators had reached a creative impasse. Says Baron, "Gary is a scholar of horror movies, and he wanted to continue on that route, while Jeff and I leaned towards the father-and-son aspects of the story."

"We also wanted to stress that people must take responsibility for their actions," says Jackson. "The story relates to the modern ethical debates about science, too. Do we cross certain barriers or not? We've kept the show in the 19th century, but a modern audience will be reminded of things like cloning. Our message is not that science is bad. We're just saying that it needs to be practiced with humanity."

The difference of interpretation caused Cohen to leave the show, though he retains a credit for original story adaptation. "The show moved away from the traditional musical I envisioned," says Cohen. "I acknowledge that Jeff is the better writer for this type of show."

Last year, David S. Stone offered to do a reading at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark, where he is a board member. The next day, two producers "pulled out contracts," says Baron. Stone signed on as co-producer, with Bill Fennelly directing.

"Everyone has an idea of what 'Frankenstein' is, mostly a green monster with bolts coming out of his neck," says Baron. "We'd like to think that when they leave our theater, that's when they'll finally know what 'Frankenstein' is really about."

*Peter Filichia may be reached at [pfilichia@starledger.com](mailto:pfilichia@starledger.com) or (973) 392-5995.*

