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The New Prometheus and His Spurned Creation

By STEVEN McELROY

One is a green-skinned giant capable only of inarticulate grunting (and dancing), and the other has the eloquence of a poet, though his suffering has made him a murderer. Which of these creatures — both formed in laboratories and both currently appearing onstage in New York — is the real Frankenstein? Actually, neither, though for almost two centuries playwrights and filmmakers have helped us to forget that the name belongs to the creator and not his progeny.

“Our identity of the creature as the title character does, of course, shift the focus from man to monster, reversing Shelley’s intention,” the literary scholar Karen Karbiener wrote in her introduction to the 2003 Barnes & Noble Classics edition of Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel, “Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus,” completed when Shelley was only 19.

The producers and creative staff behind the other “Frankenstein,” the Off Broadway musical now in previews and opening on Thursday at 37 Arts — not to be confused with “The New Mel Brooks Musical Young Frankenstein” on Broadway (also in previews, opening on Nov. 8) — want to clear up some of the misconceptions about Shelley’s book, about Victor Frankenstein, and about the creature that was neither green nor incoherent in the original novel.

“It really is amazing when you think about the Universal film in 1931 and how it’s embedded in people’s minds as the story,” said Steve Blanchard, who plays the Creature Off Broadway. “If you go and read the novel, you think, ‘Oh my God, this is what she wrote?’ because it has absolutely nothing to do with what we were shown in the movie.”

Jeffrey Jackson, who wrote the book and lyrics for “Frankenstein,” is not a purist and had no fighting words for the creative team behind “Young Frankenstein,” which could be considered the epitome of freewheeling adaptations.

“I think it’s going to be great,” he said of Mr. Brooks’s show, standing in the back of the theater at 37 Arts a few days before previews of his began. “But to me that’s a transfer of a film that was spoofing old Hollywood



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Hunter Foster plays Victor Frankenstein, the “new Prometheus,” in a new musical production at 37 Arts

films. Even those old Boris Karloff films weren’t based on the novel.”

Though Mr. Jackson has also made some adjustments to Shelley’s story, he said he did not alter the intentions, themes or characterizations of the original. “The art of adaptation is not just literal transcription,” he said. “You have to know when to bend a little bit. We’ve taken a few dramatic liberties, but I think I can confidently say this is certainly one of the most, if not the most, faithful adaptations on film, stage or television of the novel.”

The composer Mark Baron and the producers, led by Douglas C. Evans and Gerald Goehring, agreed that they were behind the truest adaptation of Shelley’s work to date. “We joke that there are no bolts in our show, and really it’s true,” Mr. Goehring said. “It’s really a relationship-driven show, and that is what the novel is.”



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Jeffrey Jackson, left, wrote the book and lyrics and Mark Baron the music for the show.

Mr. Evans, the other half of the Goehring Evans Productions team, agreed. “It’s relationship-driven,” he said. “It’s emotionally driven, it is not camp, it is not parody, it is not fluff and it’s not one-offs.”

Surely there is no crime in creating Halloween costumes, horror movies and Broadway musicals that freely adapt ideas from Shelley’s book. Mary Shelley has turned over in her

Frankenstein’s monster, with no bolts or green head.

grave more than once, no doubt. But from an 1823 play by Richard Brinsley Peake called “Presumption, or the Fate of Frankenstein,” produced at the English Opera House, to the current production of “Young Frankenstein,” Shelley’s creature, who tells his own lonely story in the novel, has almost always been robbed of the power of speech.

“It was dark when I awoke; I felt cold also, and half-frightened, as it were instinctively, finding myself so desolate,” the creature tells Frankenstein, recounting his first moments of life. Immediately spurned by his horrified maker, the creature must teach himself how to survive: “I was a poor, helpless, miserable wretch; I knew, and could distinguish, nothing; but feeling pain invade me on all sides, I sat down and wept.”

Since Shelley’s creature was as much man as monster, with the emotions of a human being, her novel questions the ethical implications of Frankenstein’s desire to create life. “He is messing with nature and God and creates a being that actually goes and kills people,” said Hunter Foster, who plays Frankenstein. “He has to take responsibility for those crimes.”

By bringing the novel to life in the shadow of Mr. Brooks’s musical, the team behind “Frankenstein” is taking a gamble. The last time a serious version of the story opened onstage in New York — the 1981 Broadway drama written by Victor Gialanella — it closed after just one regular performance.

But “Frankenstein” is about ambition, after all. “Victor is the stem cell researcher of his day,” Mr. Jackson said. “The guy who was saying: ‘You know what? I’m going out there on a limb and I’m going to do this thing.’”

The show is in previews. It opens on Thursday at 37 Arts, 450 West 37th Street, Manhattan; (212)307-4100, ticketmaster.com.

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