



## DIVA TALK: Chatting with Frankenstein's Christiane Noll



### CHRISTIANE NOLL

Christiane Noll possesses one of the more versatile voices in the musical theatre today: She can thrillingly belt out a Broadway ballad (she and Linda Eder provided one of the more exciting moments in the original production of *Jekyll & Hyde* when they let their voices soar on "In His Eyes"), and she can also handle the challenging soprano solo "Glitter and Be Gay" with ease (Noll's performance of that Bernstein favorite will be preserved on an upcoming new solo recording). For now, however, fans of the multi-talented singing actress can catch Noll in the new Off-Broadway musical

*Frankenstein*, which also boasts several other Broadway favorites: The Producers' Hunter Foster as Victor Frankenstein and *Beauty and the Beast*'s Steve Blanchard as the "Creature." Noll plays Elizabeth Lavenza in the Mark Baron-Jeffrey Jackson-Gary P. Cohen musical, which officially opened at 37 Arts earlier this week. The morning after her first preview in the mostly sung-through musical, I had the pleasure of chatting with Noll about her latest stage project as well as her recent work in the Signature Theatre's production of *The Witches of Eastwick*. That interview follows.

Question: How did your first Frankenstein preview go?

Christiane Noll: It went! [Laughs.] ... Nothing fell on anybody, nobody forgot anything, and the audience seemed to enjoy themselves. Two weeks of rehearsal, a week of tech work — I'm pretty proud of this.

Question: How did this role come about for you?

Noll: [The producers] sent me the script. I went in and had an audition and got word later that afternoon that they were interested but that they needed to secure who their Frankenstein was. Then, once they did, I got a phone call. It was really kind of easy. Some of these things drag on, where they eventually have to pay you [because] they bring you in so many times. So this was sort of a nice, refreshing experience in that regard.

Question: Frankenstein has been presented in so many different forms. What do you think sets this version apart from the others?

Noll: I think [in] most of the other forms that it has taken, they've strayed from the [Mary] Shelley novel. They've been inspired more by the Boris Karloff film. That is what created the iconic version of Frankenstein, and [why] we even call the creature "Frankenstein." We, as a pop culture, sort of forget that the Creature is just a creature. He doesn't have a name. The doctor that created him is [named] Frankenstein. This [production] really goes back to the original Shelley novella. We're trying to be as true to that as possible.

Question: Did you get a chance to go back and read the Shelley novel?

Noll: I tried to. It's not an easy read, I'll tell ya! [Laughs.] I don't know if you've tried to get through it. There are so many interesting moments with it. Hunter [Foster] and I were both laughing because [Shelley] never really talks about making the creature. All of a sudden, there he is. [The doctor] sort of describes [the Creature], but the process by which he goes about it [is] never really [explained]. . . One sentence he's not there, and the next sentence he's there. Then Frankenstein goes, "Oh, no! What have I done?" and he runs away. Then he goes back in and the Creature is gone, and he says, "Oh, good. It's gone. No worries for me." And you go, "Wait, wait... what?" We had to go back a couple of pages. "Is that really just what happened?" . . . It was also written almost 200 years ago, so the language is very flowery. She was 19 when she wrote it. If you think about a 19-year-old writing something that is as enduring as this story has become...

Question: I've heard that you have a great scene with the Creature, and I was wondering what that scene is like for you to perform.

Noll: Well, you know, [Steve] Blanchard's not bad to snuggle up against. [Laughs.] I like that scene because it — I won't say it crosses the line, that's not the right word — but it goes into some interesting territory where you're sitting there going, "Wait, did I just notice... was she kinda...?" It's not just a clear-cut, straightforward kind of moment. There's a lot of confusion, but I don't want to give it away. I'm kind of proud of it. I think it's fun. But Steve Blanchard's kind of dreamy, and that body's not a bad thing!

Question: How would you describe the character of Elizabeth?

Noll: My take on Elizabeth definitely stems more from the original novel. What was fascinating — and I was



Christiane Noll in Frankenstein  
photo by Carol Rosegg

thrilled to discover this because it was sort of my instinct — when I went back and read the book, I came to find out that it was actually the third version that Shelley created. She went back and rewrote it. [The first time she wrote it] she finished it in 1817, and then it was published in 1818. Then, I guess in '23 she did some revisions, and then in '31 she did even more revisions. She had originally conceived Elizabeth as a very strong, smart, grounded, focused, a bit sassy, hazel-eyed, dark-haired thing — a lot like herself. She was one of the first feminists, really. I think she got nervous that people were starting to think, "Oh, you wrote yourself into this book." It was very much like herself. In the version that we have, all of a sudden Elizabeth has become this blonde, angelic, beautiful thing to be admired. It's really just drippy as far as I'm concerned. I'm just not interested in being a stand-by-your-man Victorian thing. That, I have visited once before, so I don't need to do that again. [Laughs.] But [it is interesting] to get in touch with her sensuality and her fierce quality and her aggressive nature, but still putting it in the constraints of Victorian society. It was how to take a more modern approach, but you wrap it up in that kind of clothing, in that kind of style, how she has to carry herself. It's not period, but it is. If you come to see it, you'll see what I'm talking about. There are very much rules about how one carries oneself, but I didn't want the attitude of the character and how she behaved and how she responded to things to also go in that stereotypical fashion — so that's what I've been trying to mess around with.

Question: What is the score like?

Noll: I think it's rather sweeping. . . . It's not necessarily a pop score . . . . It was 282 pages when they plopped the thing down. It's very operatic in its scale, but we're not necessarily singing it like that, but there is a drive to it. There are pop elements. It's kind of difficult [to describe]. Hunter was comparing it a bit to the Les Miz sound, but even that's not quite right.

Question: Is it completely sung-through?

Noll: There are some scenes, but most of it is sung-through.

Question: Tell me about working with Hunter. Have you two worked together before?

Noll: We did, actually. I can't remember if he was still in college, but we found ourselves involved with this amazing production of South Pacific that was directed by Peter Lawrence and choreographed by Robbie Marshall and starred Marin Mazzie. Ann Harada was Bloody Mary, and Leila Florentino was Liat. We just had this amazing group of people, and Hunter and I were the native couple upstage. [Laughs.] We were both either in college or just out of college.

Question: Where was that done?

Noll: That was at the Birmingham Theatre in Michigan, outside of Detroit.

Question: Foster's part in Frankenstein is a different kind of role for him.

Noll: I'm so proud of him. [Hunter's wife] Jen [Cody] and I were talking about it last night. It really is a bit of a departure in terms of what he is known for. It's just a huge [role]. There's so much. I said it was 282 pages, but Steve and he have, I'd say, 90% of that. [The show is] about Victor and the Creature, so he's got a lot to do, and I'm really proud of what he's doing.

Question: You seem to be drawn to Gothic productions a bit.

Noll: I'm not really drawn. . . . [Laughs.] I haven't done one in ten years, so I'm not drawn at all. Although I am laughing [thinking], "Let's see, I played a serial killer when I played Lizzie Borden, and I was just a witch [in Witches of Eastwick." So there is something about the characters that I've taken. But I did Urinetown, and that, in itself, is kind of interesting and darker — but [the character of Hope] was kind of a kook. I've been all over the place. But, obviously, there are going to be comparisons, and that's been the first thing that people have been wanting to mention. "Well, you did Jekyll. It feels just like you did that." Well, [they are] similar — even reading the Stevenson novel and the Shelley novel, it is of a genre. It is a Gothic thriller. That's what it is. My skin tone and my carriage lend itself to the Victorian era, so I know how to work a bustle. If I get that opportunity to play in that era, I know how to walk around in those kinds of dresses! [Laughs.] I wouldn't necessarily say I'm particularly drawn to them, but I'm thrilled for the opportunity to explore that time period again — and certainly the functionality of that character. The character I'm playing serves a similar purpose in this story as it served in [Jekyll and Hyde], but [learning] how to approach it differently and at a different point in my life has been fun. Certainly, I was like, at first, "I don't know if this is a good idea. This could be a bad idea on a lot of different levels." [Laughs.] But I really trust the people that I'm with and what we're doing. It's just an incredible company, [who are] all capable of so much and bring so much to it. I think it has

possibilities. I think a lot of people want to see it work. Jekyll ran five years. That was, I would say, successful. Whether it was your taste or not is something else. Everybody has their opinion in terms of whether they liked it or not, but it certainly ran.

The other attempts at the vampire musicals lately, I think, have kind of proven that, to approach it on a large scale, [may not work]... We're really trying to get back to the storytelling. We don't have a big budget. Doing it Off-Broadway could be a good thing, as opposed to all of a sudden having \$15 million to play with. When you have that amount of money, then you feel that you need to spend it. All of that swallows up the story, and you lose sight of what it's about — and theatre ultimately is about storytelling. So we're really able to get back to [telling the story], hopefully without all of the distractions that cause people to start giggling when it's supposed to be a serious moment.

Question: It does seem to be the season of Frankenstein, with Young Frankenstein not too far from you guys.

Noll: Yeah, hallelujah! [Laughs.] Long may they reign. I've said this before, but I think it's funny. The more people think they're buying tickets to Young Frankenstein and end up at our theatre, we'll be in good shape. [Laughs.]



Christiane Noll in *The Witches of Eastwick*  
photo by Scott Suchman

Question: You had mentioned *Witches of Eastwick*. I was wondering what that experience was like for you.

Noll: Oh God, it was wonderful! Just wonderful. [It was] so fun... and I got to fly!

Question: Was that enjoyable flying around the theatre?

Noll: I've been wanting to fly since [I can remember]... I've actually been looking around. I'm too tall for *Wendy*, so what else could I possibly play where I can fly? It was so much fun. The four leads — [Marc] Kudisch and [Emily] Skinner and Jackie Piro and I — all really smart and really strong and opinionated. It was a little bit disconcerting at first, thinking, "Are we gonna have some problems because we all have some really strong opinions?" But thankfully we were all so on the same page from the first day that it was a real creative experience. I know there's been talk — everyone is always, "Oh, we're bringing it to Broadway." I really hope they do because it was so smart. John Dempsey did a brilliant job with turning that script into something that was just really fun and dark, but funny, and not in a campy way. I was really proud of that, so I hope I get to revisit that and do it again.

Question: You also do a lot of concert work. How do you find that compared to doing a role in a show?

Noll: Any time you get to sing some of the best music ever written for the Broadway stage in front of a 70-piece orchestra, it's not a bad thing. It's pretty amazing. It's funny to hear the Cleveland Orchestra, which is debatably one of the best orchestras in the country or in the world, sitting there playing the *Gypsy Overture*. You have this brilliant trumpet section that is not used to playing a stripper riff. It's just a different experience for them. I've been really blessed and fortunate to be able to do those concerts because it has afforded me the ability to take things that I want to work on, as opposed to constantly scrambling around, "Oh, I need another theatre job." Last year I pretty much did only concerts. It was nice to stock away some cash and then go, "Okay, now, I'm ready to go back and do some theatre work. Let's see what I can do."

Question: Do you have any other projects in the works or are you just focusing on *Frankenstein* at the moment?

Noll: Right now it's *Frankenstein* . . . I just finished working on *The Piper* for the New York Musical Theatre Festival, which also was very well received, and [director] Michael Bush has talked about wanting to produce that even if that's in the theatre that he is now taking over. That may be in the works. It would be great to play with that on a larger scale. The music was so much fun. It was all Irish. I got to sing a sea chantey. [Laughs.] [I love to sing] all different kinds of styles... I

think it's confusing for some: "Oh, she's a soprano! Oh, she's a belter! What is she doing? I don't know."

Question: It probably keeps it interesting for you, I would think.

Noll: [That's] another reason I like to do the concerts [where] I'm not pegged into one box so to speak. I don't have to just sing all the high operatic soprano stuff . . . I can also sing the "Elphabas" if I want to. The only limitation is the one that I put on myself... and I don't really put limitations on myself! [Laughs.]



Christiane Noll in Jekyll and Hyde  
photo by Carol Roseoa

Question: Any chance of another solo CD?

Noll: Actually, there is one that's being mastered at the moment. It's sort of weird the way it came about. I had done so many different compilation recordings or worked on different things that John Yap had produced, just one thing or another. [I had done] a track here, a track there, for different things. The last time that we got in the studio I said, "John, this is funny. If you got together all the tracks that I've recorded for you, we'd have an album." His eyes kind of [lit up.] So, really that's kind of what [the new recording will be]. It's a consolidation of things that I've recorded for him. In that regard it's a little bit strange because usually when I put an album together, there's a beginning, a middle and an end, and you pick material for a very specific reason. But this material had already been chosen because of what history had lent for us. The big seller for him was that there was a performance of "Glitter and Be Gay" that I had done that really knocked his socks off, and he hadn't had a chance to release it when I had recorded it. So, he really wanted to be able to put that on the disc, and I think that was the big push as to why we're doing this.

Question: Do you know when the CD will be available?

Noll: I wish I did. He keeps saying it's in the last stages. It'd be great if it were before the end of the year, but maybe it'll be early next year. I wish I knew. But maybe by talking about it, it'll get him going. [Laughs.] Release it! [Laughs.]

(Frankenstein plays 37 Arts, located in Manhattan at 450 West 37th Street. Tickets are available by calling (212) 307-4100 or by visiting [www.ticketmaster.com](http://www.ticketmaster.com).)

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