



FRIDAY, JANUARY 04, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

THEATER: It's Alive! "Frankenstein" at the Public's Under The Radar Festival

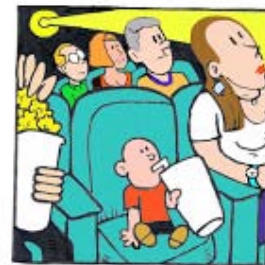
UNDER THE RADAR FESTIVAL: FRANKENSTEIN ** 1/2 out of ****

THE PUBLIC

It's alive! Mary Shelley's gothic masterpiece *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* was published in 1818 but it took this new multi-media work of theater to prompt me to finally read it. (The 1931 movie is better but the differences are fascinating; the book is very different.) Like me, most people are familiar with the story through that first film, the equally great sequel *Bride Of Frankenstein* from 1935, countless remakes ever since and the creature's omnipresence in popular culture, from Abbott and Costello films to Halloween and Saturday morning cartoons and the Spanish classic film *The Spirit of the Beehive* and the Mel Brooks comic masterpiece *Young Frankenstein* and the stage version from the UK in 2011 with Benedict Cumberbatch and Jonny Lee Miller and on and on and on. Yes, the idea of becoming a god and bestowing life on another is a powerful idea that never dies, anymore than the Creature himself.

The [Chicago troupe Manual Cinema](#) has crafted a silent film homage of sorts to that story. But they've expanded the tale in numerous ways. They also draw on the life of Mary Shelley, including the early death of her prematurely born child. And while the narrative mostly sticks to the version in the novel, it also adds some new elements to simplify the tale, along with key scenes from the film and its overall attitude towards the man-made Creature. That's when it's not reminding us that Shelley wrote this story in the first place.

In short, it's a bit of a Frankenstein's monster itself, stitching together all sorts of ideas about the novel, the film, what inspired it, Shelley's life and the creation of art in general. If it's a little ungainly, who



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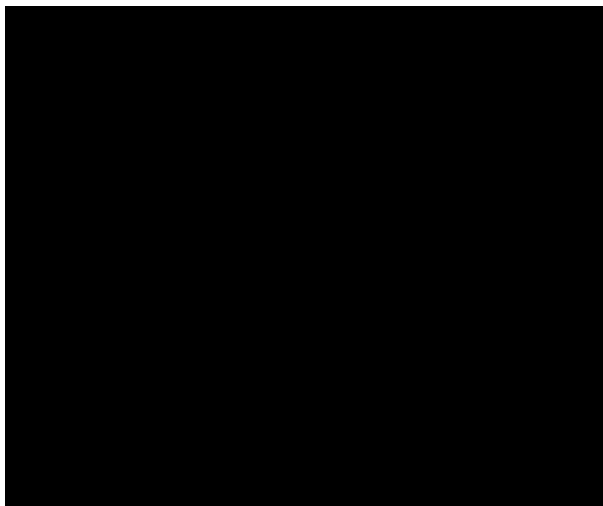
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would be surprised?

First the good. Manual Cinema works in a style similar to a number of new creative theatrical troupes like Pigpen Theatre. In this case, they combine puppetry, actors, the sound effects of classic live radio and projections to create a visual film right before your eyes. You can see an actor holding up the prop of a door with one hand on stage or you can look at the screen hanging about the cast and musicians to see the effect fully realized. You can watch puppeteers manipulate a tiny Frankenstein's monster on a tiny little set that features waves lapping onto a shore. Or you can look at the screen where the creature looms large and the moment is alive and touching.

That constant tension between observing how an effect is created or simply watching the story unfold is great fun. Very minor slip-ups (a pause before a projection appears, an image slightly askew) only add to the pleasure, reminding you how challenging such a performance can be. It's a refreshing, delightful approach to theater that is both hand-crafted and up to the minute. If you've never seen anything like this before, *Frankenstein* is a fine introduction.



However, adopting the tropes of silent cinema for this particular show is daunting. All the dialogue and narration appear as text onscreen and creating a 90 minute silent movie is not easy, even with the welcome pleasure of seeing it done right before your eyes. It seems this *Frankenstein* has been trimmed by 30 minutes from an earlier version they developed and that surely is all for the good.

While they make some wise adjustments to the novel's story within a story within a story structure, they've also tossed in Shelley a bit haphazardly. They clearly show Mary treated with condescension by her husband Percy and Lord Byron early on. So her triumph over them in this contest should be sweeter. But after beginning with her story, the show moves onto the tale of *Frankenstein*. And it goes on so long before they bring her back, one assumes Mary Shelley's story will be a bookend. Instead she pops back into the narrative rather jarringly.

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THEATER: UNCLE VANYA; VANYA -- MY UNCLE; UNCLE IVA...

The Movies, Books, Theater, Concerts, CDs I've See...

THEATER: It's Alive! "Frankenstein" at the Public'...

- ▶ 2018 (34)
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Worse, she's seen writing out the words detailing a scene that took place ages ago. It would only make sense if we saw her crafting the moment we just saw, describing what comes next or offering some information that relates to the story's creation that was pertinent at that moment. Instead, we're essentially told, "By the way, Mary wrote that scene you saw half an hour ago!" It muddies the moment, makes her presence at that stage feel pointless (surely the last thing they intended) and breaks up the suspenseful story.

Nonetheless, the score is marvelous. And the varied techniques of puppetry, live radio, theater and cinema are a pleasure to watch in action by this talented troupe. Manual Cinema gives Shelley her due by showing even bold, rule-breaking rebels like Byron and Percy Shelley dismissing her efforts. Fittingly, Shelley's triumph over men by drawing on the horror of watching her own baby die is yet another reminder of how painful and difficult the act of creation can be.

THEATER OF 2019

Frankenstein: Under The Radar Fest at the Public ** 1/2

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POSTED BY MICHAEL GILTZ AT 5:29 PM 

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