



Review of the National Theatre's Frankenstein May 2020

Danny Boyle and Nick Dear's much heralded National Theatre production of Shelley's Frankenstein looks to restore Shelley's preoccupation with creation, humanity and ambition. The green skin, bolts in the neck and shouts of 'It's Alive!' are replaced with a more naturalistic, and in my opinion, more frightening look at the consequences of playing God. There is no camp horror here, instead we are treated to a more humane and intelligent retelling that is closer to Shelley's original. One of the many innovative aspects of Nick Dear's script is how he gives the voice back to Frankenstein's creature. This production starts with the 'giving birth' of the Creature and, as the play continues, is more concerned with the consequences of creating life as opposed to the debate of whether it should happen at all.

There is much to applaud in this visually stunning and engaging production. It is easy to see how this production is still avidly studied by drama students of all ages. For a director prized for his cinematic achievements, Boyle's Frankenstein is surprisingly theatrical. Danny Boyle will be a familiar name to students and staff at Ormiston Denes Academy, after scenes from his hit film 'Yesterday' were filmed at the Academy and surrounding areas last Summer.

Much has been made of the casting of Benedict Cumberbatch and Jonny Lee Miller who take turns playing Victor and the Creature, respectively. Everyone will have their preference on which way they prefer the casting. This version gives more attention to the character of the Creature and thus it appears that the actor playing the Creature has the more interesting role. The Creature has the better character arc and there is more fun to be had in what the character asks of the actor: both vocally and physically. The demands on the actor to play the Creature are immense; great physical and vocal abilities are required to depict the Creature's learning and development of its new comprehension, and speech and in the re-learning of how to move its new body. This is all masterfully shown to grotesque realness in the opening.

It's interesting to note that the human doctor is the villain. One of the few flaws the production has is that Victor Frankenstein is reduced to a disgruntled father who is constantly trying to clean up his problem child's mess. Appearing colder and single minded in comparison to the Creature's open and hungry mind for companionship and understanding. What the duel casting gives you is endless parallels between the two characters. One striking comparison is how the two treat others. There is a large proportion of Act One that sees the Creature strike up a bond with a blind man. It is one of my favourite parts of the production. The Blind Man's kindness is blind to fear or prejudice, allowing a pure human bond to emerge; a vast contrast to Victor, who appears to have it all but shuns it in the pursuit of ambition and control. The Creature is not 'villainous' until he encounters the worse attributes of mankind. Special mention goes to Naomie Harris as Elizabeth and Karl Johnson as De Lacy.

There is much to enjoy for fans of technical theatre! The world of the play is firmly rooted in Shelley's original setting of 1818 Europe and makes much of that period's understanding of the possibilities of mankind. Mark Tildesley's set design works well in the cavernous space of the Olivier Stage at the National Theatre. The set is vast, grey and seemingly never ending which strikes well with the gothic feel of the production. The non-descript set of moving back walls and tracks on the stage allow a beautiful fluidity and offers a multi-faceted space. This technique allows set pieces to become prominent and aid the story instead of being mere backdrops. A river of light bulbs that surge and pulse above the audience signal the aftermath of the experiment or show the sparks of life from the Creature below.

The Creature spends the majority of the first half experiencing and learning from the world around him. There are some beautifully tender moments, for example when the Creature discovers the texture of grass and when he experiences rain. There is also a steep learning curve with fire. These joyful natural experiences are juxtaposed with moments of shame and fear at the hands of humans. One such moment sees the Creature encounters a 'monstrous' steam train which lurches from the darkness, nearly knocking over the Creature and stopping perilously close to the audience. This moment is the perfect representation of Boyle's directorial vision. Here sound, ensemble movement, set and lighting are in perfect unison with Boyle's vision. Telling ensemble movement on and around the 'train' encapsulate the frenzy and unstoppable sway of the coming industrial revolution. Although set in early 1800s the soundscape utilises original music by Underworld to great effect. Indeed, although being set in the original time period the production has a very modern feel. Maybe that's it, the true horror of Shelley's story is that it is still relevant and speaks to our own fears about what man can achieve. I could write more about what happens when the Creature comes to Victor's home or the denouement in an icy abyss but then that would spoil the enjoyment for yourself!

Danny Boyle's production of Frankenstein can now be streamed on You Tube alongside other major works from the National Theatre. You can watch both actors play the Creature and Victor Frankenstein, respectively. Underworld's music for the Production can also be accessed on You Tube.

By Mr Bailey