

Words and Music

Observations and opinions essayed in pursuit of a sensibly cultured life.

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Prometheus Rebound B.A. Nilsson

TWO THINGS ARE HAPPENING on the stage of Catskill's Bridge Street Theatre this weekend: Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" gets stripped to its dramatic, philosophical essence, and Steven Patterson gives the performance of a lifetime as he deftly portrays the many characters through whom we're told this tale.

Patterson took on this tour-de-force a decade ago at the Orlando Shakespeare Theatre, whose artistic director, Jim Helsinger, fashioned the script. And the piece is an appropriate choice for the young Bridge Street Theatre, which seeks fare that's off the beaten path, especially if there's some moral complexity involved. We saw Patterson's versatility in last summer's "[The Epic of Gilgamesh](#)," another one-man show, but "Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus" pushes his characterizations to even more challenging (and successful) extremes.

The action plays out on a simple-seeming set of rough wood platforms and ramps that serve as shipboard, classroom, laboratory, dwelling, and even the mountains of Switzerland. An upstage curtain takes on a variety of colors and textures to accentuate the scenes, all of it the work of the theater's Managing Director, John Sowle, who also directed. The superb sound design, by Carmen Borgia, set up atmospheric beds when appropriate, giving the sound of a ship creaking through ice or the birdsong of a meadow, and punctuated the action with appropriate effects. The novel was published in 1818 but is set in the 18th century, thus straddling an Enlightenment-era emphasis on reason and the subsequent Romantic reaction. Shaken by the death of his mother, young Victor Frankenstein falls under the spell of the works of Agrippa and Paracelsus, whose long-discredited texts are mocked at the university Frankenstein attends. But the young man is able to turn all of his studies to the goal of creating life, at which he succeeds in a wonderfully gothic, all-gone-wrong kind of way.

Patterson's monster is imagined at first, a reaction of horror in his Frankenstein's eyes. Towards the end of Act One, the monster is seen as a shadow, a jog in his wrist denoting the character. But in the second act, he bursts forth as Patterson, stripped to the waist, shoulder-length hair a tangle, conveys the absolute horror of this creature's appearance. It's not Karloff's monster, which has an odd quiet, nor is it the bloodstreaked wretch recently portrayed on stage by Benedict Cumberbatch. Patterson's portrayal projects his terrible ugliness directly into the imagination of the audience: we're seeing the ugliness we've always imagined as characterizing ourselves.

This version stays true to the novel's framing device of the letters of an English ship's captain seeking passage to the North Pole. Patterson's Robert Walton is a model of British rectitude,

making his transition to the beleaguered, German-accented Frankenstein the more remarkable. That he also impersonates the Frenchman Henry Clerval and a blind peasant, among others, sometimes in conversation with himself, is astonishing.

Never does the momentum of the story flag, and its poignant moments seem all the more heartbreaking for the intimacy of the presentation, as when Victor first confronts the monster in the wild (playing against his own shadow!), when the creature reacts to a beating by what should have been friends, and when the hopeful brute cradles the limp form of his bride never-to-be. Hanging over it all are unanswerable questions of the moral authority of creation and the responsibility – and sheer definition – of being a parent. We're not given answers, but we're offered a provocative pathway to examining those issues.

Most of all, we're given a theatrical experience, and an unforgettable performance, that is the essence of theater. You're not going to see the likes of this anywhere else anytime soon, so you'd better get to Catskill this weekend. Otherwise you're making a monstrous mistake.