

A raw and true one-man 'Frankenstein' in Catskill

By Steve Barnes, The Times Union

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One way to make [Mary Shelley](#)'s turgid prose tolerable, it turns out, is to get rid of many of her words and have the rest come out of the mouth of a remarkable actor.

The themes of moral responsibility, conscience, parental obligation and scientific ethics, the biblical allegory, even the raw pain of a person ostracized for being "other" and becoming deformed by that rejection: They're all vivid and loud and inescapable in "Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus," a one-man play by [Jim Helsinger](#), based on Shelley's 1818 novel, that is being produced at [Bridge Street Theatre](#) this weekend and next.

As Bridge Street co-founder [Steven Patterson](#) demonstrated last year at the theater in his own adaptation of the Gilgamesh story, he is a master of the solo show. With "only" eight characters to play — there were about 20 in Gilgamesh — and almost two hours to tell the story, Patterson can create each character fully, signaling changes with an alteration of posture and distinctive voice and accent (British, French, Swiss-German), etc.

Working under the direction of his co-founder and husband, [John Sowle](#) (who also designed set and lights), Patterson does his best work, understandably, with Victor Frankenstein and the Monster. In Patterson's depiction, the former's scientific curiosity turns to heedless zeal, and his pursuit of what's theoretically possible comes with horrific unconsidered consequences. His rejection of his creation is a monstrosity of its own.

But Patterson doesn't let the Monster off the hook, either. A noble savage at first, learning about human interaction, and how to read, by spying on a family for months from a pig shed, the Monster develops a conscience, too, and thus his raging vendetta and violence against Frankenstein are his own moral responsibility. This is visceral acting produced by keen intelligence, alternating subtle nuance at one moment with throat-grabbing intensity at the next. This is also theater that deserves to be seen.

Today In 1818 Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, recently married to poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, wrote her own book, "Frankenstein: A Modern Prometheus"; she was only 21 years old. The book and its impact have reverberated through nearly 200 years without abating. Most of us have relished the horror story in one form or another, mostly though through the comic incarnations of her damned creature, the monster known as Frankenstein, in the hundreds of film editions of the story which have included the creature's relationships with the Wolf Man, Dracula and other mythic bad guys with whom the creature was never meant to be seen as a partner.

In fact, Mary Shelley's Creature was not to be known as Frankenstein. That was the name of the young doctor/scientist who discovered a method for reanimation of the dead in her book. Victor Frankenstein was best played by Colin Clive in the first film which also moved a bit player named Boris Karloff into the limelight as the Creature. Except for the overacting, particularly in the "It's alive! ALIVE!" sequence, his performances as the creator, or "father," of this horror is the classic image of the scientist driven nearly mad by the awkward success of his experiments. Its sequel, "Bride of Frankenstein" while considered the height of "CAMP" is actually drawn straight out of the novel, as the new play at Bridge Street Theatre in Catskill, NY shows us. The unforgettable vision of the electric-haired Elsa Lanchester has formed our opinions of the film and the story. However, what Mrs. Shelley wrote is something quite special and different.

In Jim Helsinger's adaptation of the original novel, all of the characters are portrayed by a single actor. Steven Patterson, co-founder of the Bridge Street Theatre, takes on the role which is an exhausting experience for performer and audience alike. He is onstage continually, changing costumes, hair, persona and set as required in order to tell this story. While I admire this feat and honestly believe that he performs it as well as anyone could, I

would have enjoyed it more with two other actors performing roles in conjunction with him. There is an awkwardness in the more confrontational moments where a second player would have made all the difference.

However, Patterson's remarkable achievement is what we have to consider. His transitions from one man to another are extremely well done, his use of accents and stances helping to achieve the realization of each and every one. The most remarkable of all, though, is his return at the top of Act Two for a very long monologue by The Creature himself as he relates his story from his own point of view.

It is this extraordinary sequence that best defines the play. Here the phenomenal newly born man comes to grips with his history and his past. He assumes himself the child of Dr. Frankenstein rather than the incidental creation of that man's genius. He travels through the rigors of classic childhood rebellion as his "father's rejection" of him gives him awful angst about his place in life. His reaction is violent and his actions are vile. He has somehow achieved the incredible brain power of his creator and the two men become bitter enemies, the creator attempting to eliminate his creation, then falling into the dream of creating a mate for the horror, then realizing his mistake, then becoming the pursued who becomes the pursuer as the creature flees for the north pole to survive alone as best he can.

It is this chase scene that opens and closes the work. It is a tribute to John Sowle, the designer and director that this aspect of the play works so well. Through movement and lighting and the structure of the set itself, we are moved through space more than time and we are moved emotionally by the motivations of both the main characters. Even the sweetness of the ship captain who has rescued Victor Frankenstein on his ice-breaker is given perfect and simple honesty as he questions the man he has saved from drowning frozen below the ice of the north sea.

Michelle Rogers costumes are appropriate and fine for each character. Carmen Borgia's sound design adds to the theatrical reality of the play. The whole is much greater here than the parts that comprise it. Shelley's early 19th century language never becomes arch or difficult, never assumes a period sensibility that interferes with story-telling or emotional reactions.

In all, this is an intriguing addition to the theater scene in the region and, perhaps, it should inspire a yearly retelling on this stage. It brings back the reality of what Shelley created and sends up the send-ups we've grown so used to seeing, even in an Abbott and Costello film. As for this edition, well, I'd see it again. Once a year.