



Jason Jacobs · December 14, 2007

Witnessing the ingeniously staged catastrophe that is *500 Clown Frankenstein* reminded me of my earliest theatre-making experiences. In my backyard, childhood playmates would unwittingly find themselves cast and directed by me, feverish as a mad scientist about my creations. As I attempted to build my shows, resistance and rebellion inevitably followed. The show would rarely go on—at least not without many crushed feelings and tears along the way. In the same way, this show, a unique hybrid of clown show, *Grand Guignol*, and Theatre of Cruelty, exposes the challenges and dangers of playing with others; it's a delightful and dark piece that evokes the freedom, vulnerability, and cruelty of children at play.

The Chicago-based company 500 Clown uses circus arts, improvisation, action-based performance, and narrative to catapult their performers (only 3 Clowns, actually) into extreme physical and emotional risk. I highly recommend taking advantage of the opportunity to catch them during their run at P.S. 122. These performing artists—Molly Brennan, Adrian Danzig, and Paul Kalina—are not just talented daredevils, but razor sharp creators of thought-provoking theatre. The premise of the piece is that three clowns are going to perform their staging of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. But their technical and interpersonal problems keep their play from moving forward, or even getting started; in fact for most of the hour-long piece, we barely get past Scene One!

Their great physical challenge is working with a set piece from hell, envisioned and built by Dan Reilly. A crudely constructed, multi-purpose table/platform with a life of its own, it's beyond awkward: it's a menace. But the real conflict stems from the personalities of the performers. Adrian Danzig as "Bruce" will play Victor Frankenstein, and he has the mercurial, manic qualities required. Delectably pompous as an intensely self-conscious actor/manager, Bruce insists that his co-clowns bend to his every will. As "Kevin," unsinkable Molly Brennan suggests an impish punk-waif, desperate for the spotlight and determined to play almost every other role in the story, including Elizabeth, Victor's Father, Clerval, Justine, Little William, the Professor, the Landlord, etc. Bruce fights her for every second of stage time. When she does find a way to steal the show, Brennan has such facility with the characterizations that we could gladly watch her perform the entire book. Then there's "Shank," the handsome and hapless Paul Kalina, the beleaguered lackey of the group. Cast in the role of Frankenstein's Igor-like Assistant, he bears the brunt Bruce's neuroses and is Clown-To-Blame (or beat up on) whenever things go wrong—and of course they do. Often.

You may have noticed that no one volunteers to play Frankenstein's Creature—and therein lies the rub. It's the role nobody wants, and the struggle to cast someone as the creature emerges as the central physical and emotional conflict of the piece. Ultimately, one unlucky soul (no fear, this is not the audience participation part) will face humiliation, hazing, and physical cruelty. Just as in Shelley's novel, the monster is misunderstood and abused; the heart of *500 Clown Frankenstein* is an exploration of what it is to be considered "a monster." The piece is evidence of the way comedy results from pain and aggression—the situation escalates to outrageous lengths, driving audience laughter to the point of tears; then the piece brilliantly turns on a dime. Then, the ugliness of the situation shows its real face and we realize that we too have taken pleasure at someone's intense suffering—we are implicated.

Hats off to director Leslie Buxbaum Danzig for orchestrating the chaos with precision and wit. Her work allows the piece to unfold like a spontaneous event—and allows moments of very free improvisation with the audience—but at the end you realize how meticulously the show is constructed. Costumes by Tatjana Radisic are imaginative and whimsical and provide the most striking visual component of this world. Ben Wilhelm's lights are deceptively subtle—they provide another vehicle for the Clowns to use and abuse, and there's a fun moment where we get to see the would-be light design for the entire play, if the performers could ever get beyond the first scene!

The horror of it all is that by the time this review goes live, most of the *500 Clown Frankenstein* performances will be over and they'll be decking the halls of P.S. 122 for their *500 Clown Christmas* (it plays December 21 - 30). In this piece the Clowns throw a holiday party with a three-piece band—so just imagine what can go wrong there! I'd predict a less sadomasochistic experience than *Frankenstein*, but I'd expect it to be every bit as raucous, engaging, and smart—no doubt a perfect antidote to Holiday overload.