

Frankenstein' with a farcical twist

By Devon Glenn
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Giving a small physical theater troupe a name like "500 Clown" is sort of like describing a car engine in terms of its horsepower. In "500 Clown Frankenstein," the Chicago-based trio combines acrobatics, improvisation, period costumes and an unwieldy set to test the extremes of Mary Shelley's classic horror story in the ring of the Orange County Performing Artscenter's Samueli Theater this weekend.

"We're standing on the shoulders of great clowns," says performer Paul Kalina. He draws inspiration from the European circus ringleaders of the late 18th century who played instruments, rode horses and who, for their versatility, were paid as well as the movie stars or pro athletes of today. "They could do every act in the show and they could do it better [than the show's regular performers] because they could parody it," he says.

Yet it's parody with pathos with which director Leslie Buxbaum Danzig envisioned the mad scientist who creates a monster, building intensity with the wide-eyed mania of Gene Wilder leading a boat full of school children to either a candy factory or their doom in the 1971 film "Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory."

"My favorite kind of comedy is a slippery slope between what's comic and what's tragic," she says.

And where Mary Shelley's story blurs the line between man and monster, 500 Clown blurs the line between inanimate object and monster. The troupe uses a laboratory table as a prop as well as a sort of pommel horse for acrobatics with melodramatic results. Picture the IKEA commercial that made us feel sorry for a little desk lamp left by the trash in the rain, change pity to fear, then add several hundred pounds. "The table is completely unruly," Kalina says. "It is in itself a sort of monster."

The most unpredictable element is the fourth clown: the audience, which, like the table, can sometimes get unruly. Kalina describes one performance in which a man from the audience picked him up, lifted him over his head and, playfully channeling the angry mob sent to ostracize Frankenstein's monster, hurled Kalina into the aisle.

"Adrian [Danzig] was like, 'Oh, I have to catch Paul now,'" Kalina says. "We try to build [the show] like a sporting event. You start out with a game plan and when you meet the other team's – i.e. the audience's – game plan, you have to adjust."

Perhaps this is why, as a director, Buxbaum Danzig often finds herself seated in the crowd, referee's whistle in hand. "I set up structures and circumstances where the actors can create material," she says, but "I don't have a lot of control over what's happening [on stage]."

This freedom within boundaries is what makes 500 Clown off-center enough for OCPAC's Off Center series, a new program that launched in March. "We don't want to program to the middle of the road," says Center President Terry Dwyer. "We program for excellence."

Kalina agrees. "We practice what we preach," he says, "which is risk."