

A raucous study in sublime loopiness

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We all know the iconic tale of Victor Frankenstein and his tragic monster: The arrogant scientist who learned too late not to play God and the archetypal Other doomed to repel everyone he encountered. Played for laughs, and it's a tale that usually becomes campy and flimsy, leached of its dark and moral substance. Frankenstein the man is, after all, a tragic portrait of ambition without humility. Frankenstein the monster is arguably the most potent symbol of loneliness ever penned.

Enter 500 Clown, who in "500 Clown Frankenstein" pull off a boisterous, physically daunting comic version of the story that manages to do Mary Shelley right. As in the classic novel, there's a glimmer of cautionary sorrow throughout, only here it's incongruously, deliriously woven through pratfalls, knuckle sandwiches and eye-popping sight gags. The result is a production that's an absolute riot -- both figuratively and -- when the audience is asked to take on the role of Angry Mob, almost literally.

"500 Clown Frankenstein," it should be noted, does not have a cast of 500 clowns. There are three: the tuft-headed Shank (Paul Kalina), the ornately gowned and tattooed Kevin (Molly Brennan) and the neo-hobo Bruce (Adrian Danzig.) You get a sense of 500 Clown's free-wheeling shenanigans in the name Brennan has selected for her clown persona. Kevin?! Why Kevin? Well, why not.

Directed by Leslie Buxbaum Danzig, the clowns of this 75-minute production have little in common with the red-nosed, big-shoed denizens of traditional circuses. They don't pile into tiny cars or sport garish, painted-on grins. They are instead a cross between "Waiting for Godot's" eternally, existentially embroiled Estragon and Vladimir, the entire cast of Christopher Guest's community theater send-up "Waiting for Guffman" and a vintage vaudeville team.

With "500 Clown Frankenstein," the trio rips "Frankenstein" apart and pastes it back together in a fashion that's a fun-house mirror reflection of the manner in which the good Doctor of the tale went about dismembering corpses and fashioning his monster. Kevin, clad in a complex, corseted get-up that evokes Marie Antoinette, Bo Peep and Bjork, is the prima donna of the group, pitching a fit when she's called on to play "the body" and upstaging her cast mates whenever possible. Shank is the stoic workhorse, who at several points is forced to carry his melodramatically speechifying compatriots on his back. Finally there's Bruce, an artiste without a clue, as oblivious as he is puffed up with his own misguided sense of craftsmanship. The stage is bare but for a remarkably clever contraption that's a mashup of dining room table, guillotine, trapdoor and jungle gym. A thing of many latches and levers, it opens and closes, falls on people's heads and generally bams around with such vigor it doesn't seem accurate to call it an inanimate object.

Completing the production: The audience, whose fourth wall protection is annihilated within moments of the opening scene. When it comes time for Bruce to make the monster, members of the crowd start peeling off their own clothes for him to use as body parts. By the time ticketholders are asked to portray a howling mob, one can only think of that final scene in "The Lottery," but if it were funny instead of horrifying. In all, "500 Clown Frankenstein" is "Frankenstein" deconstructed, with sublime loopiness.