

# Manual Cinema has created a monster, but it's not your typical 'Frankenstein'

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Sarah Fornace as Dr. Victor Frankenstein in Manual Cinema's production of "Frankenstein." DREW DIR

Before she became a cofounder of the innovative Chicago performance troupe Manual Cinema, Sarah Fornace attended the University of Chicago, where she studied literature and biology.

"I always thought I was going to be a scientist," Fornace says, "so getting to play a mad scientist actually is very fun."

That would be Dr. Frankenstein. More than a dozen years into Manual Cinema's unique body of work, which combines film, theater, puppetry, music, and sound design, it makes perfect sense to Fornace that she and her colleagues have adapted the classic cautionary tale about the perils of scientific progress.

There are multiple layers to Manual Cinema's multimedia production of "Frankenstein," presented by ArtsEmerson Feb 22-26 at the Emerson Paramount Center. As Fornace and one of her cofounders, Ben Kauffman, explain, Mary Shelley's original tale is composed of concentric rings: There's the Arctic explorer Captain Walton, who recalls encountering a desperate doctor named Victor Frankenstein. The untrustworthy Dr. Frankenstein in turn gives way to the narrative at the core of the story, that of the Creature.

Manual Cinema has added an outermost layer, from the real-life perspective of Shelley's own biography.

Fornace, who grew up on "Mystery Science Theater 3000," appreciates the fact that Manual Cinema's version of the oft-told "Frankenstein" saga acknowledges Shelley as the inventor of science fiction. The various frames of Shelley's story allowed for the team — which also includes co-artistic directors Julia Miller, Kyle Vegter, and Drew Dir (Fornace's husband) — to devise new storytelling idioms for each layer.

“We were excited by the fact that maybe it could help us explode our own medium,” Fornace says.

After more than a decade of high-concept productions, Manual Cinema is enjoying an explosion of activity. Filmmaker Jordan Peele, who studied puppetry at Sarah Lawrence College, commissioned the group to create an animated short film using shadow puppetry for “Candyman,” the 2021 slasher film Peele co-wrote based on the film series of the same name.

Manual Cinema also worked with the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts on a theatrical adaptation of two of Mo Willems’s children’s books, and it contributed to a new AMC documentary, “All of Them Witches,” about the history of witchcraft.

In the spring, the team will begin production on an animated short film called “Future Feeling,” which arose from an artists’ residency at the Almanack Arts Colony on Nantucket. The story will follow a Nantucket family bracing for an impending hurricane.

“We’re calling it a climate change ghost story,” says Kauffman, a Brookline native who grew up spending his summers on the island.

Kauffman’s Northeast upbringing came in handy for one of the company’s first productions, too. “Ada/Ava,” which won Best of Festival at the National Puppet Festival in 2013, borrows from the New England Gothic tradition to tell the story of an aging woman mourning the loss of her twin sister,

plunging it into the realm of the supernatural.



The Manual Cinema team in action during a performance of "Frankenstein." The troupe's productions combine film, theater, puppetry, music, and sound design. META ANTOLIN

Kauffman and Vegter were rooming together and playing in a band (with “a math-y, post-rock kind of vibe,” he says) when Miller asked them to contribute music to a puppetry project she was preparing with Fornace. That collaboration paved the way for the formation of Manual Cinema in 2010.

“Kyle and I still joke that puppetry was not the world we necessarily saw ourselves being in,” Kauffman says. But they quickly recognized that their exacting brand of composition dovetailed with the other artists’ nonverbal approach to making theater.

In hindsight, Fornace’s own attraction to puppetry might be less surprising.

“Funnily enough, my grandfather used to do puppet shows,” she says. “Very old-school, Punch-and-Judy-style hand puppets, with lots of over-the-top violence, vaudeville jokes, that kind of stuff. He had the puppet stage with the little curtain, the snakes that popped out of cans, the whole nine yards. I loved it.”

It was her husband who first suggested Manual Cinema take on the “Frankenstein” tale. He was the resident dramaturg at Chicago’s Court Theatre before the founding of Manual Cinema. “Drew grew up with old monster movies,” Fornace says.

But while Manual Cinema's shadowy, monochromatic palette and its negation of language hint broadly at the era of silent film, none of the team members consider themselves real aficionados.

"I don't think any of us are experts or have exhaustive knowledge of early film," says Kauffman. "It's more just the constraints we gave ourselves, which are built into the name of the company."

"We really don't have dialogue, or language, or faces to tell the story. You're relying on pure cinematic language — images cut together, music, and sound. It's sort of natural to turn to early film because of that."

For more than two centuries, Shelley's tale has been interpreted as a durable metaphor for the shortcomings of humankind: our God complex and our tendency to play with fire, our inattentiveness to our own technological advances, our "othering."

"There have been so many waves of technological quote-unquote 'progress,' and different ways we relate to technology," Kauffman says. "In that sense, it has always been relevant."

He once read Bruno Latour's philosophical essay on the lessons of "Frankenstein," and it stuck with him.

"He talks about how the sin of Dr. Frankenstein was not creating the monster but abandoning it after he created it. The analogy is not that the

technology itself is bad, but we turn it loose and neglect it. We allow it to run rampant. We don't treat our technology with tenderness."

Not that the folks behind Manual Cinema are guilty of that. One big element of their productions is the use of outdated overhead projectors.

They delved into the history of scientific research while making their version of "Frankenstein," says Fornace.

"Mary Shelley was part of this giant revolution," she says. "There was a natural curiosity about things, which is one thing I loved about science. And it requires empathy. There's a very similar ethos in the arts in some ways."

And problem-solving, she says, is at the heart of Manual Cinema's artistry.

"The scientific method has become my core inner philosophy," Fornace says.

"We get a kernel of an idea, and we ask, 'What can we create out of this?'"

## **FRANKENSTEIN**

At Emerson Paramount Center, Robert J. Orchard Stage, 559 Washington St. Feb. 22-26. Tickets from \$25. 617-824-8400, [artsemerson.org](http://artsemerson.org)

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