

The Boston Globe

STAGE REVIEW

Ingenuity meets virtuosity in Manual Cinema's 'Frankenstein'

By [Don Aucoin](#) Globe Staff, Updated February 23, 2023



Sarah Fornace (left) and Sara Sawicki in Manual Cinema's "Frankenstein." META ANTOLIN

With any given theater production, the audience typically sees the finished product, not the behind-the-scenes process.

But Manual Cinema's "Frankenstein" turns that formula on its head by allowing us to see both the logistics and the act of creation simultaneously.

The result is a fascinating, freshly imagined take on a horror tale that has been subject to countless adaptations in the two centuries since Mary Shelley wrote it.

A Chicago-based performance troupe, Manual Cinema has built up a loyal following in Boston after previously bringing to town "Ada/Ava," a story of identical twins who live beneath a New England lighthouse, and "The End of TV," about the relationship between an elderly white woman and a young Black woman in a Rust Belt city in the 1990s.

Both productions, like “Frankenstein,” were presented under the auspices of ArtsEmerson. David C. Howse, executive director of ArtsEmerson, noted in preshow remarks Wednesday night that the opening was a sellout, adding with a wry smile: “I don’t often get to say that: sold-out opening.”



Musicians positioned right in the middle of the action create an eerie soundscape for “Frankenstein.”
META ANTOLIN

Taking it all in is an active experience for the audience. With a craftsmanship verging on wizardry, “Frankenstein” offers an amalgam of shadow puppetry, cinema, and live-action silhouettes, creating an experience that is half silent movie, half work of the stage.

Our eyes move back and forth from the actors and their hand-held puppets to their magnified real-time images, projected onto a large white screen upstage. In hands as expert as these, shadow puppetry proves to be capable of a surprising depth and breadth of emotion: joy, grief, terror, loneliness.

With its portrait of a scientific breakthrough leading to unintended consequences, the story of “Frankenstein” always feels timely, somehow. Consider how we’re currently grappling with the Pandora’s box of technology in the form of artificial intelligence and ChatGPT.

The ear is kept as busy as the eye during this 70-minute, intermissionless production, thanks to an eerie, atmosphere-drenched soundscape, with original music (by Ben Kauffman and Kyle Vegter) performed by musicians who are positioned right in the middle of the action. (Cellist Lia Kohl also contributes spine-tingling vocals.)

“Frankenstein” begins not with Shelley’s gothic tale but with a depiction of the author (Sarah Fornace) wrestling with the challenges of the creative process. Mary’s quill pen is poised over a page, but the words won’t come, and she bangs her head on a desk in frustration.

The action encompasses the death of her infant daughter, which leaves Mary devastated, and the famous 1816 holiday near Geneva with poet Percy Bysshe

Shelley (Leah Casey), whom she would marry later that year, and their friend Lord Byron (Sara Sawicki). The poets are a self-satisfied duo.

When Byron proposes that each of them write a ghost story, Mary — perhaps with her own wrenching loss in mind — is struck by the idea of bringing the dead back to life. No more writer's block: Two years later, her novel, "Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus," is published.

Then we are plunged into the events of the novel, with the versatile Fornace playing the wild-eyed Victor Frankenstein — and mouthing the immortal words "It's alive!" when his experiment works. (Fornace also helped devise "Frankenstein.")

The puppet of The Creature, manipulated by Kara Davidson, has a gruesome, mangled countenance, but is not the usual hulking, neck-bolted figure familiar from the movies. He's less a monster than a misunderstood outsider, a creature with yearnings to connect, epitomized by the flower he keeps offering as a token of friendship. But his encounters in the world outside Victor's lab do not end well.

Touchingly, and fittingly, Manual Cinema has devised a way to connect The Creature and his creator: Not Victor Frankenstein, but Mary Shelley.

FRANKENSTEIN

Adapted from the novel by Mary Shelley. Concept and storyboards by Drew Dir. Devised by Dir, Sarah Fornace, and Julia Miller. Projections and scenic design by Rasean Davonte Johnson. Production by Manual Cinema presented by ArtsEmerson. At Robert J. Orchard Stage, Emerson Paramount Center.

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