

The Mel Brooks Musical YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN

ST. AUSTELL AMATEUR OPERATIC SOCIETY

Director: Kathy West**Musical Director: Vicky Pascoe****Choreographer: Jess Madeley**

As seen by Oriel Bennett on Wednesday 5th April 2023

at the The Keay Theatre, St. Austell

Any observation made by the reviewer can only be based on what she sees at the performance in question. She may have received information in advance of the performance and it is inevitable that her assessment will be affected by that knowledge. The N.O.D.A. Representative's intention is to give an objective critique of the overall production and in particular the performance viewed. Any criticisms expressed may not have been valid at other performances, and are only made to encourage higher standards in Amateur Theatre. It is hoped that the audience's appreciation of your efforts will have given everyone a lift and encouraged you to greater achievements in the future and that the observations made here will prove helpful in improving future productions.

I face the task of writing this review with trepidation and draw your attention to the disclaimer above. It has been impossible to ignore the Facebook posts of which you are rightly proud but which may well have convinced you that you are set for the professional West End. Can anything I write compare with that sort of adulation? I was fortunate to see the show twice, which I hope has given me a balanced view. Please remember that what I note may not have been spotted by the average audience member - and so, with Kathy's blessing to tell it like I saw it...

This musical, based on the success of Mel Brooks's 1973 cult comedy film of the same name, was already ten years old when it came to England in 2017 but remains a relatively unknown musical for many people. The film's narrative is an openly over-the-top send up of the Mary Shelley classic tale and is, as anyone who knows Mel Brooks's style would expect, a wacky, irreverent, and totally bonkers parody of the horror genre. The musical remained true to its essence. Referencing the original film, the musical's very first Inga, Sutton Foster, said of the new version, "We have to honour the performances before us; it's such an iconic comedy classic". Indeed, those who know the film have expectations and so we are pleased to see the familiar jokes, both verbal and visual, coming to life in the hilarious and well-crafted script. A big difference is the colour and spectacle that staging the black and white movie can deliver, and with a cast of almost 30 to move plus a number of different locations to depict, the challenge is to keep the story moving without losing momentum.

The SET, open to view, showed old stone walls across the width of upstage. These subsequently proved to be three revolves, the central of which became both the library, (with the addition of a small wheeled flat), and the laboratory, while the two smaller side revolves revealed wonderfully imaginative and elaborate scientific equipment with wheels, levers, switches and bubbling tubes of coloured liquid. Additions to provide specific settings included a huge door truck that could be turned to show both inside and outside of Frankenstein's castle; a finely dressed truck and separate door for the Hermit's shack, a wooden staircase serving as the steps down into the laboratory, onto the transatlantic ship, and up to the gallows, and the rocky opening into the 'grotto of deep love'. To supplement these constructed pieces, and in addition to standard blacks, we saw a brick wall-painted cloth serving as both the Johns, Miriam and Anthony Hopkins School of Medicine (droll title! I wonder if the English get it) and the New York quayside, and a swagged red silk curtain backing the theatre performance. The cleverness and economical design of the set became apparent surprising us as the library's 'portrait' stepped out into life (why didn't he go back?) and when backlighting through the window indicated the hanging. The middle revolve changed frequently from stone wall to library to laboratory keeping the stage crew alert. It needed drapes to hide the library books - a lack of attention meant this was not successfully achieved at the lower left corner nor was the oversight corrected on its numerous turns, and the operating table was occasionally placed too far upstage on the platform, so it looked as if the cast members had to squeeze behind it. The grotto's tree stump, too, was not consistently placed with accuracy meaning that Elizabeth was obliged to edge around it and forced into the dark at extreme DR on one occasion. Spikes would

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have avoided this and one wonders why stage management hadn't used them. The hay cart was constructed strongly enough to stand up to its use but I should have liked the hay to have looked a little more hay-like. It did rather look like folds of yellow fabric. Something shaggier, perhaps? The set's details of cogs at the top of the legs, and levers each side of the forestage, plus the use of a lantern-lit Transylvania signpost on a tussock of grass and of scallop shell footlights all added immensely to the completeness of Andy Martin's creative artistry in supplying a versatile backdrop for the action.

The LIGHTING design complemented the set at all stages as we might imagine since the same team was involved in both. Opening with a swirling green break up gobo to give the eerie atmosphere of damp and decay, and then the bolt of lightning, the plot went on to support the mood of each scene using bright washes, focussed spots and special effects throughout: a burst of UV illuminated the puppet creation in the lecture room, footlights and orange spots gave an old time music hall feel, flickering candles, lanterns and the Hermit's glowing stove were small details, and there was a very tidy blacking of the main stage to focus on specific areas, e.g. SL the Hermit's shack or on the cart ride at centre during which it was satisfying that enough light enabled us to appreciate the choreographed movement of the horses. Cues for changes were accurately timed as when the lever was thrown to illuminate the laboratory, and Igor's switching on of the paraphernalia with its colour-changing tubes of light and clouds of smoke highlighted under a wash of purple. A number of blackouts allowed for scene changes all of which seemed as brief as possible to maintain continuity.

The SOUND plot had many effects that were cued to coincide immaculately with their on stage moment starting with the crash and rumble of thunder matched to the lightning, which gave the psychological effect to set the mood of the show. Then Inspector Kemp's comical 'knock on wood' and *Twizzle* arm ratchet, Frau Blucher's horse whinny, the grinding mechanism as the bookcase revolved, squeaking rat, squelching brain, laboratory operational noises, exploding lightbulbs, and the fireworks underscoring Elizabeth's awakening. Whilst there were the sounds of the baying villagers at the gate I did wonder why Frau Blucher wasn't welcomed onto the concert 'stage' with a patter of applause, especially as her line was, "Thank you, thank you..." before we heard the 'audience' screams at the sight of the Monster. Volume was carefully controlled as was the output of the microphones worn by the cast members and balanced against the musical backing. Diction was pretty good with strong projection - only once or twice did I note that the underscoring masked the delivery of spoken lines. Accents, whether American, Transylvanian or Old Man seemed to be maintained but would we have noticed if they dropped while we were enjoying the show so much?

PROPS were compatible with the historic period (ostensibly the 1930s) and were handled unobtrusively. The barrow with coffin, followed by a Cornish shovel for digging the grave, was reinvented as a luggage trolley with crates, and for carting the stolen corpse. The lecture room was represented easily by rolling in a skeleton and a blackboard easel; the brain in glass case serving also as Abby Normal's! Suitcases, if a little lightweight, looked authentic and the coordinated red cases of Elizabeth's entourage were particularly pleasing, as was the attentive detail of the astrological chart. Real liquid 'soup' was essential to the comedy between the Hermit and the Monster, which was well performed by the pair, and the ingenious thumb on fire gag was effective with the contrasting facial expressions of the two selling it. The super puppet was a real star - so much work for such little time, created most imaginatively and worked with skill by the onstage team.

HAIR and MAKE UP - this was a labour of love. Did I read that over 35 wigs were used? Everyone on stage in the visually impressive *Join the Family Business* had to have a grey or white wig bumping up the numbers on top of blonde curls, heavy black beehive and Elizabeth's series of ever more exotic creations. I was sorry that the Monster's head piece was not more successful - it served the purpose, of course it did, but the hair sprouting from underneath a straight line of skull cap just didn't look right; a more gradual hairline, even one pencilled in, would have been preferable. Was it a deliberate choice not to take his greenish make up right the way down his neck? I could understand why his arms were not green when I saw him put Dr. Frankenstein in a headlock - green make up on the white coat would not do, but 'twas a shame not to be more consistent; and it would have been so good to see a green leg through the hole in his trousers! But perhaps it was only his head that was meant to be mouldy! The long shaggy manes of the horses' heads caught the light handsomely drawing attention to their active involvement in *Roll In The Hay*. Igor's heavy skull-like make up was ghoulish with his black eyes and exaggerated cheekbones, and the Hermit's long shaggy wig and beard were perfect. The ladies of the ensemble had beautifully plaited hair that kept it tidy and off their faces.

COSTUMES It was a large cast to costume but there was no stinting on the extravagance displayed. The peasant dress of the Transylvanian townsfolk was timeless with the ladies in traditional beribboned French hoods, decorated dirndls, aprons and bodices, the men in breeches, and all with appropriate footwear. Inspector Kemp was magnificent in his gold trimmed caped coat, hat and boots and Elizabeth was luxuriantly out of place in her elegant red themed outfits. Igor deserves a mention for throwing himself to the floor to pick up in his mouth the foot from her white fox fur wrap when he dropped it! Might Inga have had a little more décolletage on display? although she did look coyly innocent in contrast to the intimidating Mrs Danvers-like Frau Blucher in her severe black. Victor's frock coat of bright blue contrasted beautifully with Frederick's red smoking jacket and the subsequent stageful of white-coated ancestors was eye catching. The fabulous full on tap routine of *Putting On The Ritz* looked spectacular with all the tail coats and toppers and Inga's glamorous feathered gown standing out against the red and black.

MUSIC was provided by the 10-piece band sitting above the SR wings who created a lavishly full sound that was carefully balanced to support the on stage vocals. We heard really confident singing from all the character roles and a strong unified support from the ensemble. It's not easy to synchronise for clarity in the audience's ears so many voices singing words that are unfamiliar but generally the lyrics came across very well, with visual spectacle covering for any that were missed, which speaks of diligent rehearsal. Frederick's patter in *The Brain* was worthy of G&S, Inga gave a most creditable yodel and the *a cappella* rendition of *Welcome To Transylvania* sounded very accomplished in its tuneful harmonies.

The brilliant **CHOREOGRAPHY** in this show was hugely instrumental in its overall success and is to be warmly applauded. Most of this cast are not dancers but you managed to drill them well enough that their enthusiasm assumed a guise of uniformity and the energetic company numbers took on a gestaltism that proved captivating. The routines were not overly simplified to accommodate the less able and nor were they too repetitive in style, rather using floor patterns and formations to provide interest. *Happiest Town In Town* was a vibrant opening number with everyone appearing secure and the use of handkerchiefs added colour and apt community gaiety. Strikingly good use was made of synchronised head gestures in *The Brain*, while full comedic value was gained from the not-touching partnerships in a lively *Please Don't Touch Me*, with the farcical "tits" refrain highlighted by a Busby Berkeley wheel. Frederick and Igor's agile presentation of *Together Again For The First Time* employed classic music hall comedy steps and gags and justifiably earned its false tabs ending, albeit written in. There's only so much you can do with two people in a three foot hay cart so if we'd seen the rollicking romps of Frederick and Inga before did we care?...the moves and innuendos make it a very funny performance but to have the horses joining in so exuberantly added even more hilarity. There was excellent interpretation of the music demonstrated by the nod to Russian dancing in *Join The Family Business*, and the quirky movements of *Transylvania Mania* were especially impressive, asymmetry and angular joint action being just right and bringing the whole stage so alive with the fun of it that the overcrowding didn't seem to matter! What is it about tap dancing that brings a smile to everyone's face? *Putting On The Ritz* was a thoroughly entertaining number that craftily built in complexity as more and more dancers joined in, with top hats and canes to manhandle as well as controlling their hop shuffle steps - utterly joyous.

DIRECTION was in the capable hands of an experienced director who seems to be getting better year by year and also appears to have the ability to inspire others to do the same. Strong casting of the leading character roles is essential for success, with the main protagonists looking right size and age-wise if we are to feel comfortable watching their interactions. Frederick became more delightfully zany as the week went on, I thought, and Elizabeth made a voluptuous match for him, with Inga's innocent young glamour just right to tempt him away, and the steady control and break out manic laughter of Frau Blucher made her formidable. What the Monster lacked in physical bulk he definitely made up for in his total commitment to the grunts and dyspraxic movements, and his Noel Coward was superb. And if Igor was rather young for the role, boy! did he give it the energy and personality to convince. We heard tuneful voices and saw dynamic performances with the understanding of comic timing vital if we are to appreciate all the nuances of this hilarious script. Characterisations were carefully coached and for the most part maintained even when not centre stage. I wasn't sure about Elizabeth's breaking the fourth wall rather than keeping the tongue in cheek, hammy nature of the film but I warmed as she did it so well. Excellent use was made of all areas of the stage and of the cast to move bits of set dressing around. Possibly the West End wouldn't have needed quite so many blackout transitions, having radio-controlled trucks and the ability to fly scenery in and out quickly, but the pace rarely flagged. I loved the purposeful use of sub-stories - the passengers boarding the ship, the different pastimes of the three

upstage as Frederick read his grandfather's book, even the crossover of audience members on their way to the concert was full of animation. Full marks for the timing of the bookcase turns when Frederick deliberately halted it - can't have been easy rehearsing that without the full set. This script is pure genius but it takes study, analysis and imagination to fully exploit all it has to offer. This director knew how to do it justice.

INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERS

Dr. Frederick Frankenstein: What a monster of a part. Rarely off the stage he inhabited the role totally. Six years ago I wrote of his role as Josh in *9 To 5*, "A promising debut...I hope you'll return" and he's been doing so, gainly experience and reinforcing his talents. Bold enough to add decisive physicality to his performance, good projection and with a very pleasing voice. Generous in all his on stage relationships he was clearly in the driving seat - everyone was pulled along. Very well done.

Inga: Sweetly innocent of her charms she is a good foil for the crazed Doctor. One could almost believe this Transylvanian maid to have come from Switzerland with that well rehearsed yodel. In contrast was the softer *Listen To Your Heart*. A subtle performance with moments of real hammy 'shock' facial expressions.

The Monster: Splendid interpretation of all facets of this character. As well as good body actions we were able to see the inarticulate crazed beast, the satisfied seducer and the eloquent metamorphosis - and all from under a half mask with little more than grunts. Really good facial expressions that came across, as did the surprisingly mellifluous singing - amazing, where did that come from?

Elizabeth Benning: This character really made her mark despite spending much of the show in the dressing room! Evident joy in her great comical delivery of *Please Don't Touch Me* and a palpable sense of humour in the *Sweet Mystery of Life/Deep Love* pairing.

Igor: Boundless energy from this young man who has a freedom of physicality and wonderfully expressive face. *Together Again For The First Time* was performed with unwavering confidence in the countermelodies and a really lively music hall appeal. Good vocal tones that followed the rise and fall of the varying moods of a servant at the mercy of his master's whims. Loved that you picked up the fallen foot in character!

Frau Blucher: What bodice-ripping fun - this was a gift of a part and this performer gave it her all, remaining steadfastly in character as support or revelling in the heart of the action. *He Vas My Boyfriend* is written to be a show stopper, of course, but this takes nothing from the fact that she sold it splendidly. Great breath control! (not bad tapping either!)

Inspector Kemp: Looking every inch the town's authoritative leader this character maintained the limp and never forgot his false arm - even taking Frankenstein's pulse with it! Lovely bit of humour. We heard a confident delivery with clear diction even through a Transylvanian accent.

Dr. Victor Von Frankenstein: A satisfying little cameo role with just the one number to deliver. A perfect freeze before the surprising animation. Assured rich singing that led the company into a rousing full stage item.

The Hermit: Another cameo with the challenges of 'old man's' voice and unseeing eyes. Well played in both elements. The voice remained constantly wobbly while singing the wistful *Please Send Me Someone*, and when the soup was poured in the Monster's lap not a flicker of a giggle! Disciplined portrayal of blind.

Ensemble: Some were able to have their own 'moment' - village idiot, trio of doctors, "my glamorous assistants", steward on the liner, entourage, but everyone is important so be assured someone will be watching everyone at some point - it's essential to maintain the character. A glance to the side will be noticed! This team came across as well rehearsed, (though without the disciplined precision of a professional cast for whom it is a full time job, it must be said - quietly!) Entrances and exits were slick, quick changes apparently without hitch, and there was evident team work in the movement of furniture and props. Wonderful to have new members joining the society who have had a wholly satisfying baptism and will, no doubt, return because of it. Take with a pinch of salt (to maintain your own modesty) that the show was, "as good as the West End". But do embrace heartily that it was as enjoyable. The delight we get from indulging in our hobby is transferable to an audience and there is no doubt that this show entertained massively. Thank you, Mel Brooks and Gene Wilder for providing such a vehicle.

Thank you for the invitation to visit *Young Frankenstein*. I wouldn't have missed it for the world and hugely enjoyed my two trips. My compliments to everyone including the front of house team. You've earned a few months rest after this terrific production. My brain is still singing songs from it!

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