

CORNWALL DRAMA ASSOCIATION

A service to amateur drama in Cornwall

CDA Adjudication of a Musical

ST AUSTELL AOS PRODUCTION OF YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN

Seen on 6TH April 2023 by Jo Nicolle and Jules Jonklass

INTRODUCTION

With its witty dialogue, themes of transformation and redemption, cathartic finish and those marvellous song and dance numbers, this musical is life enhancing, very funny and complicated. The many quick scenes, costume changes and manoeuvring of a large cast on, off and around the stage are challenges in themselves, quite apart from the large set props and the physical comedy which requires careful placement and perfect timing for maximum effect. As comments below show, this experienced director and her cast and crew stepped up to the challenge to offer the audience a most entertaining, strong, well-constructed production.

STAGE PRESENTATION

Sets and set dressing:

The Transylvanian castle exterior with lit arched window was matched by side flats providing exits DL/R and UL/R. The giant 'cogs' were a nice touch and lent a 'Mad scientist' laboratory flavour from the beginning. Revolving flats gave us the study of Victor Frankenstein, with tilted bookshelves and candelabra, (we weren't quite sure about the purpose of the half-covered painting on the wheeled flat SL); and later the laboratory with its dissection platform, and the tall, electrical, cog driven machines for the infernal experiments. We liked the bookcase of skulls – with Igor's face grinning out of the middle! The castle door, wheeled on as needed, was nicely Gothic and decorated with appropriate greenery and with two outsize door knockers. The 'brain transmitter' device was comically effective, and the hayride cart and coffin and luggage carts in keeping with both period and the humour of the piece. The USA medical department scene was quickly suggested using a 'brick wall' curtain and long window flats, and the staircase SR served for the descent to the laboratory in the castle and the ascent onto the ship in the New York port. This was also pointed by a good 'Pier 57 NYC' sign, and a nice flatbed trolley for passengers' trunks. The cave entrance was attractive and usable by Elizabeth and the Monster. The Hermit's hovel with a very good pot-bellied stove was well detailed with its door, shelf/table and tall stools. The scaffold was dramatically well raised, with its balustrade and noose.

Set dressing was good: the winged chair in the study; bench seating and the blackboard on an old-fashioned easel for the medical students; the bentwood chair in the laboratory – very well utilised by Frau Blucher – were all apposite; as were signposts, working levers and the anatomical teaching skeleton. The black curtain over the portrait, as Victor steps out of his frame to join Frederick, worked well and the slightly 'Heath-Robinson' contraptions of colour and bubbles above working wheels were most effective. Scene changes were slick and as silent as they could be – congratulations to the crew who moved and set them.

Lighting:

Macabre green and bluish purple gave a ghoulish atmosphere to the castle, while warmer colours enhanced the contrast with the everyday world of the villagers and in the port. Cool clear lighting was suitable for the medical

school, and darker more subtle tones for the castle exterior scenes. The warm hues of Frankenstein's study contrasted well with the eerie sickly tones in the dungeon laboratory, and the lighting on the two flanking pillars with their columns of bubbling water and changing colours looked impressive. Lightning flashes were timely and cleverly seen through the window. The lighting on the silhouette 'hanging' seen through the window, and at the end the spotlight on Frederick on the scaffold were theatrical and effective. Practically speaking, there were no 'dark' areas: even in the more sombre lighting all the protagonists and chorus were adequately lit. From a dramatic point of view, the lighting scheme was excellent: atmospheric and well balanced for horror and comic effect.

Sound:

Sound effects were timely and well judged for volume. Thunder claps co-ordinated with lightning; the sonorous door knocker was humorous, as were the exaggerated SFX for Kemp's wooden leg and false hand, and for Igor's hump. The horse's whinny at Frau Blucher's name was a running gag appreciated by the audience – and her reaction to it! The squelch of the squashed brain was good, as was the stone grinding turntable for the revolve. The fireworks display SFX at the end of the Elizabeth/Monster assignation in the cave was well timed with the visual spotlight effects, and the heartbeats were good for the changing rapid rhythm. The creaking rope in the hanging scene was horribly real. The 'threatening' music during the operation underlined the tension of the scene. Sound and lighting worked really well in tandem to enhance the visual and auditory spectacle of the piece – well done.

Properties:

Personal props were well chosen and handled. Suitcases were nicely period, as were goblets (including the well managed breaking goblet in the Hermit's hovel), soup bowl and ladle, candelabra, lanterns and Frankenstein's book. We enjoyed Igor's monster butterfly net, and the staves carried by the villagers. Igor's, and later Elizabeth's and the Monster's cigarettes all worked, and though the Hermit's cigars didn't, they were nicely grandiose, and led to the most effective 'thumb on fire'. The shoeshine box was in keeping – though Frankenstein was so clearly not wearing suede shoes! The enormous 'puppet' of the Monster, brought on by chorus members and beautifully handled by them, was a brilliant, clever and amusing touch – deceptively simple but hugely effective. The sedative syringe was a good size, though it was not as obvious in the 'charades' episode as it might have been to point up the comic drama of that scene: later, in the exit up the stairs, it was seen clearly. Set props, when used by the cast, all worked well – levers pulled, wheels turned, wall sconce candles tipped the balance to open the secret doorway. An important element in this comic-horror musical, the props team should be congratulated for sourcing and creating amusing and realistic properties that added to the whole production.

Costumes and make-up:

There were some nice contrasts between the bright beribboned dirndls and bodices of the villagers, with their bonnets, aprons and rather good black boots, and the black and grey garb of the castle staff. Kemp's uniform with its gloved false hand was good, the braided kepi and decorations denoting pomposity as well as rank. Igor was well dressed in unrelieved black, with a good hump, well fitting hood, and stark white makeup with huge black rimmed eyes: the bright yellow Sou'wester was an amusing addition for the cart and corpse scene. The Monster had excellent green face paint – and a good stitched scalp with wispy hair, his ill-fitting suit worked well on the long arms. Frau Blucher was nicely corseted in monochrome with a splendid wig, and the change into sparkly black taffeta with long gloves and an impressive tiara was great! The Hermit in monkish sackcloth was nicely detailed with cincture and pectoral cross, and good sandals, and Ziggy, in earthy colours and appropriately wild wig showed the village idiot by mis-buttoning the tunic – a nice little touch. Victor, in a good frock coat, though in trousers that seemed a bit baggy, was properly moustached, as was Frederick, who was well dressed in a natty gents three piece in New York, and a good quilted rich red smoking jacket in his Transylvanian study; his long rubber gloves and goggles with his Lab coat were a good 'mad scientist' detail. The difference between the nubile Inga and the

sophisticated Elizabeth was pointed by their costumes: Inga's short gingham skirt and alpine bodice over a peasant blouse, and wearing a natural makeup, was innocently alluring, in comparison with Elizabeth's bright red dress and trouser suit, her furs, and her 'beauty parlour' style scarlet nails and lips. Her Marcel Wave was very good, and we enjoyed the humour of the dishevelled hair and torn dress after her steamy session in the cave. Her bridal white with startling wig at the end was a neat comic touch. Wigs and tea dresses for the ship passengers were good, as were the Fair Isle sleeveless pullovers for the men. Hospital gowns and Lab coats were all in keeping, and the short versions of the latter for some of the dance numbers and the 'Game Show' style appearance of Mr Hilltop (with his lovely sock suspenders) were good. The horses' heads were excellent, and well managed by the two 'horses'. The white tie and tails for the 'Ritz' number were good – though not all fitted terribly well (understandably – it must be a nightmare to dress that number of hoofers in formal male attire!) The black and silver canes were well handled, and completed the 'Blue Skies' 1946 image. Inga's Ginger Rogers style floaty cream and swansdown trim looked lovely. In all, the costumes were excellent, augmenting the visual appeal of the production, and especially powerful in the big ensemble dance numbers.

STAGE DIRECTION

A huge challenge for the director with a complicated plot, a large cast of principals as well as chorus to move, big song and dance numbers to intersperse with the action, and getting the balance right between the irreverent comedy of the Mel Brooks script and the drama of a redemptive horror/love fantasy. The plot developed swiftly and smoothly, with scene changes slickly managed and dialogue and cues swift and pacy, without losing meaning or dramatic function. Tension between characters was well and often humorously built up, and maintained throughout the story. Pauses and moments of stillness were utilised for effect, juxtaposed with the overall fast pace and energy of the production. Exits and entrances were crisp and dynamic, and grouping on the stage, especially in the big ensemble numbers, was good for variety and visibility for the audience. There was a lot of comic stage business which needed careful timing, and this had clearly been rehearsed with precision. The passage of time in the scene where Frankenstein reads Victor's book was well crafted with the other three characters in a variety of actions and poses at the back of the stage, and Frederick's costume change during the telegram cable reading was neatly done. The gradual transformation of the Monster from leg-dragger to Fred Astaire type tap dancer was well managed, and contrasted nicely with his instant transition into articulate intelligence following the Brain Transmission. The danger with the characters in this play, and with the Mel Brooks/Gene Wilder script is to descend into anarchic burlesque, and some of the characters like Igor, Frau Blucher and the Monster definitely cry out for the melodramatic approach. Here the director allowed just enough leeway to her talented cast for personal interpretation, but stopped well short of farce. A huge task to take on the direction of this musical play for all the reasons already cited, and a triumph of hard work by an experienced and talented director made this a real success.

MUSICAL DIRECTION

There are a lot of musical numbers in this play from solo and duet to the big ensemble pieces, and all were ably directed. It is difficult to separate the music direction from choreography in some set pieces, and these will be dealt with in the next section. From the beginning we were treated to some fabulous singing by the Chorus, who gave every ounce of vitality to the opening 'Happiest Town in Town' to start the show with a burst of energy. The fast patter in 'The Brain' was well executed by Frankenstein, and his duet 'Together Again' with Igor exhibited two very good voices –allowing the humour to come through while keeping the lyrics crisp. Elizabeth's 'Please Don't Touch Me' showcased her powerful rich vocal range as did 'Deep Love': again the humorous lyrics were clear through the rather pretty romantic melody. 'Roll in the Hay' had echoes of all the traditional Rogers and Hammerstein musicals with its waltz time rhythm and was beautifully sung by Inga. Victor's 'Join the Family Business' was much enjoyed

by the audience, as was Frau Blucher's 'He Was My Boyfriend' which was frankly a bravura performance. 'Welcome to Transylvania' was nicely done a capella and led to 'Transylvania Mania' – a vibrant end to the first half.

The Hermit's 'Please Send Me Someone' was a nicely lyrical number and a contrast to the raucous enthusiasm of the preceding 'Surprise'. 'Man About Town' helped to tell the story while providing the opportunity for Frankenstein to encourage his creation, and the Monster to grow in confidence which was then revealed in 'Puttin' on the Ritz' – a neat transition.

Music played a part too in creating atmosphere, and it was lovely to have such a full orchestral sound accompanying the singers and the story.

There was plenty of dramatic interpretation in all the musical numbers – we never felt that the story was being sacrificed on the altar of exhibiting an individual's singing talent – but singing talent there certainly was, in abundance, and the whole was well-rehearsed and directed musically.

DANCE DIRECTION

Choreography in the big ensemble numbers was very well orchestrated. The positioning was well thought out throughout the production and everyone moved with confidence, and with synchronicity. 'Please Don't Touch Me' was a clever ensemble piece with its partner-proximity and humour. 'Hayride' showed two distinct dances: the one in the back of the cart with Inga's athletic movements, and the horses' swaying, bobbing and cantering at the front – the audience loved it. 'Family Business' showed the tapping talents of the principals and chorus, and 'Transylvania Mania' was a joyous and dynamic way to close Act 1. 'Puttin' on the Ritz' was probably the showstopper with its complex patterns and super tap routine, but all the dance numbers reflected the dedication of both choreographer and dancers, and also hours of rehearsal. Attention was paid to arms and head positions as well as feet, and even to facial expressions.

It was also clear that choreographic attention had been paid to some of the very physical comedic moments, in the dungeon laboratory for example, and this definitely paid off. Congratulations to Dance Director and cast alike.

INDIVIDUAL PERFORMANCES

Dr Frederick Frankenstein:

A most creditable and credible performance in the part of the modern doctor who becomes entranced by his grandfather's inventive experiment and cajoled into repeating it. A good speaking and singing voice, clear projection, and excellent physical awareness around the stage meant that this lynchpin character was played with assurance and dynamic certainty, holding the audience's attention, and maintaining the high energy level required throughout the piece, despite being on the stage for practically the whole of the action. The American accent was well maintained in song as well as speech, and the contrast between the assured scientist and the naïve, under-confident lover was evident with both Inga and Elizabeth – his bemused expression in 'Please Don't Touch Me' was a treat! A strong role, very well played.

Inga:

This actor played the part of the bubbly, eager, young lab assistant and Frederick's love interest with verve and warmth. Her light, very pleasant singing voice – with a great 'yodel' – was just right for this cheerful ingenue, and the flirtatious seduction in the hay cart and in the lab were innocently enthusiastic in a nice contrast to Frau Blucher's romantic reminiscences. A believable Germanic/mittel European accent. Good physicality in movement, and awareness of other characters. Well done.

The Monster:

A towering performance in more senses than one! The actor's physical build helped the impression of the over-tall Monster, but it was the gangly arm movements, dragging leg, long, open mouth and slow head movements which gave us the creature most believably. His gradual improvement in mobility during 'Man About Town' was very well judged, and the sudden transition to cultured, intelligent 'genius' offered us a change of timbre in the voice as well as diction. The actor handled the humour well – especially in the scenes with Elizabeth, but also gave the Monster real fierceness. The tap routine was performed with increasing panache. A very good performance.

Elizabeth Benning:

A boisterous character, played with delightful energy, somehow endearing the audience to the loud, madcap, selfish fiancée. All these elements were clearly present in this actor's interpretation of the role, together with the required mix of rampant sexuality and longing for love in the scenes with the Monster. A very good strong singing voice, nicely showcased in 'Deep Love', and a great New York accent in 'Please Don't Touch Me' allowed the actor to project humour as well as vocal range. Nice, crisp dance movements at the port. Great stage presence.

Igor:

Frankenstein's faithful henchman, this actor's interpretation rightly stopped short of obsequiousness but gave us the eager, helpful hunchback whose errors are often the basis for the comedy. Great crooked stance and swaying movement maintained throughout the dance numbers as well as the action, and a really expressive face under the white and black make-up. The voice and accent were just right for the enthusiastic assistant, without losing clarity of diction. Excellent comic timing.

Frau Blucher:

A tour de force performance from this experienced actor in the rather melodramatic role of the Housekeeper with a dark, romantic secret. The unsettling nature of this faithful servant was underscored from the start by the deadpan, sombre demeanour, harsh, sepulchral tones, the grating melodramatic laugh (much enjoyed by the audience) and the slightly eerie gliding walk with the candelabra, and this was in nice juxtaposition to the dynamic, passionate movement and voice in the re-living of her rather dark liaison with Frederick's grandfather. Her dramatic violin bow strokes introducing her story, and manipulation of the bentwood chair, were a masterclass in use of props, (slightly reminiscent of 'Mein Liebe Herr' in the Kit Kat Club), and the song was range-perfect for characterisation: congratulations on a super performance throughout the show, and for that last note in the song (was it twelve bars?)!

Inspector Kemp:

A good stiff portrayal of the law enforcer focused on rooting out evil from his community. Excellent, consistent leg dragging, and comic use made of that and the false arm. We saw a mixture of hate and horrified determination which came over well in both a powerful voice and courageous stance – when the Monster wasn't too close! Usually seen in conjunction with the villagers, this actor was a commanding presence as the role demands.

Ziggy:

Though the 'Village Idiot', this character often provides a voice of reason, and the words are therefore often crucial for understanding some of the plot nuances. Clear diction and good projection from this actor ensured none of these important details were lost. Engaging range of facial expressions provided comedy as well as acquiring the audience's sympathy, and natural, easy movement added to the really nice stage presence of this performer.

Doctor Victor von Frankenstein:

A 'one scene' cameo which showcased the singing talent of this young actor, who can also move well. Spoken voice could be more nuanced – this will come in time – but a believable performance as the 'mad scientist' grandfather who is perfectly capable of stepping out of a portrait (nicely done) as well as creating the original 'Frankenstein's Monster'. And of persuading his grandson to delve into the mysteries of the family business. Well done.

The Hermit:

The reclusive, holy man was nicely portrayed here with immediate audience sympathy for his lonely state. The song, utilising the actor's very pleasing vocal talents, was heartfelt, and the blindness was well done in an understated fashion: not too much groping about but a slight hesitancy in movement – except of course in the very funny 'soup spilling' routine! The combination of kind generosity to an unseen traveller and clumsy inability to infer anything about his guest suggested pathos as well as humour, and the performance here was clever enough to give us both.

Dancers and Ensemble:

The Chorus pieces, both with the Dance ensemble and the full Company, were all extremely well choreographed, but these numbers are only ever as good as the performers can make them. Congratulations go to all the Chorus members who were uniformly energetic and well disciplined whether smiling through the fourth wall at the audience (eg 'Puttin' on the Ritz'), or dramatically engaging with the principals in character (at the port, chasing after/away from the Monster). Hope, fear, excitement, concern, wariness were all shown in the faces and gestures of the villagers. There is clearly huge talent in some individuals, but also a willingness to work together as a team to make a great production – and the Ensemble did AOS proud here. Congratulations.

ENDEAVOUR, ORIGINALITY AND ATTAINMENT

As a whole, this was an excellent production of a physically demanding musical play. The casting and directing success reveals that this was a show well suited to this talented group of players, and the 'backstage' work in music, dance and dramatic direction, lighting and sound, costume, set, props, indicate a huge measure of collaboration and teamwork to bring it all together. The impact on the audience speaks for itself in the acclaim for individual numbers and scenes, and the prolonged applause at the end of what was clearly a triumphant performance.

We were very pleased to be part of the evening, and thank you for inviting us.

Jo Nicolle (Moderating Adjudicator)

Jules Jonklass (Adjudicator)