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Lyn Gardner

My God, we've created a monster

**Forkbeard Fantasy's take on Frankenstein is
a long way from Mary Shelley – but it's
absurdly entertaining, says Lyn Gardner**

One stormy June night in Switzerland in 1816, Lord Byron challenged his companions, who included the poet Shelley and his wife Mary, to a competition: who could write the best ghost story? Out of that evening came one of the most inspirational, widely known and least read novels in the English literary canon: Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus.

Born out of a nightmare, Mary Shelley's gothic tale of terror about Dr Frankenstein – who discovers the secret of creating life, constructing from charnel-house bones a creature so terrible in appearance and preternaturally strong that all who see it loathe it – was the first science-fiction novel. Its hideous offspring has included novels by Aldous Huxley and Karel Capek, television programmes like *The Munsters*, endless cartoon strips and pulp fiction, and movies such as *Robocop* and *Blade Runner* as well as a major part of the Hammer Horror output.

Its latest progeny is a new show from Forkbeard Fantasy, the 28-year-old theatre company whose strange, teeteringly insane and absurdly entertaining mix of live action and film has won it a cult following. Long before *The Purple Rose of Cairo* was even a twinkle in Woody Allen's eye, and theatre companies such as Spain's *La Cubana* or Britain's *Stationhouse Opera* and *Faulty Optic* got in on the act of merging stage and screen, Forkbeard Fantasy was going from reel to real.

The company has created a body of experimental work that has its roots in the illusionary magic of Georges Méliés and Felicien Trewey, the memory theatre of Kantor and absurdist despair of Beckett, as well as the nonsense of Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll and *The Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band*. It has the distinct honour of being the only theatre group to have been banned from the all-embracing Edinburgh fringe festival. Its crime? Leaving a dead fish on the assembly lectern

of a Tollcross school after a joint 1977 performance with the renowned Birkenhead Dadaists. Whatever happened to the Birkenhead Dadaists?

Academics have speculated at length the unprecedented creative energy sparked by the 19th-century coterie that included Byron and the Shelley's, and there are parallels with in the inventive dynamism of the relationships that support Forkbeard Fantasy. The company's founders are brothers Tim and Chris Britton; they were joined in 1980 by designer Penny Saunders, Tim's partner. Just as you might wonder about the home life of the Shelley's after reading their work, the same question pops into your mind as you watch Forkbeard's Frankenstein, a show so gloriously mad, inventive and darkly manic that you ask yourself whether its creators' brains are wired in quite the same way as yours or mine. It is not an idle fancy, for what is Frankenstein: A Truly Monstrous Experiment but a meditation on the nature of creativity itself?

"In many ways, this show is about the way we create things, about the creative process itself," says Saunders. She explains that the company develops a show by creating a shared scrapbook of ideas and influences that is eventually storyboarded, like a comic book.

"After all, the process of creating a theatre show is akin to creating a monster. You have an idea, it grows, and eventually it takes over. When we begin there is always the struggle to verbalise your ideas to each other, but eventually it takes shape and then suddenly it is out of control. It lives." Strong influences on this particular show included the Hayward Gallery's Spectacular Bodies exhibition, early myths such as Gilgamesh, stories of the alchemists and their homunculi, and Jon Turney's book Frankenstein's Footsteps: Science, Genetics and Popular Culture.

Followers of Forkbeard Fantasy will recognise other characteristic themes as well: the narrow line between fantasy and reality, the self-obsession and vanity of human beings, and genetic experimentation. In 1980 the company produced the first theatre pieces about genetics, The Clone Show. The subject matter was then so arcane that the piece was repeatedly billed in arts centres as The Clown Show. Forkbeard is probably the only theatre company to have had its work reviewed by the prestigious scientific journal Nature; the writers admit that more than one show has been inspired by articles in the magazine New Scientist.

It is but a short hop from the disgruntled 8ft-tall white rabbit – an escapee from a genetic engineering lab in the company's 1997 production The Barbers of Surreal – to Frankenstein. But what seems new in Frankenstein is a greater emotional depth, particularly the exploration of Frankenstein's creator Mary Shelley.

"One of the things that interested us was why a woman wrote about a man creating another man," says Saunders. "What does that say about Mary Shelley, the life she lived, the men she lived with and the time she lived in?"

But for plenty of Forkbeard fans the real pleasure of the evening will come in the interaction between live performance and film, a technique that the company handles with such masterful skill that there are moments when you really cannot believe your eyes. This skill with illusions, allied to a show of real depth and substance, may well catapult Forkbeard from the ranks of the small cult companies into the big leagues. Some are already talking about this show as the next Shockheaded Peter, last year's surprise West End puppetry hit.

They may be disappointed. Plenty of people have wanted to repackage Forkbeard in the past, but – old hippies that the trio are – the company jealousy guards its creative independence and freedom.

“When the phone rings we don't exactly rush to pick it up,” says Chris Britton. “We've always known that the most precious thing we have is freedom and control. We would never through that away.”
