

Review

Frankenstein

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Forkbeard Fantasy has spent 28 years experimenting on theatre, challenging audience expectations by putting film clips where characters should be, and even emptying the stage to leave only a glowing cinema screen. Frankenstein: A Truly Monstrous Experiment is as winningly subversive as its previous productions, and perhaps more accomplished. None the less, its most astute, amusing and affecting scenes are those in which people simply stand on stage and talk to each other. Make what you will of theatre's body, it seems there's no tampering with the human interaction that is its soul.

When it comes to Forkbeard, nothing is done simply. At the heart of the play are two relationships: that between Mary Shelley and her companions, and that between the Creature she created and one David G Scrivener, the would-be leading world expert on Frankenstein. Mary, played by Chris Britton, is a morose figure who converses eerily with her doppelganger in the mirror. Her husband Percy Bysshe is played by Tim Britton as an obnoxious gnome crammed in an overstuffed armchair, spouting incompetent verse with the distorted celluloid face of his friend Lord Byron. She tries to tell them about her idea for Frankenstein, but is drowned out and ignored. For all the silliness and wonderful inventiveness of the staging, it's the pathos of her loneliness that roots in the mind.

Tellingly, Tim Britton also plays the self-important Scrivener, and Chris the misunderstood Creature who longs for love. The Creature is a superb comic creation, a deflated Michelin man with an ear for a nose, a tap for a penis, and a language that melds Miltonic English with modern slang: "Why art thou trying to do mine head in?" he asks piteously of Scrivener.

Together with a cuddly, hunchbacked Igor, they retrace Frankenstein's steps to make a monster's mate. Again, what resonates is not the deliciously grotesque designs, nor Scrivener's outlandish theories about the space-time continuum, but the developing rapport between Scrivener and Igor, whom Scrivener initially denounces as a "travesty" but finally embraces as a friend.

There is a plot of sorts (although at one point Scrivener proudly announces that he's lost it), plenty of slapstick humour, and a frenzied analysis of the Frankenstein industry that proliferated in the 20th century. The film effects are remarkable, not least the scene in which Scrivener travels between two screens via a hole in a mattress. But, as with Shelley's own Frankenstein, it's when invention blends with humanity that one is really impressed.